

# F I C T I O N

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## THE DARKEST SKIES IN NORTH AMERICA

*by Amy Root*

She was named Celeste because her parents believed in heaven. When they died, she inherited their co-op apartment, a junior four in the basement of a Bay Ridge high-rise. They believed in subterranean living. It was cheaper to forego a view.

She acquired this Brooklyn real estate during a dark time in her life, when her office was a converted storage closet in a nexus of cubicles and hallways. The fact that she had an office at all, with a door and built-in shelving, gave her status. She was a coordinator. She held mid-rank positions in a hierarchy that included assistants, directors, and representatives. There were also creators: those who produced ideas, schematics, and an exhilarating vocabulary to describe their creations.

She slept little in those days. The inherited apartment shared a wall with the building's boiler, which had a faulty sensor and wailed intermittently each night. She would call the Super. He knew only the language of blame, fixated on reminding her that she had ruined the garbage chute's mechanical eye because she threw too much away.

She looked for a pattern, charting the temperature and time of day when the boiler alarm blared. It added up to no particular equation. Her coordination at work bore few patterns either. She tried to predict the reactions of the co-workers on each team, attempting to ensure timely completion of all assignments. Each attempt to distinguish a pattern failed. The representatives were inconsistent in their enthusiasm about representing various products from the creators. The directors gave sporadic directions. The assistants could only report facts ("it's in the routing queue," "they're all at lunch") because they had no authority to approve or disapprove. Darkness was the only consistent feature of that time. She would leave the apartment very early in the morning, plunge into the black tunnel of the Manhattan-bound R knowing that a sunrise was breaking outside. She would coordinate for many slow hours in the sealed walls of her livelihood, then re-emerge in her parents' chosen neighborhood by moonlight. They had always taken time to admire the surf, marking Celeste's age by the years passed since the Verrazano Bridge was completed.

On summer evenings she could sometimes leave work early enough to glimpse a sliver of sunset glowing between buildings. Then she read an article about the biological benefits of sunlight and decided to sell the apartment, seeking an aboveground means for getting to work. She became a suburban commuter because she craved the sky.

The move occurred in January. Her new apartment was an even exchange in terms of price per square foot, but she now lived on the third floor and could see well-lit single-family homes from her window. On her first rush-hour walk to the railroad station, the trees were barren of leaves, opening the view to clapboard saltboxes and center-hall Colonials. Children were sledding while their mothers told them it was too early for play.

In the cold, Celeste walked faster through the shady blocks and more slowly through the ones that bore the first light of day. A neighbor had shown her a shortcut, giving her the upper hand over the other commuters from her complex. She passed black squirrels, chipmunks, and a bunny.



Time was her new identity. She had planned to beat the others who were shuffling to the 6:27, but she reversed the AM/PM feature on her clock and overslept, not waking until 7:30. She would barely make the 8:18. If she didn't shower or eat breakfast, she might have made the 7:57. But she decided to complete her regular routine, fast, and now hoped her watch was in sync with the train conductor's. She breathed in pace with her footsteps and crushed the leaves under her boots, which were sturdy after being half-soled by a Brooklyn cobbler before she moved.

Across from the station, she had to negotiate heavy traffic from speeding all-terrain vehicles and contractors' trucks on their way to lucrative remodels. One man drove a vintage Jeep, with plaid upholstery and acrid exhaust. He parked beside a long green sedan. A woman sat inside it. She deftly applied false eyelashes and was wearing a broad-brimmed hat, as if she were off to a garden party in the middle of winter. Celeste skipped up the wrought-iron stairs two at a time. An express train sailed down the center track, with cars bearing the names of people she had never heard of, such as Governor Ella T. Grasso. She had just enough time to purchase her first monthly pass from the station house, which was tan and square and made her think of a whole-wheat cracker.

