

Amongst the Stars

“Amongst the Stars: Prologue”

Tanner:

I found myself sitting amongst the stars. No memory of how I got here, or why I came. Maybe I never technically “arrived” here. Maybe my home has always been with the stars. Maybe, like Hercules, I fell to this mortal world full of pain, suffering, and injustice, ostracized for that which makes me great. Maybe this world isn’t built for someone “with my sensitivities.” That’s what my mom says. This world wasn’t built for someone intended for the stars. I may disagree quite loudly with her when she asks me to hide the essence of who I am. But I agree wholeheartedly that this world wasn’t made for me. I’ve never felt comfortable here. The guys at school say I’m a “Schizo” because I see things that people who were made for this place are blind to. Maybe I should’ve listened to my mom when she asked me to keep that part of me hidden. The part of me that sees other grounded stars looking for their way home. Except these stars are different from me. These stars have tried to go home and found themselves eternally grounded here, and as though punished for attempting to escape early, lose any physical connection to this world while having no escape to anywhere else. I suppose it would have been best if I had listened to my mom. She told me people, old and young, would never understand me. It’s become increasingly apparent that she was right. But one friend? One person who understands me? That doesn’t seem like too much to ask for. I slid my shoes off, leaving them near the tree swing I spend my time by. My swing looks out over the stars, and when I’m lucky, and the stars are feeling generous, I can swing high enough to feel a small glimpse of home. I kicked off the ground feeling the coarse dirt scratching against the tops of my toes as I swing back and forth gently. My mom warned me not to swing too high tonight since a storm would be rolling in at any moment. I tried to assure her that I’d be okay because the stars watch over me, but she doesn’t have the same “sensitivity” as I do. She sees the stars as mere lights that freckle the night sky. I see them as warmth, light, love, and hope. I kicked off the ground a little further. The swing hadn’t passed the cliff like I was ready for it too. I desperately wanted to listen to my mom. So, with each kick, I made sure to keep about an inch between me and the edge of the cliff. Anticipation rose within me as I fought to keep the disobedient young boy I used to be at bay. The boy who made rash decisions like ignoring my mom’s advice. Not this time though. This time I would listen and behave. I felt the wind tickle my skin, raising goosebumps all along my arms and the back of my neck. I closed my eyes and turned my face upward letting the starlight gaze upon my face. I heard a giggle and turned quickly to see who it would be this time. I can’t always tell who they are, and they never give me names. I mostly see two grounded stars. I call one of them, the taller one, Big Ben. I call the shorter presumably younger one Little Miss, Missy for short. I knew who I would see based on the giggle. Missy is constantly vying for attention from me whenever she could get it. I felt the swing carry me back towards the tree, towards Missy. I hollered back to her, “Behave yourself bac-”. Before I could finish the sentence, I felt the swing push sharply forward. I felt a jolt, and then I felt free. I realized the

swing was no longer attached to the tree. All I could see was the cliff I used to be sitting on and the sky. No, the stars. The beautiful, merciful stars. I felt like I was flying. I felt like I was finally understood. Not by a human friend, but by the only friend I'd ever known. I was going home, to my friends, Amongst the stars.

“Amongst the Stars: Chapter 1”

I was eight years old when it happened. I remember the calm from before it happened. I remember getting off the bus, the sky a dark gray preparing itself for the storm that would arrive any moment. Humidity hung thick on my skin. The wind brushed my hair in front of my face as it moved the trees and the grass to a dance they only perform for the storm. I remember my mom was waiting for me with a smile on her face. It was the last time I would see such a peaceful smile grace her lips, her face. I ran to her, throwing my arms around her. This woman was everything to me.

The only thing missing was Tanner being alongside her, telling us stories about the ‘stars’ he saw wandering around. But I knew where I could find him. Tanner loved his swing. He told me a star named Missy led him to it. Through a barely discernable path through the trees and on the other side was his swing that looked out over a cliff. He showed me where it was, and it made me a little scared. When I go there with him, I don't swing, because it gets so close to the edge that I feel like there's nothing tying me to earth. Like I might just fall and never stop falling. Tanner loves his swing, and he made me swear never to tell mommy he took me there. He said mommy didn't want me to know about it since it was so close to the cliff, and I was too young to be playing out there.

I asked mommy where Tanner was and she told me he went for a walk, which is what she told me when he was at his swing so I wouldn't ask questions. We walked into the house where I left my school things and then, with mommy's permission, I left to go climb in the trees. That's what I always told mommy I was going to do when really I was going to Tanner's swing. When I stepped outside, I heard the thunder boom and lightning crack. Storms have always been louder here than anywhere else I've been. I had always found that comforting, but that was before I knew the true maleficence storms were capable of.

