

Supernova

by Ray Shea

Ben had us over, me and him and his boy, Benji, to look at the supernova. Ben was always coming up with these things with the telescope. Jupiter's moons, Saturn's rings. On his wedding night he made everybody stop dancing and run out to the golf course so he could show us that big comet they had that year. He grinned, said it was a sign, but we all know how that turned out.

"I can't see anything," Benji said. He reached up to grab the eyepiece.

"Don't touch, just look," Ben said. "Here, let me see. Aw, dammit." There had been clear skies and no rain for months but clouds show up when he wants to have one of his star parties.

I grabbed the last two beers out of the cooler and handed one to him. Benji wandered off to look for bugs. Ben cracked the beer, took a swig and plopped down in the lawn chair. "They oughta clear out soon I guess." He bent and scooped up a handful of driveway gravel, and started zinging them one at a time into the brush.

You could see where the whole part-time single-dad thing was taking it out of him. Usually he'd be grinning and giving one of his grandiose speeches, talking about the cosmos and the origins of time and matter in his Stephen Hawking voice. Tonight, though, he just side-armed those rocks and muttered to himself. Above us the cicadas cranked up their mournful cry. We both worked our beers.

He'd already told me about this supernova we were looking for tonight, about how it was the closest one in a generation, some god-awful number of light-years away. I could get the gist of what he was saying, but I wanted to get his head back here with us, with the boy.

"So," I said, "this thing exploded millions of years ago...?"

"Right, right," he said. "See, this event, this massive cataclysm, it was all over, BOOM," and he whacked his chair with his palm, "like that, back before there were even cavemen. But the light is only just reaching us, so looking at it tonight is like time travel. Like getting to stare into history."

Benji looked up from where he was grubbing in the dirt. "Are we gonna go back in time?"

Ben laughed. "Yeah, kinda. If your mama doesn't come pick you up first."

Benji went silent. It was a touchy subject. Ben's ex was batshit but he let her walk all over him where the boy was concerned.

"Yo, Banjo," I said. "Why don't you run in the house and see if there's any more beers in the fridge?"

Benji jumped up and smacked the dirt off his hands, then tore off toward the kitchen, little red lights blinking in his sneakers. Ben watched him go, then scoped the clouds again, looking for a break in the sky.

"You know, Ben, you're probably tired of me saying so, but..."

"Yeah, I am."

"Look," I said, "I ain't saying she didn't have legitimate grievances, but the boy needs his father. You need to keep that in mind."

He crumpled his can and flung it at the recycling bin, but it hit the lip and bounced off into the dark of the bushes.

"I blew it all up," he said. "I had it all just like anybody would want, and then I blew it all up and I can't get it back."

I picked at the pull tab on my empty while I thought about how to put it.

"Maybe," I said, "getting it back is not the point."

The screen door slammed behind us and Benji skittered across the drive all out of breath.

"There was only one left."

Ben pointed at me and I took the can, popped it open. A car pulled up on the gravel shoulder and honked. I gave Ben a look, but he was already headed down the driveway. Benji just stared at the sky. "It's still cloudy," he said. Not whiny, like you'd expect from a kid. He was just stating a sad fact of life.

I couldn't make out what Ben was saying to his ex. He was leaning in the driver's window, red-faced and intense, probably breathing that six-pack on her which wasn't the best idea. She stared straight ahead, both hands gripping the wheel, until he ran out of steam. Then she said something about his drinking, and custody, and Ben slammed his hand on the roof of her car and stomped back up our way, his face flushed and sweating.

"OK, Bubba, grab your backpack," he said.

"But I thought we were having a star party!" the boy said. "I want to see the super nova!"

"Come on, give me a hug and we'll go see mama."

Ben swept the little guy up on his shoulders like he didn't weigh nothing at all and marched with him back down the driveway. You could see the fight go out of him the closer he got to the car, like a wind-up propeller plane that had popped its rubber band. He got Benji squared away in the backseat, then he started to lean in the driver's window again, and I guess you could have predicted, or I could have anyway, that she just tore off, leaving angry tire trenches in the gravel. He flipped her off, a weak and belated last word, and trudged back up the driveway.

The clouds picked that moment to blow off and open up. Ben got all twitchy and started futzing with the telescope.

"Ben."

He didn't look up. Kept fooling with that thing.

"Ben. Hey. What say we go down to TBone's, throw some darts or something. Look, man, that explosion will still be there tomorrow night. What do you say?"

He didn't answer. He twisted the eyepiece, adjusted some knobs, turned this lens and that dial. Trying to give it a sharper focus. Trying to find the one thing that would do the trick.