Except for the rattling of newspapers and the coaxing of phlegm, the platform was quiet. When the 8:18 glided in at 8:19, Celeste observed that most people in the suburbs liked to ride in the first car, even if it meant standing up. Celeste chose a window seat in the very last car. She had planned to spend the time planning, but instead she was transfixed by the sun as it illuminated the billboards. They touted AM radio talk shows, financial newspapers, and job-search websites. In the ads and on the train, she saw her skin (a pale shade of strawberry Quik) duplicated row after row, and the uniformity irked her. She tried to focus on the morning's weather as she approached the Harlem River.

Returning that evening, she saw couples making snowballs. She thought of her parents and wondered who would inherit her new apartment when she died. These questions had haunted her in the city, but she assumed the tranquility and illumination of her new surroundings would put them to rest. She admitted it was time to pursue online dating.

She chose a site that allowed her to write a self-description in prose format rather than answering a restrictive questionnaire. She disapproved of deception and set out to create a realistic portrait. She did not want to post a photograph because the assistants at work might find it and spread a rumor she was desperate. Rumors of desperation would reduce her efficiency in gaining the necessary approvals to meet her deadlines.

"Hair: Mine is naturally streaked, producing the illusion of winter wheat and tobacco, sprouting together in the same field," she wrote. "It won't curl without rollers or hormones, but with the right cut, this doesn't hold me back.

"I weigh 145 pounds, though doctors usually guess 125. The number is mostly evidenced in my abdomen. The genes from this physique evolved in Scandinavia, where the long winters favor those mammals with sufficient insulation.

"My skin cannot keep a secret. If I have a beer or the jitters, my cheeks will become the color of cranberry salad. But if the air is chilly, you can spot the major veins of my body, which produces blueberry-hued vascular maps.

"I had a double bunionectomy in college. The scars are still visible when I wear sandals, but my feet themselves are now quite beautifully shaped, without any calluses or protrusions.



“Also, I have quite a strong heart. Three flights of subway steps pose no problem. Even at 53rd and Third, I soar up to street level without ever in my life using the escalator. I can charge through twenty blocks in the time it takes most people to walk forty.”

Frustrated by her attempts to write accurate but appealing copy, she opted for speed dating instead. Celeste debated whether to attend a Manhattan session or one in the suburbs. She decided the suburbs would provide better anonymity.

There were numerous agencies from which to choose, many whose names included the word Cupid or hurry. She chose the most expensive firm, hoping this would ensure a battery of men with jobs or dividends from lucrative IPOs. The confirmation arrived by email, calling her by a screen name. “Hey, Bklyn-Born, wanna take the plunge? Click here to confirm a pre-dating event.” Celeste thought the venue was called Cozy Meals, which conveyed the image of a diner. When the taxi driver dropped her at the address, she realized she was actually at a Mexican restaurant called Cozymel’s, next to a discount shoe store. Except for a piñata in the window, she saw little to make her think of Cozumel. She was early and decided her shoes were too flat. She had not worn high heels since the foot surgery, but because there was little walking to be done that night, she invested in a pair of three-inch slingbacks with alligator uppers. Retail price: \$139. In the red-dot bin, \$39.99.

When she entered the restaurant, the event coordinator had begun calling out instructions through a microphone. Women would stay seated throughout the evening, and men would move from table to table every seven minutes. Celeste wondered whether the shoes had been worth it, since they would not be seen very much that night. She found a table by the kitchen door and looked at a menu. Everyone was given fifteen minutes to take their places and order dinner. No one wanted to eat. Most of the crowd ordered margaritas. She asked for a glass of wine. A list of conversation starters had been placed on the table, suggesting questions such as “Do you believe in ghosts?” and “Do you have a pet?” A sociologist announced that she had gained permission to conduct research during their session, and anyone willing to participate would receive a free dessert, a choice of flan or chocolate tres leches cake. One woman stood up and put on her coat, leaving abruptly.