I giggled and skipped along the path I'd often taken with Tanner. I saw the piles of rocks we had laid out together so we could always find our way to the swing and back again. I felt the bark from the trees with my fingers as I skipped along the path. This path felt magical to me. Where Tanner found solace in his swing, I found solace in the woods, in the trees. I liked to imagine that if I could just climb high enough, I'd be able to find the stars Tanner talks about. That they might reach down and show me the same warmth and kindness he finds in them. He laughs at me for that. He says, “No silly, the stars in the sky have to stay there. It's the ones down here, on the ground, you have to find. They know what it's like to be here and what it's like to belong somewhere else. They are the ones who can help you.”

Tanner has always been a bit ‘special’ according to my mom, and I agree with her. Tanner is the best big brother. He cares about me, and he guides me the best he can. He says he

doesn't belong here and if that's true then I'm glad for whatever mistake was made to lead him here. Tanner is my star, and just being around him helps me when I feel lost. I guess that makes him my North Star. He is what guides me home.

I saw the low-hanging branch that I have to get around to find the other side of the trees. Tanner always goes over it and then helps me over, but when he isn't with me, I have to go under it. This means I have to crawl on the dirt and Mommy gets mad when I do that cause "I ruin my pretty dress." I got on my hands and knees and army-crawled under the branch. I like to imagine that I'm on a dangerous mission in a cave or something. That lives depend on me getting past this branch. I felt the dirt scrape at my palms and knees, and the rough bark of the tree branch pull at the back of my dress. I stood up too quickly as I passed the branch and felt it scrape along my back as I stood. I felt the sharp pain of skin breaking and gasped as tears formed in my eyes. I ran around the corner of trees, if I could just find Tanner, he could help me get home so Mommy would bandage me up.

As I rounded the corner, I found only the top part of the rope that used to hold Tanner's swing. But where was the rest of Tanner's swing? My back hurt as the confusion and fear swept over me. Tanner was going to be so upset when he found his swing was gone. I ran home to Mom, crawling under the same tree that had just attacked my back not caring as the bark scraped at the fresh scratches on my back. I told Mom through the tears and the lump in my throat about Tanner's swing, I told her how I knew where it was and to not be mad at Tanner for showing me. I told her about his swing being broken, that part of the rope was still there but the swing part was missing. Mommy's face turned to fear. She told me to go to my room and stay there. I complained because I wanted to be there to comfort Tanner when he found out his swing was gone, but she insisted I stay. After a short phone call asking the neighbors to come sit with me, she ran out the door.

I went to my room and couldn't stop crying. Tanner was going to be mad that I told Mom I knew about his swing, and he was going to be sad that his swing was gone. I wanted to be able to comfort him through it, but what if he wouldn't want to talk to me because I told Mom about the swing, and he was mad at me?

The neighbor woman came to my room and held me while I cried. She took me to the bathroom and used a rough washcloth with water and soap to clean my back. I cried harder then, cause the soap burned. But the neighbor woman said it had to be done or I could get really sick. When she finished with the soap and the burning, we went downstairs and watched movies. I could hear the storm's persistent cries of thunder, and saw the lightning crack every so often. It didn't comfort me anymore. It felt almost like it was mocking me now. Each roar of thunder made anger rise alongside the fear. But still, Mom didn't return. I remember having fallen asleep at some point on the neighbor woman.

I woke up in my bed, the covers tucked under my chin. But I knew Mom didn't put me here. When Mom tucks me in, she only pulls the covers to my elbows, never to my chin because then I get too hot. I snuck out of bed and down the hallway. I glanced into Tanner's room. There were stick-on stars on his ceiling that glowed in the dark. I remember him complaining about

how they should be on the floor too cause that's where stars like Missy are, but Mom laughed and said he was really creative. But that same night we stood on chairs that were on top of books so Tanner could grab two stars from the ceiling and put them on the floor. He took one big one and placed it by the bookshelf and a small one and put that one by his toy chest. He said the small one was by the toy chest cause Missy likes to play, and the big one was called Big Ben and he liked to read. I saw both the stars in his room, but Tanner wasn't there. I went downstairs and saw Mom lying on the floor wet and crying, while the neighbor woman walked towards her with a towel. The neighbor told her that "she should call the police." But Mom didn't say anything. I ran down the stairs and cried out "Mommy? What's the matter? Where's Tanner, Mommy?" I shook her but she didn't reply. The neighbor took my hand and led me to the kitchen away from my mom. I started crying again. "What's wrong with Mommy?" But the neighbor woman didn't answer my question. She sat me at the table and said, "Your mom's going to be just fine. Okay, Hun? I need you to help me out though. I need you to sit at this table and not move. I have to go make a phone call and I'm going to try to help your mommy, okay? Can you stay here for me?" I was confused and scared but I did as I was told. The neighbor woman picked up the phone and left the room. I could hear that she was speaking but I didn't know what she was saying. After a few moments, I heard her footsteps moving again. Then I heard my mommy start yelling things like, "my baby boy" and then louder still she'd just scream. I was terrified. I remember missing my brother more than anything. If he were here right now, he'd comfort me.

