

## MYRA'S ORBIT

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Two subway stops, the Broadway-Lafayette station of the F line and the Bleeker Street stop on the 6 local, connect below the grimy streets of the East Village, New York City. It's not a full connection. Only downtown-bound passengers can transfer from one line to the other at this junction. But those who know about it use it. Intent on passage, they rarely look around or glance at one another.

In this environment, Myra was able to remain almost entirely invisible, despite her outsized haunches and the scales that protruded at her neck and wrists. At night, she lapped water from puddles on the tracks. When mornings came she sensed them and slipped deep into the station's concrete recesses. She rifled trash bins for paper and other treasures, finding, for example, an array of outfits she used to decorate and disguise herself, copying the people she saw on the station platforms.

Today, she was dressed in a long-sleeved sheath of metallic green, her silver locket, and deep purple stockings to conceal the scales on her legs. Her shoes were also silver, with rounded toes and red stones set high into the heels. A strap circled the instep all the way around, like the tracing of a planet's orbit. Her black hair, cut like a helmet around violet eyes, looked false but suited her. She had a large vinyl bag over one shoulder in which she carried an odd collection of metal parts, dropped coins, green weeds, and a white fur jacket.

An incoming F roared into the station and noise flew up like startled pigeons around her. There may have been a momentary separation of the underground and the surface in that soundblasted moment, a parting of atmospheres. Doors sprang open. Rushing feet emerged. Shoulders dodged in hurried angles. But by the time the train left the station, only two passengers remained on the platform.

Myra was one. The other had her large haunches and rough skin, a peculiar costume and even a dark wig, but was definitely

male. She recognized him instantly and a breath caught in her throat before she spoke.

"How did you find me here, Ducat?"

He took his time eying her. "I guess the same way you'd have found me if you'd tried."

"And you're all that's here? No others?"

"There are a few others. Haven't you felt it?" They spoke in a language that would not have been recognized by any other denizen in this station.

"What about Plath?"

"I think Plath is dying," he told her.

"Where is he?"

"I don't know. His signal's very weak." He raised a scaly hand and took hold of the silver locket at her throat. "You still have it."

She let him hold it a moment, then took it back and slid it under the neck of her dress. "I can't talk long."

"What? Why? Where are you going? Myra, why haven't you tried to find us?"

"Some kind of rupture in the signal," she lied.

Ducat looked at her in amazement. "Maybe you needed to try harder."

"Maybe I didn't want to."

Ducat sucked his teeth in reply, shifted his weight. Myra saw he was angry but he was pitiful too—afraid of this place, and in such a rush to get back. She felt fear too, but it was mixed with excitement.

"Where did you get those clothes?" he asked her.

"Here, in the bins, around, I don't know," she said.

"What are you doing here, where are you sleeping?"

"I found a place. Ducat, what do you want?"

"OK..OK." Ducat pulled a metal cup out of a large pocket. "Here you go."

He handed her the cup. It was silver-colored, battered. As she took it, sparks of energy, nearly visible, passed between them. She wrapped her hands around it.

"It took a lot of work to get this to you," Ducat pressed her, "so maybe you could spare a few moments figuring out how to get our planet back."

"Moon," Myra said, her eyes nearly lashed to the cup.

"We're a satellite moon, not a planet."

"I am corrected," he said. "Or we could just call it 'home'."

"It was." She looked up at him. "It was home."

She brushed off the start of his reply. "How did you get the cup?"

"One of the counselors, Piro. He's in the Bronx now."

"So he's here," Myra said quietly. She could see him in the Bronx.

"He must have held on to it at the last moment," Ducat told her.

Myra squatted down on the platform. Passenger feet were starting to show at the top of the stairs. She opened her bag, placing the cup inside. Then she rose and spoke quickly. "Okay, listen. I'll try to figure out something, but don't come looking for me. If I get the gel out, I'll make contact with you."

To cut off any more words, she walked fast down the platform and up a set of stairs. "Myra!" she heard Ducat yell after her, but kept going. There was a crash as if he'd pushed over a garbage can, but she did not turn. Then the noise of an arriving train covered any other sound.

When she heard the ding-dong of its closing doors she crept carefully back. The platform was empty. She caught sight of Ducat in the last car of the departing 6, his strange familiar face disappearing into darkness, and felt a deep loneliness. This man, once her step-brother, still her step-brother, was so quick to fade. Where were the others? It was as she feared. A few survived, some random selection, and they had found her. Not just found her. They believed in her, believed she could restore their home, reverse the explosion of their universe. She doubted it could work, but she was required to try.



The world they were from . . .

. . . was Qaln, Earth's second moon, located just a dozen miles above New York City. Undiscovered, Qaln did not orbit independently, but moved in perfect synchronization with the rotation of the Earth, as if tethered to it like a helium balloon, high above a city where no one looks up.