A gong was struck to mark the beginning and the end of each session. After an hour and a half, Celeste had sat across from ten men. The first was Canadian and told her he was ashamed of unionized labor and socialized medicine. The next wore a ponytail and had thick gums. He immediately asked her whether she was a business executive. She wanted to know what had given her away, and he gestured toward her shoes. A man who said he was from the Tropics but would not be more specific ordered a fresh screwdriver cocktail each time he changed tables. He was unimpressed that she clutched the same glass of rosé he’d seen her order initially. A direct-mail specialist asked Celeste whether she had ever been married. He was relieved when she said no. He said he couldn’t date a woman who had slept with another guy. Only one of the men worked in the city; she had chosen a dating session that was miles from a train station. With little success, she tried to ask questions she very much wanted the answers to: whether they had sympathy for those with insomnia, and what they considered to be their most generous act.

The emcee recommended circling the words “Let’s Talk Again” for every prospect on the lists. After all, how much could you really discern in such a short time? But Celeste didn’t want to talk again. She didn’t want any of them to have her email address. She wondered what the other women were deciding to do. She was hungry and hoped she would



be the only one to linger for dinner once the pre-dating had ceased. She watched as everyone began placing take-out orders and turning in their two forms—the date report to the event coordinator, and the sociology survey to the grad student. A take-out dinner would be cold by the time she made it home, so Celeste sat at the bar to eat her meal. The speed daters had all left, emptying their back corner quickly. Few other customers remained. She ordered another glass of wine and a plate of flautas, which she was told might take a while. She grew hungrier and tipsier while waiting on the dinner, so she asked for a cold, fast dish—ceviche—to tide her over.

Through the window, she could see a man dressed head-to-toe in puffy ski wear. He was loading a fat shotgun into his trunk. When he turned to enter the restaurant, she whispered to the bartender that there was something suspicious about the new customer. She was dismissed as a nut. Removing his jacket, the man took a seat next to her. He was now wearing a gray turtleneck, which matched his graying sideburns. He asked for Chivas and scotch, then corrected himself and said Chivas and soda. He shivered and rubbed his hands together, smiling at Celeste and asking her whether she'd had a good evening. She nodded and asked the waiter how much longer her order was going to take.

“This is a great little town,” the ski man said. She tried to discern his accent. Definitely not North Shore drawl. Not Wisconsin. California surfer? “I’m Ray.” He shook her hand. His fingers were still cold. He hadn’t been wearing gloves. She thought of introducing herself with a fake name, then feared she’d forget it. He said he was an astronomer, and that he was surely facing the worst night of research in his life. “It’s pretty up here, but too much light pollution. New York and Boston will eventually become one megacity, with neon neighborhoods in between. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not opposed to all outdoor lighting. I just wish more communities would retrofit their fixtures with new technologies that aim the light downward. It’s the law in my county.”

She told him that she didn’t know what her county’s stance on light pollution was, and that she had moved from Brooklyn in order to escape city income tax. Then she felt comfortable enough to tell him the truth and say that she was really trying to escape her dark time. She apologized for assuming his telescope was a gun. She recounted the months she had lived without sunlight. He told her he knew how that felt. He said he lived in far west Texas, on terrain that was both a mountain and a desert blanketed by the blackest skies imaginable, so that he could work at an observatory for most months out of the year. “Most of the others just live in the university cabins for a few weeks at a time. I bought a place, though. I stay out there full-time, even when I’m not scheduled for projects. It’s not natural to work on projects year-round, observing at night and sleeping during the day. But I ordered special shades from Sears to keep the sunlight out.”

She thought the better of using her speed-dating questions: no, he had never heard of this restaurant before and no, he would never have eaten Mexican food on this trip if he weren’t looking for something convenient. No, he was not raised in any of the regions she had guessed. He had grown up in L.A. He was in town to lecture at the Museum of Natural History. He didn’t want to sleep in Manhattan because he was curious about the skies outside the city. He was sufficiently renowned to be trusted with the loan of a portable telescope. He had rented a car and actually liked driving up the West Side Highway. Traffic was a thrilling rarity for him, reminding him of his youth, she guessed.