I'm not sure how much time had passed while I sat at the kitchen table. The next person I saw that night was a man in a police uniform. We talked about policemen in school today. They were the people who helped when things were really bad. He sat at the table with me for a long time. He tried to speak to me, but I didn't know what to say to him, so I didn't say anything. I was scared that maybe I'd be in trouble. Maybe they thought I did something to Tanner's swing set so he ran away because he was mad at me. After a while, the neighbor woman and another stranger walked into the room. The stranger asked me if I would like for the neighbor woman to stay with me tonight. I thought this was a ridiculous idea. "I want Mommy," I said. The neighbor woman crouched in front of me. A couple of tears fell from her eyes as she said, "Mommy isn't well right now, and she needs some time to get better. But I'm going to stay with you until she is."

"Where's Tanner?" I cried. "I want my mommy and Tanner."

I went to bed that night alone and afraid. The neighbor woman told me she would be right downstairs if I needed anything. But I didn't need her. I needed my mom. But that day I saw her when I got off the bus was the last day I would see her as my mom. Every day that I saw her after that, she was never quite right. If Mom was a star, then she had lost all her light and all that remained was a hollow shell of a woman. The neighbor woman took care of me since my mom couldn't or wouldn't. Mom didn't leave her room and it became expected that I would go to the neighbors for meals and rides to school. When I turned 16, I got a job at the gas station down the street. When I turned 17 the neighbor, Marjorie, died. I spent that summer working as many hours as I could. Once August hit I would have to finish school on my own. I would have to take

care of Mom on my own. I think that summer was the first time I fully realized that I lost everything that night. I lost my mom, and I lost Tanner. Even ten years wasn't enough time to heal my mom enough to get her out of her room. I went into her room once. Tried to rouse Mom from whatever spell had her transfixed. But my mom wasn't there anymore. She just sat on her bed looking out her window into a line of trees. The very things that used to bring me comfort were now nothing more than a reminder of that fateful August day. In two more weeks, it will have been 11 years. Tanner would have been 21.

“Amongst the Stars: Chapter 2”

I sat on his cliff, my back resting against the rough bark of the tree that his swing used to hang on. Although I know I should probably stay away from this place, the place that took my brother from me, I can't help but return. This is the one place he enjoyed spending his time. Everywhere else was nothing more than a reminder of how cruel people are. Anything that dares to be different be damned. Sometimes I wonder what it would cost to spend one more moment with him. To ask for advice, and even give him a hug and tell him how important he is to me. I closed my eyes, resting my head against the tree, calling forth my favorite memory of us.

It was the summer before the incident. We were playing along the path to the swing, using sticks as swords as we battled for the crown. Tanner, the prince defending his kingdom and his title, and I, the spy determined to reveal his secrets. I lunged forward to stab him with the stick, but my shoe got caught on a tree root and I fell, scraping my palms and knees.

“Kya!” Tanner called out for me.

He knelt beside me, gently inspecting my hands. When he realized I was okay and not even in much pain he laughed a little.

“You're about as graceful as Little Missy.” He said while shaking his head at me.

“When can I meet her?” A question I had been asking Tanner for a while now.

“Well, she's right over there.” He pointed towards a plant where a blue butterfly was resting. If you looked closely at the wings, you could see what appeared to be eyes staring back at you. This butterfly's eyes were fixated on me.

“All I see over there is a butterfly.”

“That's okay, maybe when you're older you'll be ready.”

I remember pouting for another moment while Tanner helped me to my feet. Then he lunged toward me and there was no more time for pouting because I had a mission to complete.