Plath is king, or was. He'd grown weak over the past few years, nearly as stiff as the unique metal of his moon. Qalny blood, magenta and gel-like, had all but stopped in him. He would not die, though. Like the others, his blood would harden into a black metal, dense as obsidian, to be stored in rock until a descendant of the royal family could revive it. The capability of that substance to again become blood was the sole wonder of Qaln. An old counselor had spent many hours instructing Myra in its properties, though he thought she'd paid little attention at the time.

One side of Qaln faced away from Earth and towards the galaxy, day and night. This was the side where the Qalnians lived. The other side was dark and lifeless, without water or wind, but it faced New York City. Wandering away from tedious lessons and the

aimless business of the Qalny court, Myra had discovered her moon's forbidden side when she was still very young, and had spent much of her childhood there.

She'd found a smooth rock with a bowl-shaped top which she took as her seat. Once she became accustomed to the darkness, she had learned to see some details of the city below. The daytimes were green. The nights glowed blue and there were diamonds of light that winked at her.

Occasionally, the city sent out messages—blundering searches for other worlds. Lights would blink in dull, predictable patterns that Myra thought were at odds with the evident vibrancy of the place. There was a roving light that swayed across the sky sometimes, but its message was impersonal. There were days when the sky churned with grays and whites, and the messages, if there were any, were gibberish and shrieks.

It was odd then, how attached she became to the city below. Maybe because of the way it did reach out, so tentatively and spastically, she found it more intriguing than her life on Qaln. Qaln was boring, she told her tutors. They requested her to rethink her statement. She tried to talk to Ducat, son of her father's second wife, about the city's magnetic charm, but he seized on her whispered account to ridicule her. She told her father and one of his counselors about the signals, but all they saw were vague threats and her obvious insubordination. Qaln had its ways, and Myra learned to keep her thoughts to herself.

Yet Qaln had not always been so immutable. It had broken free of its orbit from time to time, swinging wildly through the solar system, possibly outside it, and in those dangerous inter-epochs had accumulated great, ranging knowledge. The knowledge became myth and when at last Qaln resumed its place over Earth, stories were handed down. Myra knew from the counselors how far lost Qaln had been, how it had once breached a bulge in the cosmos itself, or so they said, how the people had survived only by sacrifice, guarding the blood of the ancestors that was locked in striations of rock or in small sacred objects.

At least twice Qaln had done this, and twice it had been restored to Earth, perhaps by an attraction of atmospheres. There was no way to know, for the blood-obsidian lost much of the memory of its own salvation. The moon had stabilized and softened and produced life, and the inhabitants began again, young. No one knew if such a rescue could be repeated.

As a child, Myra had no fear of these accounts. In fact, she longed for a wild inter-epoch in which she would travel the universe.

"Tell me again," she would plead with her tutors, when they taught the history of Qaln's inter-epochs. "Where do you think we went, just where do you *think*, I know we don't know for certain."

They refused to speculate, so she refused to listen. These lessons ended badly. Only one counselor would sometimes answer her questions. He wasn't her tutor, he was one of the court advisors, but at least his eyes didn't look like yellowy marbles. He had very dark eyes and when you looked in them you could keep going. His name was Piro and he told her these inter-epochs could occur at any time. That possibility sustained her through her lessons, and court business and Plath's kind but repetitive lectures.



When she was certain Ducat was gone, Myra went back down the subway stairs and slipped along the tracks away from the station lights. She moved rapidly, trailing one hand along the rough wall until she felt a stirring of cool air. There she stopped and hoisted herself through an opening in the wall and onto a concrete platform on the other side. This was her place, where she kept her things. No one came here. Technically, there was no stop on the uptown side in this station but Myra had found it—the ghost platform of the uptown 6—and she'd made it her temporary home.

She pulled the cup from her bag. It was glowing. She wiped it on her dress and held it up to the thin autumn light filtered from a street grate above. Words began to show along the rim, instructions to the bearer in the stilted language of the court, in an alphabet no one here would have recognized.

"If this cup has come into your hands, handle it with utmost care," it concluded, "for it contains our ancestry, which can never be replaced."

"Useless. Oh my God, that's so useless!" Myra whispered to the cup. She ran her strong fingers through the final words, tearing them and uncovering the night-black metal surface beneath. She knew what was under that. The gel, nearly impossible to release, but Qaln's life force, the thin streams of ancestors' blood they needed to start again.

There were scratches and dents in the cup. She guessed the other survivors had tried to release the gel and failed. That's why they'd sought her out. Plath might be able to release it if he were here, but Plath was missing, and the cup was in her hands. She would have to uncover this dense secret by herself.



The next morning, Myra filled two large shopping bags along Canal Street. Using some of the coins she'd gathered from the station floors and with her singular ingenuity, she picked up chemical solvents, paint thinner, linseed and tung oil, acetone, epoxy, turpentine and other liquids that smelled sharply. She also picked up electrical cord, wire strippers, switches, test cables, brushes, laboratory goggles, needle-nosed pliers, steel wool, sandpaper, screwdrivers, sculpting tools, beakers, string, hoses, mixing pots, a trowel and two putty knives. She peered into the two bags, sorting the contents and studying them until a sidewalk vendor began to berate with her strings of harsh, sing-song words. Then she gathered everything and returned with it through the station, down along the tracks, and back to the ghost platform.