After she had eaten, including the free sociology dessert, she asked the bartender to



order her a cab. Ray offered to drive her home. She was hesitant, though she remembered how much she had liked bringing strangers home in college. She also acknowledged that in college she had spent her science credits on astronomy: a difficult introductory class, followed by Archaeoastronomy, featuring sleepy slide shows of ancient star-tracking structures around the world, and then *The Search for Extraterrestrial Life*, conducted as a semester-long equation with a new variable introduced each week. The final exam required her to compute a logical probability for the existence of life beyond Earth.

While she debated about his offer, Ray wrote his license plate number on a napkin and gave it to the bartender. "In case she turns up missing," the men joked.

He was a careful driver and followed her directions explicitly. When they pulled up to the lawn beside her apartment, she invited him in. He said, "I would, but I have to get back to work. That was my lunch break, you see." She shrugged and reached for the door. He slipped a card into her hand and told her that someday she should see where he lived. He called it a wisp of a town but promised that she could see good modern art there, and he would give her a ticket for a star-gazing party where he worked. She reached for one of her own cards, but he said he would have no trouble remembering a woman named Celeste.

At work the next day, she spent the better part of the morning researching Ray. The museum confirmed his lecture. A university did operate an observatory in the Davis Mountains. And the town where he lived, strangely called Marfa, did exist. She dug deeper, looking up Marfa in the dictionary only to realize it was a proper name, not a generic noun. A co-worker speculated that the town had been named for a Dostoevsky character. The wife of a railroad executive was supposedly reading *The Brothers Karamazov* when the town was founded. She read up on Prada Marfa, a faux store erected roadside by artists seeking to create a provocative, biodegradable sculpture. As intended, vandals soon removed the glass windows and merchandise. The adobe building was designed to dissolve into the landscape. Celeste wondered whether there were any shoes left in her size.

Then she put away the thoughts of this trip. She had a slew of feuds to resolve, mostly between the representatives and the coordinators regarding a sluggish production cycle. She wondered if they knew about light pollution. It wasn't until several months had passed that a message from Ray sprang up on her computer, asking for information about apartment rentals for a friend who was relocating east. She responded with helpful, thorough answers, and they began the sort of intimate online chats that are known for stimulating as much oxytocin as flesh-and-blood relationships do.

By the following winter, she was addicted to airline websites. They had agreed that it was time for her to see his turf, since he had already visited hers. The only way to fly directly to Marfa was on a private plane. Commercial airlines were no help; the nearest major town was only served by a carrier with whom she had no frequent-flyer miles. The company with whom she had frequent-flyer miles could only get her within 200 miles of Marfa, and that would be on a propeller plane. She restricted herself to one airline, and to jet service. Also to non-stop flights. After an ice storm at O'Hare years ago, she added the non-stop requirement to her list of deal breakers. She finally sent an email to Ray and asked for his advice. He recommended that she either go LGA to DFW or EWR to AUS and rent a car. He said the drive would take her ten hours at the most.

Celeste scarcely knew how to drive. Her parents hadn't owned a car, but she had taken lessons in high school just in case. She could make do on rare vacations with friends,



getting from the hotel to historical monuments, or on business trips that required meeting with vendors in cheap, inconvenient neighborhoods. But she had not driven for more than an hour in one sitting. And never in the mountains.

There were buses, but buses made her queasy. She emailed Ray again and asked about trains. He told her there was a route that stretched from Chicago to California with Texas in between, but he explained that the service was extremely unreliable. He had once been stranded on a broken Texas train for seventeen hours. The tracks were in disrepair, he said, and the trains themselves were not as spiffy as the ones in her part of the country. Besides, the station was still an hour from where he lived. He assured her that once she drove out of the city, hers would be the only car on the road.