I awoke from the pleasant naivety of childhood memories, startled at a loud crunching noise. I looked around desperately for answers, but the woods and the cliff were all quiet and still. An animal, maybe a deer, or a raccoon. Something non-threatening just happened to step on a really loud leaf or something. Surely, that's all it was. Feeling unsettled and disturbed I stood up brushing the dirt off my butt from sitting against the tree. It was darker now; the sun had mostly gone down and the sky was barely lit from the sun's distant touch. I grabbed my bag that I'd set by the tree, throwing it over my shoulder. When I turned around, I was startled by a huge butterfly flying into my face. I waved my hands around to get it away from me. When I realized

how close to the cliff I'd gotten, my heart skipped a beat and I rushed forward a few steps. The cliff had already gotten enough from my life, I'll be damned if it takes me too. The butterfly flew to where my bag had been sitting and rested there. I saw the same sort of eyes as I had seen all those years ago in the butterfly that Tanner pointed out. Except this butterfly is purple. The few remaining rays of the sun from sunset poured down over the butterfly's wings in streams of violets and deep, royal purples. I stared in awe at this wonderful little creature. Mom always used to say that if a butterfly graced you with its presence, it was a loved one who'd passed on reminding you that you are loved. Tears slipped from my eyes at the thought that just maybe Tanner was listening from beyond and sending me a hug from wherever he'd wound up. The light seemed to grow with the butterfly's incessant variability of color. The blues and purples streamed out in rays, brightly assailing my eyes until I had to cover them for fear of damage. I felt the warmth from the light on my skin causing goosebumps at the few chilly winds that managed to break through the light and warmth. The warmth built more and more until sweat had begun to break out on my forehead. I finally felt the warmth slowly break apart telling me it was safe to open my eyes now. The light had focused and condensed into a 6-foot-tall diamond-like figure. I gasped and took a step back in pure astonishment and a little bit of fear. It looked just like Tanner had described: a grounded star. The light diminished, slowly revealing a boy who looked to be 18 standing where before there had been nothing but light. He wore a pair of jeans and a faded T-Shirt with a jean jacket. I stared at him unsure of my eyes. I shook my head as though to clear the fog of confusion that must have overtaken my brain.

"Hi, sorry, uhm, are you lost? What's your name?" I asked him.

"Wow, you took that a lot better than I expected. The name's Ben. Your brother knew me as Big Ben. I always hated that nickname though. So, Ben will do just fine."

I laughed in pure disbelief.

"No, no, - no. You must have me confused for someone else. My brother's been gone for nearly ten years now. And trust me there is not a single living person that he knew that I didn't also know, and he did not know you," I stated with a head nod at the end to further impress upon this stranger my point.

"Well, there's your problem. I'm not living." He said it so casually and with such a matter-of-fact tone. I laughed again.

"Yeaaa, no." I turned and walked to grab my bag from beside the tree, dusting off any dirt debris. He rushed toward me as though to grab my hand and I jumped back towards the damned edge of the cliff again. Just being within two feet of the cliff makes my heart race and this stranger seems to have me stuck in that un-comfort zone quite often.

"Kay, that's gonna be a no from me. Let's refrain from touching me seeing as I DON'T KNOW YOU! Yes? Can do? Thanks."

"All right, I'm sorry. There's just a lot that we need to discuss and that's not going to happen, at least not easily, until you just hear me out and have an open mind."

"Sorry, but my mom warned me about two things in life: 1.) Don't talk to strangers, and 2.) Don't talk to the undead. Seeing as you claim to hit both of those marks, I'm gonna have to

pass on that delightful little conversation opportunity. Would ya mind?" I gestured with my hands for him to get out of my way, but he remained resolute.

"I get that I'm saying some stuff that seems like a lot. But you've never pondered the possibility of there being an afterlife?"

"Oh no, I'm sure, positive even that there IS an afterlife. It's just that for it to be an AFTER life it can't coexist with plain old life."

"Look I'm just saying," he began but seemed to get distracted by something behind me. My heart began to race again at the reminder that there is a cliff behind me waiting to pull me to certain death.

"Missy no!" he cried out, reaching a hand out towards me. It was too late. I felt something pull my feet out from beneath me. My stomach hit the edge of the cliff hard, knocking my breath out of my lungs, making me dizzy. I grasped at the grass desperately. Surely this wouldn't happen to me. Surely I wouldn't die on the same cliff my brother went missing from. I mean that'd be absurd and just plain cheesy and dumb and just no. My fingers dug into the rough ground of the cliff searching for any hold or friction I could manage but came up empty each time. The next moment I was falling. The air whipped at my hair, and I could see on the cliff two grounded stars. One big, just like the star I'd just seen, the other was about half the size of the big one and was dancing around the big one. For a moment, I felt Tanner with me. Warmth and comfort flowed through me, and I felt like I truly understood him. Finally, I felt icy water grabbing at me pulling me lower and lower into darkness. My head felt light, and I had a sharp stabbing headache. It didn't take long before I succumbed to the darkness. At least now I would be able to see Tanner again. Careful what you wish for, I guess.