All was as she'd left it. She mounted the new instruments on her table and stored the chemicals and solvents underneath it. She hung the electrical supplies on an overhead pipe, placed the cup at the center of the table, and then stood back to admire her work.



When Myra had first found the ghost platform, she'd lain on the wet concrete floor and watched rats scurrying by. But as she'd gathered her wits, she had made herself a home. Now there was a collection of food cans stacked neatly along one wall. She'd put together the table with lumber from a Grand Street building site. She had made a sleeping nest of beaver furs and fox pelts that she'd lifted on a daring foray—one of her early successes.

Despite her violet eyes and a long, stalking stride, Myra could become nearly invisible. She could become air-colored, dun-colored, could pass through atmosphere without disturbing it. She had copied a certain walk she saw on trains until she could become the shuffling woman no one sees, the woman remembered only by the children she fed and some forms in a file cabinet at a defunct city agency.

It was this woman who rode the elevator to the third floor of Saks Fifth Avenue on a weekday afternoon, sliding through coat racks, touching and feeling the furs, clipping tags, stuffing the furs inside enormous shopping bags.

A store detective had approached her, a short man posing as a shopper, waiting near the fitting room. She spotted him as if he were glowing red.

"Can I help you at all?" he'd asked.

Myra had shaken her head shyly and continued to look intently at the seams of a coat, running her gloved hand down its lining.

He'd persisted. "I'm just here with my wife. I thought I'd see if you needed help."

Myra had kept her eyes down until the man, feeling suddenly and inexplicably embarrassed, had backed off and returned to his post. Only when the inventory was checked on Friday did the loss become known, and by then Myra was another girl completely.



Wrapped in her furs, working through the nights, she recovered the instructions from the cup rim, interpreted them and began to work on the black metal of the cup's surface. She applied different chemicals, used various tools, but the hard metal remained inert. She soaked the cup in solutions, twisted the metal against itself, but the substance in its surface did not yield.

Her impatience mounted. She re-read the instructions and saw how they echoed Plath's calm tone, a younger king as she had known him in her childhood: controlled, a mind of perfect intent. She missed that mind. She was his daughter, but she did not believe she was his equal.



September stretched its tendrils toward October and still the cup was inert, black and cold. On brief afternoon walks outside the station, Myra watched the sun's light dim. By evening it was gone. The silver of the autumn moon reminded her of home, with its cool fluorescence of thin air. She was not yet suited to this place. This air was too yellow. The abundance of oxygen kept her awake. Metal did not seem to react as it did at home. Her scales, which kept her temperature constant and her need of food and water low, were too obvious. She felt exposed and fearful.

The cup gave out piteous cries but not its secrets. It yowled through her precious moments of sleep in red nightmares, awaited her when she woke. She believed her father was berating her from some hiding place in the galaxy.

"I tried that one!" she shouted at Plath, when a compound occurred to her—again. "You don't understand, I've tried all of them." She pulled the cup out of its oily solution and hurled it onto the cement platform. It remained inert.

But at last it gave. She'd descended onto the tracks and was prowling there for food, ideas, for anything she hadn't tried. Absently, she'd touched the cup to the third rail of the subway track, and the resulting spark hurled her onto her back with the shock of a thunderbolt. She lost consciousness for a time. But

when she finally opened her eyes and raised the cup to look, then slowly, painfully slowly, a tiny droplet of magenta gel bubbled to the surface.

Myra didn't know if she expected white birds to fly up or singing to erupt, but none of this happened. She stared at the cup for a long time; then she climbed back onto the ghost platform. This tiny amount of gel wasn't enough to stir a world to life. A second shock might kill her. But something in that rail had awakened blood. Life was, she now knew, theoretically possible.

She put the cup down, and wandered along the platform's edge. Water dripped loudly onto the tracks. She stared distractedly down at them, parallel lines leading away. A rat ran towards its hole. A scent of air reached her through the grate overhead. Finally, she turned. It wasn't anything planned; she just gathered her furs and the cup into the vinyl bag and left her hiding place behind. She was not going to make contact yet.



The handicapped stall in the Penn Station ladies' room had more room than the others, and Myra locked herself in there to recover. She had no home again. Her walk uptown along the tracks had taken her here, but now the din of this enormous, cavernous station was too much. Thanks to the forbearance of the Salvadoran washroom attendant, she stayed in the stall several hours, dozing and thinking.

She let the first swirls of morning rush go by, then she unfolded herself and ventured out into the main waiting room.