“What about trucks?” she asked.

“They’ll steer clear of you,” he replied.

When there was nothing left to ask, she began coordinating. She chose to fly from EWR. Although LGA was closer to her office and a cheaper taxi fare, she was terrified of driving out of DFW. She packed low-cut sweaters and her high-heeled slingbacks, though Ray had recommended boots and turtlenecks. She wheeled the luggage through her office lobby and flew out after work, maximizing her vacation hours. This meant she would land late at night, staying in an airport hotel and beginning the drive in the morning, but she always chose to conserve her time off when weighing commodities. Waiting for her boarding call, she inspected the weather map on the television screen and saw clouds blanketing her flight path. There was turbulence on takeoff, so she took a tranquilizer and afterwards the air pockets made her think of nothing but an invigorating shiatsu massage. A flight attendant served her a cheeseburger. The movie was *Nurse Betty*.

The airport was desolate when she landed. She smelled jalapeños and sausages, and over the speakers a grunge band was playing. A sign claimed that she had entered the live music capital of the world, and that only the music of local artists was played in the airport, and only the food and wares of local vendors was sold there. She asked which terminal she was in. A friendly woman wearing a patchwork vest told her there was only one terminal.

Still tranquilized, she bought a bottle labeled Rainwater and drifted to the airport hotel, a brand through which she could earn points and even get a double-dip bonus for the flight. She ate a spinach salad from room service and slept deeply, waking to allergies and a spectacular ice storm. Temperatures were not expected to rise above 25 degrees, and the iciest roads were to the west. She emailed Ray from the hotel’s business center, and he told her to wait another day because it would be 80 degrees in just a few hours. The marble-mouthed weatherman confirmed this prediction. She ordered more room service and watched shows about financial planning and redecorating.

At dawn, conditions were as drippy as Ray had said they would be. She familiarized herself with the rental car. She had asked for a four-door sedan, in case someone rear-ended her. She adjusted the mirrors, pumped the lumbar support, and experimented with the satellite radio she had requested. “It will work anywhere on the planet?” she had asked. “Yes ma’am, as long as you’re not under a bridge.” Then she wished she had borrowed someone’s satellite phone. She had friends who knew reporters. Surely she could have borrowed one. The rent-a-car man said he didn’t have any. She drove away angry at herself. Ray had told her there were few cell towers in his part of the state.



His prediction about driving was true. As she drove west, the cars numbered fewer and fewer until she found herself alone with the radio. She listened to Court TV and NPR and pulsing British house music that reminded her of being twenty years old, and when she began getting sleepy she found a rock station called BuzzSaw. The sound of Ray's voice entered her mind too, whispering the kind, precise words of fascination he had uttered into the phone in recent weeks. She had begun taking his calls in the nude, never telling him the true location of her hands. He guessed aloud about her body, asking her to change her flight reservation so that he would not have to wait so long to see her again. Their computers were now loaded with photographs of each other, digital shots taken by co-workers and friends who were eager to see the couple join the ranks of regular married society. She felt more connected to him than to any of the men who had taken her on actual dates.

He perfectly balanced worry with encouragement in his treatment of her, delivering a strangely correct amount of caring. Fixed on the image of his gentle smirk, she let the speedometer creep past ninety. Ray had warned her to fill up often because gas stations would become scarce. She fell into the rhythm of the road, the filling of the tank and emptying of her bladder, the refilling of her coffee cup and emptying of the trash. The terrain was scruffy and flat, and she watched carefully as her cell phone switched to Roam, and then to No Service of Any Kind at All.

There were short cedar trees and spotted ponies, a wind farm and ailing Victorian houses. She began seeing license plates from Mexico, on the rare occasions when she saw another car. She passed through a series of blasted-out cliffs.

