

How To Find A Galaxy In The Dark

by Roz Warren

I don't know what I'd expected from the week of mourning after my mother died but I sure hadn't pictured this marathon cocktail party. Our house is packed with people, food, booze and borrowed chairs. People I haven't seen in years keep turning up with casseroles.

I'm hiding out in the music room, drinking Canadian Club and gazing stupidly out the window when Ray's battered Pontiac edges up the crowded circular drive and squeezes into a gap between a silver Lexus and a black BMW. Ray gets out.

Nineteen, like me, he's short and lean. His dark hair needs a cut. He wears the usual faded jeans and worn T shirt. He stretches and yawns, then removes his sunglasses and sits them on the roof of his car. Scanning the house, he sees me at the window and grins.

Instead of going to the front door like a normal person, he wades through the azaleas toward my window, which I open after a brief struggle with the screen. He hoists himself in over the sill. We exchange a rough hug. He steps back. "You look like shit, Aaron."

"My mother died,"

He smile fades. "Oh crap. All the cars -- I should have known. I'm sorry."

"She hated your guts."

"I know." He sighs and runs a hand through his hair, a familiar gesture that brings back memories of much better times. "But still --"
" Crossing the room, he flops down on the sofa.

He looks exactly the same as when he left, almost a year ago, except that he's wearing cowboy boots instead of sneakers. I half expect Mom to come in and tell him to get his feet off the furniture.

"Anything I can do?" he asks me.

Everybody says this.

"Do you want to eat something?" I ask. "There's a shitload of food in the dining room."

Including the biggest selection of deviled eggs ever collected together in one place. It's a deviled Egg-a-thon on our dining room table. Deviled eggs were Mom's favorite snack, and many of her friends have chosen to memorialize her by bringing a plateful to the shiva.

At the door, Ray hesitates. "Won't they wonder who I am?"

"Don't worry. I don't know half the people in this house."

When he returns, I'm at the piano, my fingers skimming the keys too lightly to produce sound. The last thing I want is for the mourners to come rushing in for a concert. Ray sits down beside me, plunking his drink down on the Steinway's polished wood. When Mom was alive, it was my job to protect her stuff from Ray by bringing out the coasters.

Well, that's over.

"Can you bring the volume up a little?" he asks.

He gobbles his chow and tells me about his trip back across the country from California. A lot of it is about car trouble. Spinning out of control in the rain in Amarillo. Something about a hub cap in Utah.

Describing an Olds full of elderly Indians in tribal dress that tore past him on a narrow mountain road, he waves his hands around so much he almost knocks his drink right into the piano.

I fight the impulse to move Ray's glass to a safer perch.

I met Ray a year ago on my way to the supermarket. He was standing by his car in the rain on Twelve Mile Road, waving a set of jumper cables. There's a bumper sticker here in Detroit: YOU ARE WHAT YOU DRIVE. I was driving Mom's Cadillac. Ray was driving a battered blue Pontiac, the passenger door held shut with a length of rusted chain. When I stopped to give him a jump, I was impressed by how deftly he opened my hood, hooked our cars together, got his engine fired up, then slammed shut both hoods. It took all of two minutes.

In his place, I probably would have connected the wrong clamp to the wrong plug and blown up both vehicles.

I had nothing planned for the rest of the afternoon but helping Mom put the groceries away. So I did something totally unlike me -- I asked him if he wanted to get coffee.

"Sure," he said. "You bet!"

Unlike me, Ray was obviously an upbeat guy.

At a burger joint on Woodward Avenue I ordered black coffee and apple pie, and Ray got a root beer shake with chocolate ice cream.

He spoke with a regional accent I couldn't place. He looked uncared for and his clothes weren't stylish, but he had an enthusiasm totally lacking in my prep school friends.

He seemed to enjoy himself. Unlike me.

I don't know why we connected, but we did. He told me that he was a high school dropout from Ellsworth, Maine. When he'd dropped out, bored with school, an uncle had lined up a night shift job at the Ford plant in Wyandotte.

I was bored to death in school, but I was college bound.

It had never occurred to me that I could just leave.

Ray described his job in the kind of loving mechanical detail that people who care about cars get into. I've never given a damn about automotive shit, so I just nodded and said "Uh huh. Yeah."

Ray was saving money to fix up his car and drive to California. Somehow, I ended up telling him how much I hated Detroit Country Day School. I hated the snobby kids and the stupid uniforms and the hours of boring homework. And sports.

"You're a social pariah there if you suck at la crosse," I said.

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Ray deadpanned. "Fuckin' la crosse, man."

That broke me up. Clearly, Ray had never played la crosse and didn't give a damn.

