

Starfall

It started the night we saw the fireball. Technically, it was a bolide, since it exploded in spectacular fashion halfway across the twilight sky. All the news media picked it up. Just between you and me, I'm still amazed that there is always someone filming things on their cell phone, documenting their kid's birthday party or the restaurant they're walking into, and accidentally capturing history. Of course, the first headlines gave conspiracy theorists a field day.

Airline Shot Down Over Portland! UFO Collides With National Guard Jet At PDX! North Korean Missile Intercepted Above Oregon!

My friend Bart, the resident nerd at the clinic where I work, insisted on lecturing me about the etymology of *bolide*.

"It's from the plural of *bolis*, a Latin word Pliny used to describe 'prodigies or wonders in the heavens.' I'm pretty sure that phrase is in the Bible, too. Give me a sec."

Opening the laptop on his desk, he typed an entry into Goggle. "Here we go. *Acts 2:19*. 'I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below.'"

I shook my head and laughed. "Just what kind of hard drive do you have between those big ears of yours?"

"It's an SSD, wise ass. State-of-the-art," he said, protruding his lips in an exaggerated pout.

But the nerds and the internet whack-jobs couldn't ruin a special time with my seven-year-old daughter Cinda. We had finished supper and washed and put away the dishes, and now we were outside at dusk, watching the sky turn purple as the sun dipped below the horizon. Catching the first star of the evening was a game Cinda never tired of playing. She sat snuggled in my lap on the back deck, startled and awed by the sudden light show above us.

"Oooo, Daddy! What was that?" It wasn't fear in her voice, but the wonder and excitement a child witnessing something new.

"That was a fireball, darling. A very big, bright meteor. And it exploded at the end."

She was bouncing on my lap. "Can I wish on it?"

"You mean like you do when you see the first star?"

"Mm hmm."

"Well, I don't see why not."

She recited the rhyme like a prayer. "Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight. I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight."

"What did you wish for this time?" I always asked, though I already knew the answer.

"The wish Santa Claus couldn't give me."

"Oh, sweetie." I tightened my hug around her and nuzzled her ear. "I love you so much."

"I love you, too, Daddy." She wriggled free of my grasp and pointed to the heavens. "Is that a star, or is that Venus?"

"You're so smart! It's either Venus or Jupiter. I'll have to check and see which it is." I planted a kiss in her blonde hair. "Want a story before bed?" Another ritual.

"Oh, Daddy. Is the sky blue?"

"Does a bear poop in the woods?" I answered.

"You know I want a story. Let's do *The Velveteen Rabbit*."

That was far and away her favorite story, especially since I had found her a plush stuffed rabbit. I would lie next to her in bed, my head propped on an extra pillow. She would pull the covers up and hang on tight to her rabbit, whose name she had shortened to Velvet. And when she fell asleep, I would get up and tip-toe out of her bedroom and downstairs, asking myself the rabbit's question over and over again. "What is real?" But I had no Skin Horse to tell me.

A year ago, I would have said, "My life is real." I had a job I loved as a physician's assistant, a darling daughter as smart as a whip, a beautiful wife who had just made a splash in the literary world by winning the Booker Prize for Fiction with her debut novel, *The House on Carter Lane*. I had it all.

Until I didn't.

#

It was a lovely morning in late spring. The sun was glinting off the newly-minted leaves on our ornamental cherry tree. Cinda was outside with her neighborhood friends, the shrieks and laughter of little girls at play making the best kind of music for a sunny weekend. Genevieve and I were chatting over our second cup of coffee, planning a trip to Crater Lake for later in the summer.

My wife dropped her cup before it reached her lips. It bounced off the table and onto the floor, breaking into a dozen pieces and hurling coffee everywhere. Then in slow motion, she slid out of her chair and into the mess on the floor. When I dashed to her side, her mouth was moving as though she were trying to form words the way a baby makes sounds before she's learned language. Her eyes were wide and frantic. I ripped the phone from my pocket and called 911. I don't remember much after that. Cinda came running in when she saw the paramedics arrive. I was sitting on the floor with Genevieve's head cradled in my lap.

"Is Mommy asleep, Daddy?"

I couldn't reply to her. The EMTs lifted my wife onto a gurney and rushed her out to the ambulance. Then Cinda and I hugged each other and cried.

"Cerebral aneurysm," the doctor said later. "Nothing you or we could have done. I'm so sorry."

Sudden. Unexpected. The way a star falls from the night sky.

#

Since then, my daughter and I have learned to navigate the loneliness with a map of routines, like the star-gazing and the bedtime story. We have a ritual for everything, from brushing teeth to laying out clothes for school the next day. In fact, I thought we had been doing quite well until I got a call a week ago from Ms. Selby, her teacher at Driftwood Elementary School.