She wondered how the day was going for her assistants in their cubes, but there was no way to check. They had often taken vacations with lovers. This was the first time they could envy her trip instead. She had been eagerly anticipating Fort Stockton, the Big Turn she needed to look out for, picturing a frontier town with log cabins and storefronts built from rough-hewn rocks. The town turned out to be an extended strip mall, with several motels and a variety of burger joints. She chose the restaurant that represented the largest national chain, one whose health inspection scores were usually high on local news exposés, and used the pay phone to call her co-workers. She got voice mail and reiterated the importance of several upcoming deadlines.

The next highway was more like a boulevard. Leaving the interstate reminded her of a departure on a transatlantic flight, between a familiar coastline and a foreign one. According to the map, she was at a high elevation and had begun entering a mountain range. Yet what she saw was no more familiar to her than Mars. In the distance were barren, red cliffs. Her black strip of road was bordered by barbed wire and white, withered grass that met the sky in a surreal horizon, like the ocean in reverse. The tumbleweeds were as large as her car, floating toward her as if they were the fossils of enormous, extinct sea creatures. When one approached, she slowed down to let it pass, unsure how much something like that weighed. Another one blew onto the hood and bounced off delicately. She understood now why Ray craved traffic.

After an hour, she realized she had not seen any mailboxes. Perhaps all of this acreage belonged to one person. She hadn't seen any troopers, or even a lone pickup. If it weren't for the radio, her mind might have begun constructing nuclear fallout scenarios in which she was the planet's sole survivor. When she at last encountered a town, she stopped for gasoline, which cost nearly twice what she'd paid so far, and a pricey Dr Pepper sold in a



glass bottle. She hadn't needed either, but she wanted to hear someone speak. The attendant seemed distant, as if he didn't want to interfere with the quiet.

She passed a sign for a viewing area, where at night people could gather to see notorious ghost lights. Ray had told her not to bother: "Who knows? It's just some kind of electromagnetic field or a gas."

Trendy renovations had given her a range of hotel choices. She preferred a hotel to a motor court, wanting doors that would lock inside a hallway. She loved the architecture and lore of Manhattan's old hotels. But when she arrived at the address on her reservation, this Deco structure reminded her not of a place where grand dreams came true all, but a place where the one permitted dream had died in infancy. In the corridors and balconies, and the potentially glamorous poolside bar, she saw not a resurrection but a burial. She chose one of the more affordable rooms, a room not purported to have housed Elizabeth Taylor or Rock Hudson during the filming of *Giant*.

She phoned Ray immediately, hoping that he was anxious about her safety, but he sounded calm. She told him she was enthusiastic about the 75-degree weather. He warned her that it would be below freezing again after the sun went down. He told her he had made a reservation for her to tour an art collection the next day, and that his colleagues were looking forward to meeting her the following night. The public would have to pay for the stargazing, but she would not need a ticket. He told her that her hotel bar had a broad selection of every liquor, and that he would join her if he weren't on duty after dusk. She hadn't expected to be alone that night. She thought of the way he had told her to wait out the ice storm. His emails had sounded eager, but he was now probably full of regret.

The restaurant was named after James Dean's final character. Though she was there during off-season, the restaurant soon filled up. She could almost have been in midtown; she ordered and Stoli, neat, with olives, and Chilean Sea Bass. The waiter complained about skyrocketing real estate prices. "We're the next Santa Fe," he sighed.

In the morning, she drove across a set of railroad tracks and parked in front of the art foundation, tempted to call Ray but knowing that he needed sleep. He had cautioned her against calling it a museum because some believed its founder had intended to create an anti-museum. Exhibition space was a safer term. She had seen this artist's work in Manhattan. He had purchased decommissioned army barracks here during the seventies. They had been restructured to house his metal sculptures and give them a unique context.

