

Traces in the Winter Sky

by Doug Bond

Tyler steadied himself alongside the enormous Cypress that bordered the open space across from his house and reached down to unleash the dog. A chilly wind rising up from the bluffs set the branches creaking overhead as it also lit up the wind chimes his wife had arranged on the gazebo back behind the garden. Exhaling slowly and deeply, Tyler settled his back in against the saddle of the tree's broad trunk and let it all go.

The fight had been silly, he knew. Absurd, even, tangling with her about whether to change the way the Christmas lights would be hung. Couldn't she just let some things stay the same? Her tone had been sharp edged, even taunting, the way she abruptly clipped the leash and dropped it in his hand, all but pushing him out the door. The flares had come to feel like more than just the bickering of long married people, and he resented it: a disembodied voice and that inflection of disinterest. It pulled at him, the shift and weight of dependency, and Tyler tromped his feet heavily on the wood chips for a few steps as if to shake himself back. The Lab pulled up beside him misreading the cue, and Tyler lowered to pat his head and then released him away again.

As he listened to the jingle of the dog's tags mixing with the wind and lilting chimes, Tyler let himself drift back into memories and images long gone. The face of a girl and a first kiss, a December night like this one almost fifty years ago. His brain clouded from the distance and compression of so much time. He remembered the way her skin had smelled sharply of astringent, and the brightness that had come into her eyes when he looped her in his arms.

They had snuck out of the Christmas concert and tucked themselves back for a smoke behind the orchestra room door. Jenny had unbolted it from the top and gave it a kick, sending smoke up past the glowing red exit sign, her hair braided and whirling. When he looked up at the sky and counted out the three stars on Orion's Belt, Jenny pointed to the lowest one, told him it was actually two,

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rotating so close together they seemed like one. It was the first time Tyler had heard her talk of stars.

Hers was the kind of mind that had wrapped easily around numbers. Back then he would go into a trance when Jenny gave voice to the elegant geometry of the constellations, to the sound of words like Trapezium, the star cluster deep inside the Orion Nebula, the dim edge of the sword falling below The Hunter's Belt. They had spent hours together staring up into dark and white speckled skies through her father's old telescope, so dim and weak they had called it The Night Glass.

A sudden, but small commotion of collar tags and rustling shrub leaves lifted Tyler off the Cypress trunk, remembering that he'd promised he would not be gone long. Shaking the leash in both hands he called for the black dog who came quickly padding towards him in the wet grass. Together they tracked towards home with the leash pulling, straight and angled.

Watching as Tyler came up the walk, she stood in the parted curtains of the front window, backlit by the dining room lamps. She was outlined sharply in the window frame, but no matter the light, he could not see her.

By the time Tyler stopped at the door, she had it opened, waiting. He reached out and brushed his hand across her forehead, then slowly his fingers along the bridge of her nose, onto her lips and into her hair, which lay now short about the crease of her neckline. When she opened her mouth to speak, he felt it and gently shushed her, turning to draw his eyes up again towards where he knew it should be, Betelgeuse, and the long line from the Hunter's foot to the shoulder. She took Tyler's hand and helped him trace it, crossing straight through the Belt's three stars and then the further distance to Rigel, the one she said that burns brighter than all the others.