No one stood still. It was like watching hundreds of spiders all spinning patternless webs at once. Not a single person ever leaned back and looked around. Myra stood underneath a big board and watch numbers and letters flipping over. She watched the people scurrying whenever announcements were made. After an hour of this, she noticed that the slowest-moving people headed for the stairs when "Albany" was announced. Maybe they were reluctant to go, but Albany passengers walked slower. All right, she would head towards Albany then, where people went slower and so could she. She slipped onto the next Albany train, the 12:40, entering the back car from the very end of the platform, and settled herself in an empty pair of seats.

"All tickets please, all tickets!"

A fat conductor was swaying towards her. When he got to her he stopped and stood with his big legs splayed, locked at the knees, breathing noisily through his mouth. "Your ticket." He looked down at her through thick lenses.

Myra tried becoming the woman no one sees. She rummaged in her bag and came up with a piece of paper that she handed him silently.

He examined it. "That's not it."

She nodded to tell him it was, pointed to words on the page—"LOW LOW PRICES!!"

"No it isn't. Looks like some kind of advertising."

She pulled the paper toward her so they were both looking. Her fear gave off a scent, and perhaps it registered with him.

"Can you talk?"

She shook her head.

"Well, this isn't a ticket. You need a ticket."

Myra turned her face toward him. "N-n-n-no." It was the first word she'd spoken on Earth.

The conductor stepped back. "No? OK, 'no'. I have a two-year-old who sounds just like you."

Myra did not smile. Her "no" was echoing in her head.

"You have any money?"

Myra looked away, seeing her reflection in the dark window.

"OK, miss, you'll have to get off at the next station. Get a ticket there or call someone, all right? You understand me?"

She nodded her head, still looking out the window. The conductor moved on down the aisle and Myra closed her eyes against her pounding heart.



Yet when the train came out of the tunnel, everything lightened. She watched rain come, disturbing the pearly surface of a river that followed the train's left flank. The number of buildings thinned. The river widened. The sky got larger and she let her mind go.

The squeal of the train's brakes brought back the screeching of the loader birds in her father's aviary back home. The aviary was misnamed: it was a graveyard. Plath had taken her there once, to see the birds, he said, but he also showed her the graves. She recalled the day he'd taken her hand and they'd passed through netted gates that reached to the sky.

They'd entered a world of air and flight, and her father had called different birds in their own voices. She remembered the colors. She saw their wings fluff out and close as they settled near the king. Running ahead, Myra had rounded a rock and come upon the loaders. The huge gray birds had been agitated, screaming warnings as Myra neared the obsidian graveyards of the Qalny dead. That day, her father had showed her his own obsidian streak,

the blood of his birth, and the porous places in the rock where he would be returned until it was time for him to live again.

He'd showed her the place where her mother's remains were stored, and the remains of her mother's people. She also saw the mangled corpses of rodents that had stalked the aviary the previous fall. Plath told her the loader birds had attacked the rodents and killed them all, and his story had frightened her so much that he had taken her out through the gates, and never back again.

She'd been left alone for a long time after that. But time had not stood still, even on the windless, seasonless moon of Qaln.

Myra had grown, from a temperamental child to a sulky adolescent; then suddenly and unexpectedly, into a unique beauty. After that, people referred to her as "princess" more often. Her father sometimes deferred to her. Ducat changed the way he spoke to her. Myra continued to guard her tongue, though. She understood things that other Qalnians did not.

The day came when she was to receive the cup, with its streaks of ancestral blood, signifying her accession to royal guardian. That morning her father and stepmother gave her a silver locket containing a milky liquid, a memento of her birth. At noon the counselors assembled for the presentation of the cup. All was in readiness.

Except Myra herself. She had spent the morning on her lookout rock trying to talk herself into going, but she was still on the dark side at noon.

Ducat found her there. "Myra? Your coronation slip your mind?"

"Why can't they do the ceremony here?" she'd asked him.

"Come on, don't ask that."

"If I go I'll get swallowed up. I'm the next in line, that's all I am."

"They care about you."

"Then tell them to come here."

"The bestowal of the cup takes place at court."

"I won't go."

Ducat returned to the court without her. Myra imagined his sarcastic report and Plath's reaction. Plath would consult the ancient books, or turn to the counselors, who would give him bad advice. Perhaps Piro could interject some sense. Then she saw a tiny line approaching from a distance. It got larger: Piro leading a procession of counselors, carrying the cup. They rounded the soft curve of the moon and entered the darkness. She waited, relieved, curious, for them to arrive at her rock.

That was as far as things had gone. Their approach formed a snapshot in Myra's mind before the flash of ... impact!



What launched the third inter-epoch was a collision with a meteor, hurtling through the debris surrounding Earth. Qaln seemed to implode, recover its global shape for an instant and then nearly tear in half, veering out of orbit. The Council Chamber was exposed and the counselors who had remained there were flung into a deep, retreating chasm. Those who were part of the procession were strewn among rocks, as Myra tried vainly to shield them. Powerless, she watched the opening moments of the next inter-epoch, frightening and cataclysmic as the ones before. The king was gone. The rocky landscape was filled with ricocheting cries, chaos and screaming.