She followed the tour along a gravel path. When the group entered the first room, her eyes drifted from the taut geometry of heavy aluminum slabs, which reminded her of a corporation and were therefore reassuring, to the empty landscape looming through the windows. She overheard conversations: "What a visionary." "I heard he could be an ass." "His mind had clearly evolved beyond derivative conceptual functioning."

There was Russian art, including an installation that filled entire rooms with schoolbooks, desks, ink wells, report cards, and paraphernalia inscribed in Cyrillic. There was cone art, solid-copper sculptures in the shape of earplugs. There was automobile art, made from compressed car bodies. Celeste fixated on the remains of a bumper, searching for other recognizable parts. From behind, one of the men on the tour looked like a lankier, younger version of Ray. She imagined him cautiously now, stoking a small fantasy of grasping this man's shoulders and pressing the length of her torso along his faceless frame.

She had not eaten breakfast because the hotel didn't serve any. By the time a break





was called, she was lightheaded from hunger. She was the only member of the group who had not brought a friend, so she decided to return to yesterday's gas station for a snack because she knew the way. The same attendant was there. He sold her two breakfast tacos that were still warm from a heat lamp. He said his wife had made the batch that morning. Celeste complimented the saltiness of the chorizo.

In the afternoon, she continued through a series of buildings that featured works by the founder's one-time friend. His primary medium was fluorescent light tubes. The artificiality, in shades of gelato, made her deeply homesick. She turned from one end of the whitewashed room to the other, asking herself to choose between electricity and natural light. It was a disturbing experience. She had seen this artist's work before also, but in the city the source of the light had not seemed so relevant.

Afterward she toured the artist's former home. He had built most of the furniture. It looked stern and punitive. One of the larger buildings was a converted arena, where horses had once paraded. Before driving away, she took a photograph of an outdoor sculpture, a supersized, rusty horseshoe impaled by a massive nail that cast a shadow like a sundial. "Oldenburg and friends," she jotted in her travel diary.

She was not to meet Ray until 7 o'clock. He said they could have dinner at the StarDate Café, his unofficial office. She lay on her hotel bed, wrapped in its gray duvet, listening to the wind rattle the double-hung windows in their pulleys. For twenty minutes she dreamed, imagining she had dozed off on a train and missed her stop. She saw herself being awakened by a conductor who spoke Russian. In subtitles, he tried to tell her she would never be able to logistically coordinate her way back home.

She had set her cell phone as an alarm, and the Tchaikovsky ring tone was unsettling when it summoned her back to the mountains. It was already dark when she left the hotel, venturing in the other direction on the same two-lane road without passing any travelers along the way. She saw signs for the Hotel Limpia, which she thought meant Clean Hotel (though Ray later explained it was named for clean water nearby) and knew her turnoff to the observatory would soon appear. As it did, she eased into the thinner road. Not a speck of light shone from behind in the tiny town behind her. She steered carefully because the road was so tortuous, and the wind resisted her attempts to accelerate. She switched off the radio so she could concentrate.

Alone with herself, she no longer felt secure. She watched the clock, thinking surely the summit should have been in sight by now. Maybe she had taken a wrong turn, though a recent sign said otherwise. Around and around, she looped her way up the peak with her high-beams on, encountering only occasional wildlife. She thought of calling Ray but couldn't get a signal.

Even without a sunroof, she could see the stars. They dominated the view through the windshield. She had never been able to fathom how other cultures made out creatures and people in these eruptions of light. Her mother and father had died together, drowning in a boating accident near Montauk. One had tried to save the other, though witnesses were unsure which was the savior. Celeste tried to picture her parents as stars, frolicking and twinkling in perpetual bliss. But to her, the stars continued to look like a case of the measles, randomly littering the night. She reminded herself that the stars were completely intangible to her, some of them burning out millennia ago with their auras just now reaching her. She thought of the destiny of the sun, the spectacular explosion that lay



ahead in its future. She knew that for anyone looking at her galaxy, the sun was just one speck among these, a flare in someone else's constellation. She knew that the universe was expanding, propelled by an unknown force—named dark matter with such an unsettling lack of clarity—and that everything she was seeing only drifted farther away from her with each passing second. She suddenly could not climb anymore.