"Cinda has been showing more temper, Mr. Fortune. Yesterday she slapped a little friend for not playing the game the way she wanted her to. She'll get frustrated when she doesn't immediately grasp a new concept I'm teaching and run out of the classroom. She threw away her math paper on Monday because she didn't like the way she had written her numbers." The teacher hesitated, as if reluctant to say what she worried about most. "I found her crying by herself on the playground today, and when I asked her what was wrong, she said, 'I want my mommy.'"

We spoke for several minutes afterward as I tried to digest all she was telling me and come up with some sort of plan for proceeding. I had a sense there might be something more to the story. When I pressed her, she answered my question.

"I asked Cinda if she talked to you about missing her mommy. She said she didn't because she didn't want to make you sad. She said that sometimes when she wakes up at night, she can hear you crying in your bedroom."

So, my seven-year-old daughter is trying to protect me. How could I not have seen this? I thanked Ms. Selby, ended the call, and sat back in my chair. I wasn't sure what to do, but I resolved to take the burden off my daughter. I would initiate conversations about her mother every evening before our story.

On the evening of our falling star, I wrapped my arm around her shoulders as she lay in bed and had her nestle her head on my chest.

"I sure do miss Mommy," I said. I felt her body stiffen. "I was remembering some funny stories about her. Do you remember your fifth birthday and the cake she made?" Her body relaxed, and she turned her head to look into my eyes.

"That was the awfulest cake ever!"

"It was, wasn't it? Something happened to the chocolate frosting, and it hardened over the cake like an abalone shell!"

She began laughing. "Mommy couldn't even cut it with a knife!"

"We should've gotten her recipe for it. I could've used it to repair our chimney!"

Cinda's laughter changed to tears. "I miss her so bad, Daddy. I wish she would come back."

"Me, too, darling." As I stroked her hair, I remembered her letter to Santa Claus last Christmas, scrawled in her little girl's hand, stuffed into her stocking, where I found it when I went to fill her stocking after she had fallen asleep.

Dear Santa,

All I really want for Christmas is my mommy. Could you please bring her back, even just for one night? I left you extra cookies.

Love,

Cinda

I choked back a sob and held her close. I'm sure she heard or felt my sorrow. She pulled back and wiped a tear from my cheek with a finger wet with her own tears.

"I'm sorry, Daddy. I didn't mean to make you cry."

"Honey, you didn't make me cry, and besides, it's OK to cry. Like I told you before, you can talk with me about Mommy any time, and if we cry, that's all right. We cry when we miss somebody we love."

She didn't look convinced. I thought that might be enough for one night, so I picked up our book from her nightstand. "I think we're on the next chapter."

Her smile returned. "OK, Daddy. What's Velvet up to now?" She grabbed her stuffy and cuddled it.

I read until her eyes closed.

#

The next morning was a Saturday, so I let her sleep in. At eight-thirty, she came bouncing downstairs with the biggest grin on her face.

"Wow! You look happy. You must have had a good night's sleep."

"It's even better than that, Daddy. The fireball worked. What's for breakfast?"

"I think this is a day that calls for chocolate chip pancakes. What do you think?"

She gave me the thumbs-up sign. "Roger that!" It was her new favorite expression from some show we had watched together.

As I turned on the grill to warm it up and started mixing the batter, I looked over at her. "What did you mean when you said the fireball worked?"

She had climbed up into a kitchen chair and took a drink from the orange juice I had set there for her. “I got my wish. Mommy visited me last night.”

I almost dropped the whisk I had been using on the batter. Once I had collected myself, I resumed stirring. “So, you had a dream about Mommy last night?”

“Oh, no. Mommy came to see me before I fell asleep.”

It had to have been a dream, since she was asleep before I left room, I thought. That, and her very active imagination. “What did Mommy say?”

“Not a whole lot. She called me ‘sugarplum,’ which is my very favorite name. She’s the only one who calls me that. She said she just wanted to make sure I was OK, so she’ll come back to visit me a few more times.” Cinda took another big drink of OJ. “Oh, and she told me to tell you she forgives you.”

I put down the bowl. It was hard to keep the concern out of my voice. “What?”

“She forgives you for forgetting your guys’ anniversary last time.”

I stumbled back against the counter. How did Cinda know that? I decided she must have overheard Genevieve scolding me about it, though I couldn’t remember Cinda being around when that happened. I shifted gears.

“OK, a stack of three perfect chocolate chip pancakes coming right up.”

“Roger that.”

#

It turned out to be a perfect Saturday. We drove north on 101 to the Cape Lookout trail, bringing plenty of water and candy bars with us. The Sitka spruce and hemlocks at the trailhead perfumed the air with the unmistakable fragrance of the Pacific Northwest. Later, when the trail left the forest and hugged the cliff-edge over a precipitous drop to the sea, I held her hand as we gazed at the surf, foaming white along the miles of beach below us. My little darling was gung-ho and made the five-mile roundtrip without a single complaint.