Myra had tried to run towards the aviary but the path was gone. She could find no way out. One by one, then in terrified groups, her people resigned. She could no longer sense Ducat, or the counselors with the cup. The thin atmosphere was sucked out, everything grew dark. The rushing sounds, the spinning—nothing.



It was probably Myra's affinity with Earth that saved her. A tunnel opened to her, like a ray of light but dense, sucking her downward too fast. She only knew she was flying past any solid point; it was impossible to slow her fall or touch the light-walls as they channeled her to Earth. She landed under the East River, in a subway tube below the Willis Avenue Bridge. Squatting on the tracks, choking on the dank, grainy air, Myra finally came to a stop.

She still recalled everything about that day. How she'd picked her way along the tracks to a station, grateful for a cement bench and the tunnel vision of the people on the platforms. She'd boarded a downtown 4 and gotten off at Union Square. Standing at the front end of the platform, she'd gone nearly deaf from the squealing of metal wheels. Finally she caught a Number 6, riding in the front car, and got off at Bleecker St./Broadway Lafayette, where, after a terrifying two days, she'd made her lucky discovery of the ghost platform.



This Amtrak train was nothing like that subway train. Sunk into upholstered seating, Myra rocked in rhythm with its motion, noticing the green out the window and the wide gray flow of the river as they continued north. When the train stopped the first

time, she hid in the ladies' room, and after the conductor collected tickets she went back to her seat.

Out the window she saw the train had passed into the city's surround. She recognized the calm green color she had viewed from Qaln. Without the distraction of city lights she was able to see it better. She was glad she had chosen this train. Three more times it stopped and the conductor came through, and each time she hid in the restroom. She had fled without a plan, but now one began to form in her mind.

Towards mid-afternoon, with the sun coming in at a slant through the tinted windows, Myra once again gathered her things. Next time the train stopped, she got off, alighting on a much smaller platform than the ones that served the subways. She was the only one who got off. There was a little house right there, trees in every direction. As curious as ever, she entered the house.

It was another station. This one was built of wood, not cement. She sat on one of the benches. There were people in the station but they were very quiet and still. Myra tucked her feet as far back under the bench as they would go and tugged her sleeves down. After a southbound train passed through, the waiting room cleared of these passengers. Myra sat for a long time, enjoying the solitude and the voices from a light box mounted overhead. She listened intently, storing the box's sounds in memory, trying to make one or two of them with her dry, scaly throat.

At last she went out and walked around, finding a side street, a secondhand shop with appliances and droopy clothes in its window, and past that, a long stretch of paved road.

The road led into the distance and more trees. She followed it, covering several miles with her characteristic speed, sniffing the different-smelling air and eying the mountains to the west. Evening began to fall and she turned toward these mountains, taking a rutted dirt road in the direction of the sun. At the end of it, she found an abandoned house with a porch, a weedy yard, no neighbors. The doors were swollen and stuck, some of the window glass was missing. She circled it twice and then stepped onto the porch.

It was quiet. She set the cup and her tools on a broken table beside a wicker rocker. She pushed open the front door, disturbing ancient cobwebs, and found a place to lay her furs. Grasses and seedy things in an old vegetable garden yielded something to eat. She slept for several hours.

When she got up, it was midnight. She walked out to the main road and back, encountering no one. She took her locket off and left it on the kitchen sink, then went back to sleep.

Pre-dawn. The furniture on the porch emerges in blocks of lighter black. The gray edge of the table wavers and resolves as Myra sits curled on a broken wicker chair. Her long fingers wander across her body, feeling each part. She picks the first scale off her thigh. It stings. She covers the raw place with her hand and rocks herself back and forth, waiting for the pain to subside. Then she looks. The skin is red and mottled. She tries to press the scale back. But once the stick of scale to skin is torn, it cannot be rejoined. It will be a wound on her now, she thinks, an ugly part.

She digs into the vinyl bag and pulls out a satiny skirt that feels soft against the newly-exposed skin. She pulls off her stockings and picks three more scales. She runs her hands down her hungry stomach and feels the rise of her haunches, the curves of her body. She peels scales from her arms and tries to pull several from her back, ignoring the stinging pain. She gathers the detached scales in a box wrapped in a piece of the satin stuff, and pushes the box deep under the porch, where it will reside with rusted plow parts, a watering can, and a broken swing.

It is almost three Earth days later that she opens her eyes. She shifts and rises, moves slowly to the doorway, and there in the bright light looks down. The raw places on her leg are not as red. She looks closer. There is a slight tightening at the edges of each wound, scar tissue with its trace of opalescence, not as ugly as before. She touches the places and feels the stickiness at the center. Touch travels up the center of her, through places she hasn't felt before. She feels her expanding lungs and strengthening muscles. She has not known touch like this before.



