

# Space Junk Sounds A Hell Of A Lot Sexier Than It Is

*by* Lynn Beighley

We were talking about the falling space junk.

"Remember when we were kids? Skylab? We were freaked out, in a Chicken Little sort of way, that the sky was falling, and was going to fall on us," he said.

"I was a scared little girl," I said.

"You were 14, we both were."

"I was a very sheltered 14," I said.

He looked up as we walked down the dark street to his car. We were keeping our distance from each other, the newness of being together in the flesh making us much more tentative and awkward than we were online. We both knew that this couldn't go anywhere. But we were friends, and that was okay.

"Look," he pointed.

I caught a glimpse of a light moving across the sky.

"I bet that's space junk," he said.

I figured it was a meteorite. Really, what were the odds that we'd see a piece of the falling space junk? Astronomical.

"When I was 8, my parents took me to Yellowstone. I loved it. These strange, alien pools of boiling water, the geysers, the paths you didn't dare stray from. I wasn't the least bit scared," I said.

"I've never been," he said.

"You've got to go. Anyway, I felt perfectly safe, even as a little girl. Right up until the park ranger told us that the whole park was a massive volcano just waiting to erupt," I said. "That scared me. I spent the rest of the trip worried that the very ground beneath me would become a boiling pit of lava."

"I'd have imagined it as baking soda and vinegar. That's the only volcano I knew much about at that age," he said.

"I was kind of freakish."

"Still are," he said. I fake punched him, and he grabbed my arm. It felt good. Really good. But he let my arm go.

"I have kind of a volcano obsession," I said. "I saw lava flowing in Hawaii, felt the heat from it. Stole some brand new cooled lava. Pumice. Whatever."

"That's supposed to anger the goddess Pele, right? You aren't supposed to do that," he said. "You are cursed!"

"Yes, it's true. Pele has cursed me. That's why I'm here with you."

"Geek," he whispered in my ear as he kissed my neck. He stopped after a few seconds and slapped his arm. "Damn mosquitoes. Let's get going."

We were both quiet as we quickly reached his car. I saw another meteorite streaking across the sky. It was a sign, I thought. Pele, maybe. Fire in the sky.

He opened the passenger door for me.

"Home?" he said.

"Afraid so. I've got to work tomorrow." I was grateful that he didn't say anything about her waiting for him.

He started the car, turned on the lights, and pulled on to the road.

"Tell me more about your volcano obsession," he said.

I told him about visiting Pompeii. About the city frozen in time. And about the casts of people forever in stances of eternal abject horror by a disaster they had no chance of avoiding, a disaster they didn't expect.

"They had no idea," I said. "Well, they had a little warning that things were not right, I think they must have felt some earthquakes, and seen the eruption. But it was so close, so fast, that even if they wanted to avoid it, they had no chance. They were running and cowering, the ones that were entombed by the ash. Those tragic human statues."

We talked about other natural disasters as he drove me home.

"My favorite natural disaster is the hurricane. You have enough warning to avoid it, and while it's horrible, nobody should die in one," he said.

"And yet people do. Some people simply can't escape disaster, no matter what they do. Look at New Orleans," I said.

"True. Sometimes we have no options. And that's just natural disasters. Think about the man-made ones. 9/11. Fukushima. Hell, this space junk falling on us," he said.

"Speaking of space junk, look." In front of us were more meteorites, impossible to miss in the dark sky above the unlit street I lived on.

He pulled over at my house. He leaned over and kissed me on my cheek.

"Stay there," he said, "let me get your door."

I watched him get out of the car. As he walked in front of the headlights, in a split second, like lightning, a blinding flash outlined him. The car jerked as he thudded into the hood.

I screeched and clambered out of the car. Space junk had hit him in the chest, the impact creating a crater where his heart was, where the engine was.

My first thought, when I could think again, was that he was absolutely, irrevocably dead.

And then I realized that if I walked in the house, called 911, and reported that an unknown car, a stranger had been hit by something, that she'd never know about us. She'd wonder, but she'd never know. She'd be a survivor, not a victim.

So I did.