She fell asleep on the car ride home. Every now and then I would steal a glance in the rearview mirror to see her angelic face dozing peacefully. I felt as though my heart would burst.

Our evening routines went more quickly than usual, given her level of exhaustion. Our star-gazing was reduced to fifteen minutes and our story-reading to ten. She was out like a light when I left the bedroom.

I slept well, too. Fresh salt air and exercise make the best soporific.

#

Sunday morning dawned with tendrils of fog creeping up from the ocean, puddling at the bottom of every street. The sun was hidden behind steel-gray clouds.

Cinda greeted me with a cheerful smile and a warm hug.

“Well, good morning, buttercup,” I said. “What a nice way to start the day.”

“Hi, Daddy. What’s for breakfast?”

“How about bacon and eggs, toast and coffee?”

“Yuck! You can drink the coffee, not me! I’ll have hot chocolate, please.”

“Your wish is my command, Your Highness.”

After breakfast, we went to church. My parents were pretty strict fundamentalists, but since Genevieve’s death, I was no longer sure how much I really believed. Cinda loved it though, and she had found a second home in her AWANA group on Wednesday nights and her weekly Sunday School while I attended the regular service.

Then, of course, we had our after-church ritual—a trip to The Reef Coffee House. The shop was done like something out of *Treasure Island*, with Jolly Rogers and crossed swords hanging

on the walls, and a treasure chest of free cookies on the counter. Cinda loved the owner, Darby Galloway, who catered to kids by wearing a pirate's tricorne hat on his head, a black patch over one eye, and greeting them with a hearty "Ahoy, matey!" when they walked through the front door. His hot chocolate topped with whipped cream and cinnamon was ambrosia, and no little girl could resist his freshly made donuts. For the grownups, his Danish pastries were to die for, and the word was that he brewed the finest coffee on the coast.

"Ahoy, Cinda!" he said when we entered. "Welcome aboard. You, too, Robert."

"Hi, Darby. You can start us off with a hot chocolate and a black coffee while Cinda makes up her mind on the donuts."

"Coming right up."

Cinda walked back and forth in front of the display case. Finally, she looked at me and said, "A maple bar for today."

"Good choice. I'll have a cheese Danish." I placed our order with Darby just as another family with three children walked in.

"Ahoy, me hearties!" Darby called to the new brood. "'Tis a fine wind we've got for sailin' today."

Cinda chuckled. "Darby's so funny. I love it here."

"I know you do, honey. I do, too."

Darby brought our food and beverages, and we relaxed into Sunday morning.

"Mommy said she wishes she could join us here, but she can't. She told me to have a maple bar for her."

"Why can't she come here?"

"She's dead, Daddy. You know that." It was one of those "duh" moments when she looked at me as though I needed to have my head examined. "She can only visit me in my bedroom at night."

I tried to remember my study of sleep disorders. I recalled that there are two kinds of bedtime hallucinations, those which occur when a person is falling asleep, and those which happen as a person is awakening. Two big words popped into my head—hypnogogic and hypnopompic—but I couldn't remember which was which.

"So, you saw her again last night?"

"Yep. She had the prettiest dress on. And those pearls you bought her for her birthday five years ago."

"How did you know I got those for her?"

"She told me. She really likes that necklace."

I had given my wife that necklace when Cinda was only two years old. Had Genevieve ever told her? Did Cinda know we buried her mother with that jewelry on? I tried to steady myself with a sip of coffee and a bite of Danish.

After our brunch, we drove home and had a quiet afternoon together. The rain had begun, and it was a perfect afternoon for reading and watching a movie. Later, Cinda requested her favorite supper—what she called "breakfast for dinner." I fried up some hash browns with a little onion, cooked some sausage links, and prepared scrambled eggs, while the princess toasted some sourdough bread.

"No star-gazing tonight, honey," I said, pointing to the skylight overhead, where a busy rain was chatting away.

"Then we get a longer story time," the negotiator said.

"We'll be finishing up *The Velveteen Rabbit*, you know."

“Then we can start at the beginning again.”

My little girl knows what she wants and when she wants it. After a half-hour of reading and a few minutes of remembering her mother, she still hadn't closed her eyes, but I knew it was time to tuck her in. I kissed her on the forehead and stroked her hair.

“Sleep well, my darling. I love you.”

“Love you, too, Daddy. I'll let you know what Mommy has to say. Good night.”

Should I be worried? I asked myself as I walked downstairs. *My daughter sees and talks to her dead mother every night. But she seems fine during the day.* I decided to call her teacher toward the end of the day tomorrow to check on Cinda's behavior at school.