Time never stands still. As October proceeds, the house grows darker and cold. She wraps herself in the furs and ventures out to pick green apples from a tree along the drive. She finds an old magazine in the drainage ditch and studies its pages. One day she walks to town and listens to people in the station, storing their sounds to practice at the house. "Oh," she can say now. "Oh," her mouth in a circle pushing out air. But what are all the sounds they make after it? "No" she knows from when she was back in the city. It makes people back away. "Eye" is herself, "I." When one of the people talks, the other one often says "eye", and then the first one "eye" again.

She picks up a few more words. Several mornings she goes into town early, before the stores open, and wanders around, leaving as soon as the sun rises. One day she stays later and sees people in a line outside the old shop by the station, shifting from

foot to foot. She watches until the door opens and they push forward, their faces yearning towards the inside.

That night at the house she has a dream involving a red path, and a light that swings back and forth against the sky. The light ignites stars that seem to move outward as she watches. The path goes over a hill and disappears, but in the dream she is compelled to follow it. It takes her to a door that is made of solid sound, words all spoken tightly together, shutting her out or opening for her, she cannot be certain.

Myra adds the cup and her locket to the box under the porch. She exchanges her silver shoes for brown ones she finds in a closet under the stairs. Signals from the outer sky are scarce and growing scarcer, she realizes. She lives in this place. The people are soft, dense things mostly, but some of them are firm and light, with eyes that see things they do not speak of. She feels oddly protective of these ones. She feels she can help.

The next morning when the doors open at the shop by the station, she is part of the forward surge. She follows the small group past racks of musty-smelling shirts and old shoes to the back, where there are tables and chairs. There is another line, and she gets a bowl of warm food.

After she finishes eating, she volunteers, passing soup to an old man, baked potato to a lady without teeth, then two bowls to a hungry-looking couple.

"Now what brings you here today, dear?" a pink-faced lady says, expecting a reply.

"I can help." Myra's voice shocks her when it comes out.

But the pink lady replies matter-of-factly. "I'm here Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Tuesdays I volunteer at the hospital. Fridays I don't come of course because we do the flowers for Sunday service then. It's best if you come on a regular schedule; otherwise we don't know when to count on the extra person."

Myra does not know what to say. "What do the people here need?" she finally asks.

"Just a tug on their own bootstraps," another pink lady answers—there's a group of them, scrubbed and plump—and in the tittering laughter that follows, the ladies consider Myra and turn from her.

Myra ties on a red apron like the ones they have on. She copies their dips and gestures, their gathering of plates and washing of spoons, but help is a strange thing. She squats beside a young man, heavy and stubbled. He is talking loudly, yet he has light, starry eyes. She listens while he talks, but the ladies quickly pull her to her feet to stand back behind the serving table.

"We mustn't get attached to them, dear" one tells her. "There's no telling what they will try to get from us. A little is enough for each one and every one." She smiles around the little group.

Myra tries to find the man again but he has left. She leaves too, pulling the cheerful apron off over her head and dropping it on the road. Without thinking she walks towards the town, noticing the cold on her skin where scales used to be and thinking about the pink ladies. Why does helping make them angry? Are the ones who need them weak? Why are the people they serve so silent?

There are other people on the streets. As they pass she looks away anxiously into shop windows. At the corner she pauses in front of one, with "Pharmacy" written on it in chipped gold letters. Beyond the letters Myra can see odd devices, pyramids of purple bottles, soaps arranged in little rosettes, dusty boxes of different sizes, all of these draped with orange and black crepe paper. A flat cardboard cat, its back perpetually arched, is glued to the entrance door. She goes in.

The pharmacist looks up and then down again at his small pile of mail.

"Anything I can get for you?"

"No," Myra replies, looking away.

"Well, we got a special on the lotion," he continues. "Winter coming, the ladies usually like to take some lotion."

What is lotion? What is he saying to her?

The man gestures toward a shelf on the far wall and Myra drifts over, her hands at her sides.

"Go ahead, try some if you like. There's a tester there."

Her face must register something—confusion? The pharmacist comes to stand beside her, a tall man, his head higher than her own. He takes a bottle off the shelf and holds it out.

"Try some on your hand—here."

When she does not respond, he reaches for her arm. She forces herself not to pull it back, just to have this experience, whatever it is going to be. He pumps some of the lotion onto the back of her hand. She stands frozen.

"Go on." He gestures with his own hands for her to rub it in.

Slowly she does, and is surprised by the sensation of cool dampness, the scent of it, the way it disappears into her raw skin, still criss-crossed with scar tissue from the scales.

"You like it?" he asks her.

"Yes." It is the first time she has tried this word, which she has heard several times. She likes the slight smile it makes on her face.

"Well, take a bottle," he says.

She doesn't move.

"Pay me tomorrow if you like."

His kindness takes her off guard. How did he know she didn't have any coins left? Why does he offer this?

"Your skin looks a little chapped," he says, winking at her and smiling.