I thought about our conversation over the next few days, going back over what we'd said and wondering what he was up to. So I wasn't exactly surprised when he turned up at my house a week later, after

he got off work. Why else would I have told him my name and where I lived?

It was three in the morning. I woke up at the sound of his car pulling up our drive and deactivated the alarm system. When I got in the car, Ray said, "I was in the neighborhood."

We both knew that was a flat-out lie.

We sat in his car and talked about the people we liked and the people we couldn't stand and our fucked-up families. At dawn, I slipped back inside, fell into bed, slept through the alarm clock and missed an important calculus test.

Ray turned up often after that. It drove Mom crazy. "He's a bad influence," I overheard her tell a friend. Meaning he was broke and wasn't going to college. My step dad agreed with her.

"If I were you," he said, with the smirk I always thought of as Papa Jerry's Fuck You Smile, "I'd drop that little stinker fast." He thumped my shoulder. Hard. "But it's your funeral, sport."

Sylvia Summerfield appears in the music room doorway. I haven't seen her since her family moved away when we were both seven, but before that we were inseparable. She's still skinny, with gold blonde hair, pale skin and a grave smile. She takes my hands. "Oh Aaron, I'm so so sorry."

At seven, she was a sweet, spacey girl who'd sit in the garden for hours with a notepad and a pencil, taking notes on ant behavior.

Now, she tells me she wants to become an air traffic controller. "I thrive on stress," she says. "Speaking of which, I hear you got into Yale. That's so cool! I'm starting Stanford in the fall."

She turns to Ray. "Where are you going?"

"Ray's not in college," I say.

"I haven't got time for that," says Ray. "I'm a professional la crosse player."

"Really?" Sylvia asks.

"No," he laughs.

"Ray is professionally full of crap," I tell her. "He excels at bullshit. But he's harmless."

"No I'm not," says Ray.

I grab Sylvia's hand and take her to family room where Jerry is holding court, so she can offer her condolences. When I return, Ray is gone. His empty plate sits on the piano bench. But his car is still on the drive. I retrieve his shades from the Pontiac's roof and put them on. They make me feel even more detached as I wade through the jabbering crowd.

I find him in my room, stretched out on the floor, reading my journal.

"You're invading my privacy, dude," I say.

Ray makes a snorting noise and turns a page.

I go to the window. Our driveway is packed with luxury cars. Mom once remarked that the driveways in our subdivision were so mammoth that the only time they fill up is for death or a dinner party. After a minute, Ray joins me at the window.

"I know I shouldn't have left," he says.

“And yet you did.”

We stare at the driveway. “Looks like a car lot,” he says. “All you need are salesman and colored flags.” He jabs his finger at a maroon Caddy. “We can take that one. Your mother dies, so you steal a car. You drive to California. When the shit dies down, you come back and say you're sorry. All is forgiven.”

“Okay. Let's go.”

He looks at me, wide-eyed. “Really?”

I laugh. “Fuck no.”

“Dude. You could get away with it, you know.”

There was a grief counselor at Mom's hospital who told me that mourning can take many forms. “There is no inappropriate way to mourn,” she said.

In Detroit, mourning could easily take the form of grabbing a Caddy. It wouldn't be any crazier than the big stupid party downstairs. In fact, I think it would be more personal and more meaningful, if instead of partying, the mourners who'd truly loved my mother did something dangerous and desperate, like breaking a law, in her memory.

“I got you a souvenir,” says Ray. I follow him down the hallway to the bathroom and he locks us in, takes a baggie from his pocket and spills white powder onto the counter. As he fusses with it, I look at our reflection in the mirror. Ray's hair is dark. Mine is light. His expression is light-hearted, cocky. Mine is glum.

Ray forms two fuzzy little lines that stretch along the countertop like tiny white caterpillars.

“Where'd you get this?” I ask.

“Taos.”

“Pick up any other bad habits there/”

He snickers, manipulating the little lines, gently chopping at them with a razor blade. He rolls up a dollar bill and shows me how to use it.

At first, all it feels like is a bad cold. We sit, facing each other, sniffing and snorting.

“Now what?” I ask.

He raises an eyebrow, amused. “Nothing. That's all.”

Suddenly I worry about Mom. Can she see me?

If she can, she's really pissed.

I can't think about her. That's close to impossible, since she's all I've thought about for months. How is she? Is it going to be a bad day?

What can I do to help her?

It's hard to turn that off.

“You do this often?” I ask.

He smiles. “I can't afford to do this often.”

A giddy feeling rises up in me, which is very inappropriate. My mother is dead -- this is no time for levity. I feel as if all I'd have to do is lean forward and lock eyes with Ray and the rest of my life would simply vanish.

"This is dangerous stuff," I say.

"Yup," he agrees happily.