I didn't sleep well. I dreamt of Genevieve. We were walking the shoreline together, hand-in-hand, the wind blowing her long, blonde hair like a comet's tail behind her. The air was warm, with the sweet, briny smell of the ocean. The sun felt good after the cold rain of winter. She was laughing at the antics of a dog frolicking on the beach ahead of us. She didn't seem to know she was dead, and I couldn't figure out how to tell her. I woke up overcome with sorrow. I curled into a fetal position and wept.

#

I must have fallen back to sleep after that, because I slept through the alarm. I ran to awaken Cinda before I jumped into the shower. We rushed through breakfast, and I got her to school just before the first bell.

My work day was crazy. A diabetic patient collapsed as she was walking from the waiting room toward my office, creating an uproar in the reception area and triggering a flurry of emergency responders rushing to her aid. She was eventually stabilized, but her primary care doc wanted her hospitalized as a precaution. That instigated even more disruption in the clinic, making me late for all my other patients. I played catch-up until three-thirty, when I remembered that I had wanted to call Ms. Selby and check on how Cinda was doing in school. I crossed my fingers, hoping the teacher would still be there. The office manager at the school answered and assured me Ms. Selby hadn't left for the day yet. She transferred my call to her.

“I'm so glad to hear from you, Mr. Fortune. I was about to call you myself.”

I immediately feared the worst. “Is she in more trouble?”

“Oh, no. Quite the contrary. Whatever you're doing with her is working perfectly. Keep it up! She's more relaxed, more cheerful. She's sharing more easily with other children. She isn't spending time off by herself. No outbursts or tantrums. It's a day-and-night difference.”

We spoke for a few more minutes, and I thanked her for her efforts. Although I was reassured by what the teacher had to say, I still worried about Cinda's mental health. I felt I had to do something to make sure.

That night, after all our routines were accomplished, I kissed her goodnight, but I didn't go downstairs. Instead, I left her door open a crack so I could listen and look in upon her, and I sat down in the hallway, leaning my back against the wall. A few minutes later, I heard her slow, rhythmic breathing and knew she was asleep. I waited.

Had I fallen asleep as well? I heard voices in her room, Cinda's and someone else's. Was that Cinda mimicking her mother's voice? I froze in place, afraid any sound or motion would interfere with whatever was happening.

“Hi, Mommy.”

“Hi, sugarplum. How was school today?”

“It was really fun. We played dodge ball at recess, and nobody could hit me with the ball.”

“You’re a very fast runner. And pretty tricky.”

“Yes, I am, Mommy. And we learned all about sea urchins today.”

“You mean those prickly things that look like purple porcupines?”

“Yep. There’s too many of them in the ocean. They’re eating all the kelp.”

“What are the scientists going to do about them?”

“They say we should catch them and eat them!”

“Really? Oh, yuck!”

Cinda laughed. “My friend Eliada made a noise like she was going to barf and ran out of the room. It was so funny!”

There was a moment of silence, then Cinda spoke again, in the voice she used whenever she was asking me for something special. “Can you say hi to Daddy? He misses you a lot.”

“I miss him, too, sugarplum, but this is your wish. Just for you.”

Cinda harrumphed. In my mind’s eye, I could see her pouting, the cute way she sticks her lips out. “It’s not fair, you know. The way you left me and Daddy.”

“You’re right, sugarplum. It’s not fair. I’m sorry.” I heard a pause. “And I’m sorry your wish is over. I won’t be able to come back again.”

Cinda tried another tack. “Can I come with you and be wherever you are?”

“Oh, no, angel. You’re not ready yet. You’ve got lots more to do—more friends to make, more fun to have, more things to learn. And who knows, maybe you’ll grow up and become a mommy yourself someday.”

“Can I become a famous writer like you?”

“I think that’s a wonderful idea. Tell Daddy to buy you a journal so you can keep track of all your ideas.”

“Can I write about you, Mommy?”

“Sure can. You can even make up stories about me. Writers make up things all the time.”

“OK.” I heard a catch in her voice, as though she were holding back a sob. “But I’ll miss you every day.”

“I’ll miss you, too, sugarplum. But I’ll always be right there in your heart.”

My back and butt were sore from sitting on the hard floor. When I looked at my watch, I was startled to see it was two o’clock in the morning. I arose and looked in on Cinda. Her eyes were closed and her breathing was slow and regular. I made my way downstairs and fell into bed.

#

I was still sore when I awoke the next day. Cinda was already up, fixing herself a bowl of cereal in the kitchen.

“I’m going to be a famous writer when I grow up,” she announced. “Just like Mommy.”

“Good for you, kiddo. How about if I get you a writer’s notebook so you can start today?”

“Roger that,” she said, giving me the thumb’s-up sign.

The End
©2021 William J. Cook