She could not remember how to drive and didn't recognize the person sitting behind the wheel. How did she come to inhabit the body of such an unfamiliar woman? She thought about taking one of her airplane tranquilizers but feared this would make her driving even worse. The unfamiliar woman wordlessly swung the wheel around and began driving back down the mountain. She descended much faster than she had driven up, staying close to the gravel shoulder. She did not look at the clock until she had the Clean Hotel in sight. By then it was 7:45. There was a drugstore across the street. She parallel parked and went inside.

As soon as she saw the sparsely toothed man behind the counter, she recognized herself once again. He asked her if she felt all right, and she told him she was just glad to see another person. He had a supper menu and brought her thick slices of barbecued brisket, with biscuits shaped like cotton balls. He gave her a piece of buttermilk pie that she hadn't asked for but wanted. She also bought a donut and a can of iced tea so that she could eat breakfast in her room the next morning.

Ray called her that night and did not seem surprised when she said she hadn't been able to make it to him in the dark. "It's a tricky road if you're unfamiliar," he conceded. He told her that he would pick her up in the morning, if she liked, and give her the daylight tour. "But won't you be tired?" she asked.

"Nah. They're predicting a bright morning. The melatonin will keep me awake."

He was waiting for her in the lobby at 7 a.m., looking at the movie stills lining a wall. He was taller than she remembered. She was just as ruddy as he had recalled. They traded honest smiles, then reached out to clutch each other stiffly. She thought she felt his cold mouth brush her ear, but she could not be sure. She looked through the windows and asked which car was his. He pointed to a German coupe and told her to do the driving while he navigated. The thought filled her with dread. "It's a completely different experience after sun up," he said. "You'll feel better about yourself if you tackle this." He put his hand against her spine when he said that. "It's an automatic," he added.

Past the Limpia, as the vegetation descended below her, the sight of the cliffs and occasional red roofs was reassuring. There were no clouds, only a deep blue ahead that disguised all traces of the cosmos. "I'll show you the telescopes," he told her. "The oldest one is an 82-incher. It's been here for about seventy-five years. Watch it up here—this one is going to be a sharp bend." After a few minutes, she saw the domes resting on the green hillside like stray golf balls. "There's still plenty to do, even though everyone in the cabins has gone to sleep." When she parked in the nearly empty lot, she tried to imagine why this spot had seemed so impossible to reach the night before. "You made it," he cheered. "The pinnacle of your driving career." She exhaled slowly and thanked him.

They walked to a ledge and breathed in the dry air. "Don't you ever get spooked up here at night?" she asked him.

"Not really. Working here was my goal in life. I'm always amazed that I got here. What is it that spooked you, exactly?"



She wasn't sure at first. "It just didn't feel safe."

"But you feel safe using public transportation. Anything could happen in your city. Anything could happen anywhere. You could fall through a grate in the sidewalk just walking to your office."

"There would be someone to help. Out here, there's no one to help. If I'd gone off the cliff last night, it would have been hours before anyone found me."

"Do you not like being with yourself?" he asked. "I think you're good to be with."

She felt warm and took off her coat. "I guess I'm just used to distractions. I'm surprised there are so many distractions here in the daytime. I didn't think there would be much to see without the stars."

"You can still see *our* star. We can do solar viewing. And I'll give you a refresher course in spectrometry."

She paused, realizing this was another junction. She wasn't ready to go inside. "How do you know how far from home to go? That's what I want to know. How far from civilization is safe? Don't you miss Los Angeles?"

"I know what you're trying to figure," he finally said. "I measure light for a living."

She looked away from him. The visitors' center roof reflected the raw morning sky. She was growing accustomed to the silence between his words. "All right," she said. "Show me the universe."