But Myra is weeping, leaking from her violet eyes, the tears soundless but as overwhelming to her as any sounds could be. She cannot turn away from him. She doesn't move.

He pats the lotioned hand, unalarmed. "Lonely coming to town alone," he says.

The thing she has fought hard to reject, and here it is, simple in its arrival: human touch.

The pharmacist reaches to a shelf behind him and opens a pack of tissues, handing her one. She wipes her eyes. She wants to tell him who she is, but she doesn't know enough words.

"Not a talker, are you?" he says, still with a slight smile. "That's OK, I'm not much of one either. Just saw you looking a little unsure there. Go ahead, take it."

Myra holds the bottle hard against her breastbone as she travels back to her place. When she gets home, she pours the lotion all over her cracked skin and tender head, rubbing it in. Its unfamiliar scent of foliage foreign to the Hudson River Valley, or New York City, or to Qaln, tells her there must be other parts of Earth, different climates. She finishes rubbing and then settles, like an animal after a meal, slowly and gratefully into her furs.

What did the pharmacist say? "Try some," she recalls. "Try," she says aloud. And then the much harder "bottle."



Myra returns to town. From behind a hedge she watches as a light comes on in the apartment above the pharmacy, before the sun rises. Shortly, a side door opens and the pharmacist comes out. He begins running and she follows him, first with her eyes, then she is forced to leave her hiding place to follow. He heads out a side street. She stays behind him, out of sight. The town stops and the road curves through dense woods, then a cleared field. The pharmacist heads down a small embankment and starts to circle. Myra sees there is a circular path, seats, numbers on the field. She watches him circle twice, three times, four, puffing breath into the gray air.

His running seems to suit him, the natural gait of humans, more graceful than the way they walk. She waits until he leaves and then tries it herself, but it is hard to mimic his bounce.

She adopts a new routine though, going every morning to watch the running. She finds a rock in the woods where she sits to

watch, feeling as if she has gained, at last, a front-row seat to Earth's goings-on.

The pharmacist usually arrives first, appearing from behind the rows of seats, curving slightly as he enters the track. She counts his circles, eight times. A woman comes after him some days, smaller, slower, she usually circles four times after entering from the parking lot on the far side. Another two men usually arrive next, taking short strides, talking as they circle. The woman tries to catch up with the pharmacist, but Myra sees he quickens his pace to avoid running with her. Two other women come together and walk rather than run, their elbows jutting out like bird wings.

But by far the most amazing sight is what she sees one day when she is late and doesn't get to her rock until afternoon. When she arrives there are dozens and dozens of runners—lithe, and much faster than the morning people. Myra moves as close to the clearing edge as she dares. Their voices carry. Their clothing hangs off their shoulders and waists. Sometimes they toss clothes on the grass. Some run backwards to talk, tripping and recovering easily. Some leap and turn in the air, shouting. She understands these are the young. She'd seen young in the city, but they did not behave with such abandon there. She feels a great urge to be part of their running.

Myra circles around through the woods until she can see the square tan building the young come out of, and is suddenly curious about its insides, after ignoring it all these past days. At the entrance along the side there are scores more young, moving in large groups, a din of words floating above them, sparks between pairs. Their physical selves are lighter than the pharmacist, or the people at the old-clothes store, or the morning runners. They flow in ways she hasn't seen. Myra is lifted by watching them, and tries to move as they do. It feels like the lotion, pouring but sticky at the same time, and she feels desire for what she cannot name. She wants to be among them.



The 8:10 a.m. warning bell rings Wednesday morning. Myra, dressed in an old wool skirt and sweater from the old-clothes shop and those brown shoes again, is walking determinedly up the front steps of the tan square place, Coatesville High School. She moves through the main doors, every sensor on high. Guided by a cacophony of sound, scent and signal, she slides along the hallway, looking in doors. One room is empty and she goes in further, cruises its perimeter, finally settles at the large desk in front. Two girls walk in, then a boy. She wills herself to return their gazes.

"Is this the makeup exam?" a boy asks her.

Myra is saved by a second voice: "In here, please, English 5 make-up. Oh good, the proctor is here. Just give them these booklets, thanks, 45 minutes. I'll stop back," and a small woman with gray hair drops some thin blue books on Myra's desk with an abrupt nod.

The students observe Myra coolly, then take the blue books from the desk and begin working. Myra sits still and practices dissolution, shooting off little sparks of herself at intervals, keeping her center opaque.

One of the girls raises her head but looks down quickly when she sees Myra watching her. The boy scratches behind his leg and shifts his shoulders. Some time passes. Another bell rings. The students drop their blue books on the desk and leave.

Myra follows them into the hall and is caught in a surging crowd of students. She allows the crowd to sweep her along for a minute, then turns off at a door with a paper, "Math 4," taped to its little square window. This classroom has many students, and a woman with an enormous belly.