"Is there more?"

There's a loud knock on the bathroom door. We both jump. Ray tidies up and I open the door to a woman I don't recognize. As Ray slips past her, she pulls me into a fierce embrace. Her perfume is overwhelming. "Poor baby," she moans. "You'll never get over this loss. My mother passed ten years ago and I'm devastated to this day."

Thanks, lady. You're a comfort.

She grips me harder and begins to rock back and forth. I grimace at Ray over her shoulder. He rolls his eyes and shrugs. Then, as she shows no signs of letting go, Ray starts making faces. He sticks out his tongue, crosses his eyes, waggles his fingers next to his ears. My body convulses as I struggle to hold in laughter. "There there," the woman croons, mistaking my desperate spasms for sobs.

When she finally turns me loose, we wander down to the living room, where Jerry is drinking with his cronies, all partners in local law firms. Jerry, large, handsome and expensively dressed, grunts a greeting at Ray. My father died when I was two. Jerry adopted me when he and Mom married, but he never pretended to like me. Jerry doesn't care that Ray is back any more than he cared when Ray took off for California.

Mom was thrilled when Ray left.. He and I had begun talking about driving west after I graduated from high school, but when I'd told Mom that I wanted to take a year off before starting college she

blew up. "Turn your back on a good education to run off with that loser?" Her voice shook. "Over my dead body."

Two months later she was diagnosed with cancer.

At first Ray stuck around. Then, without an explanation, he left.

He didn't text or phone. But he sent me postcards. Scenic views. Bridges. State capital buildings. With apologies scribbled on the back. "I'm really sorry.." "My bad." "I suck." Mom sighed theatrically each time a new one turned up in the mail box.

By the time the postcards stopped I didn't really care because by then she was in the hospital.

Now, I move through the crowded rooms with Ray at my side. Everyone says the same things.

"It's terrible this had to happen," one of Mom's friends says tearfully. "But Aaron, she was suffering so much. Maybe it's better this way."

I nod agreement, although in my selfish heart I don't care how much she was suffering.

She's my mother. I want her back.

They all expect me to cry. When her friends approach in tears and I gaze back at them dry-eyed I feel like a monster. But she was dying for months. I drove her to the hospital for chemo, pushing her down the corridors in a wheelchair when she got too weak to walk. I spent hours at her bedside trying to figure out what the fuck she was trying to say when the cancer reached her brain and jumbled her words into nonsense that nobody but me could make any sense of.

I cried myself to sleep each night for months. I'm not going to make a big show of grief now, just because she finally died.

People I'd forgotten I'd ever known turn up to offer sympathy. Grade school friends, former neighbors. Nina, a junior high school friend who used to be a plump, joyful girl, is now a lean, intense Ayn Rand freak. She engages me in a conversation about values that I cannot begin to follow. "What are your premises?" she asks, finally.

"Life sucks and then you die?" I offer.

She shakes her head. "You really need to check your context, Aaron."

"I don't mean to be rude," Ray interrupts. "but let's get the fuck out of here?"

Out on the driveway, his car won't start. Surprise! The battery is dead. We could get a jump from one of the mourners, but I don't think I could bear to go back in that house. We sit on the hood of the car. It's getting dark. Gazing back at the house feels like looking at my life through the wrong end of a telescope. Everything seems small and far away.

"Where do people go when they die?" I ask.

"If I knew, I'd tell you," says Ray. "But I haven't got a fucking clue."

Our house is a monster. A mammoth, eye-grabbing pile of wall and glass. But it actually looks nice right now, a solid place full of people and light.

The day before Mom died she had a lucid moment. We were alone in her hospital room. She was stretched out in bed, wasted, her voice a raspy whisper.

"Any moment now," she sighed. I took her hand.

"Just be happy, Aaron," she said.

"I'll try."

She smiled. "I love you, honey. You'll be okay."

Ray and I stretch out on the hood of his car, our heads on the windshield, our arms lightly touching. Soon he falls asleep. The stars begin to come out. I can barely see them and then I remember that I'm still wearing sunglasses and take them off. My Uncle Rob from Sandusky pulls up in his black Lincoln. Long after he's gone into the house, his car continues to make small clicking sounds, the hot motor responding to the cool night air. "We can hotwire it," I whisper to Ray as he sleeps. "We'll be three states closer to California by morning."

Watching the sky, stretched out on the hood of Ray's car, I feel excited and restless, as if I'm waiting for something amazing to happen. Maybe a shooting star. Maybe a choir of angels who'll descend through the darkening sky and sing that Mom is all right.

Maybe I'm just waiting for Ray to wake up.

I wait and watch the sky. Everything up there looks static, but I know it's moving a lot faster than I can imagine.