"Sit! Sit everyone! Let's go. Take out your homework," the belly is saying. Myra tries to merge towards the back, but so do most of the students. "Oh hello, please take a seat wherever you're comfortable." Myra realizes the woman is talking to her, and she perches at a cramped chair, one arm of it bulging out in front of her.

The woman is coming towards her. "I'm the teacher, Jean Nidaros. Are you the sub?" Myra nods, guessing this is what the teacher is expecting. "I wasn't sure when you were starting, but I'm glad you're here. We're up to bi-variables. That's what we'll be doing today. You're ... I'm sorry I forget ...?"

Myra understands she is supposed to speak, give a name. "Myra," she says, scaring herself half to death.

"Miss Meyers, very good. Class!" the teacher turns around, using a much louder voice, "This is Miss Meyers. She's the sub who is going to take over when I go on maternity leave. I am sure you will each give her your complete respect, *complete*."

"They said the substitute was starting in two weeks," a girl volunteers.

"Shut up! What are you, the principal?" a second girl answers, relieving Myra of the need to answer.

For the next 45 minutes, Myra sits and watches Mrs. Nidaros write formulas on the big blackboard, talking rapidly as she writes. Some students use the bulging arms of their chairs to scribble on papers. The ones in the back rows stifle constant laughter. Mrs. Nidaros is explaining dual variables in a very

confusing way, Myra thinks. Solving for  $x$  and  $y$  is much simpler than she's making it.

Again a bell rings, and a second set of students enter. Again, Mrs. Nidaros introduces "Miss Meyers" as the "sub" and again teaches the lesson on dual variables. At the end of the second lesson, no more students come. Mrs. Nidaros collects some papers and comes towards Myra.

"I have a prep this period. How does it seem? They're catching on but you have to go over things with them. Anyway, I guess you'll want to meet Arthur and get your paperwork arranged. I'll see you after lunch."

Myra nods again and goes out to the hall, which is quiet and empty this time.

She makes her way towards a set of stairs, but a man steps out of an office and stops her. "Hello, I'm Arthur Foresta, the principal. You must be the new sub." Myra feels dizzy with these people's assumptions. The teacher must have alerted him. But she understands he is a gatekeeper.

"Yes," she replies. "Miss Meyers." She is proud of her speech, but the principal has already launched into his own.

"So you could start a little early. Well, that's fine. You should probably have called me, but that's fine. I thought they said your name was Rose Macklin, but I must have gotten it wrong. Why don't you shadow Jean for a couple of days, through Friday, then she can start her leave on Monday. How does that sound?"

Myra likes the rotund, smiling man, his face flushed with the excitement that working with the young must generate. He doesn't wait long for her answer. "Your principal at Schenectady spoke highly of you. So welcome aboard. Oh—and the paperwork. There's always paperwork, I'm afraid. My secretary will give you the forms. We can get you paid out of my discretionary budget until everything is squared away. Don't worry, we don't let the formalities get in our way here. Again, welcome!" and he is gone in a round little bustle.



On Monday, the school building seems pink to her, and she realizes it is just dawn. The doors are locked and she waits outside for a long time until the custodian arrives with the ring of keys. By then the light has restored the building's tan hue.

Today, she stands at the front of the classroom. The students turn absolutely silent when the bell rings, watching her. She sees the challengers, the curious, the skeptics. She wills them to see only Rose Meyers, the substitute math teacher.

With a breath, Myra turns to the blackboard and writes out the beginnings of a formula, one she has carried in her head since Qaln exploded. It stretches across half the board, a jumbled train of numbers and symbols. Below it, she writes a word: ORBIT.

One boy looks up and smiles. She extends the equation, then adds a formula for propulsion that she learned from Piro.

Light rays shine through the dirty windows of the classroom, transforming the dust particles over the front row of desks into small, dancing galaxies. Some of the students look up. The sun's warmth makes them languid.

"What were you working on before bi-variables?" she asks them.

"Angles and tangents," says the boy who smiled.

Myra thinks, then speaks, finding new words tumbling out.

"If a moon is forced out of its orbit," she asks, "and you know the shape of the orbit, what can you use to determine the direction the moon has taken?"

The students look through their books, but find nothing to aid them. Then a girl rises and sketches an ellipse on the board, bisecting it with lines of force.

"Yes," says Myra. "Yes, that is a start." She studies it for a time, not speaking. She writes another formula. Rather than copy it at their desks, several students join her at the board, and jot calculations. The board gets nearly full, but Myra sees no progress toward her answer.

"A theory has to come," she explains. "You can't be sure but you have to guess something. Then you will have a direction to go."

More writing. The sunlight has moved a fraction of an inch, and the changed angle agitates new particles.

"Must an orbit hold everything inside the pattern or are some things in it independent?" a girl asks.

It seems a good question, and Myra wishes to explain better than she can right now. "It may be," she says carefully, "that magnetic force does not apply to thoughts or ideas. They could fly loose."

"And people?" another girl asks.

"People I don't know as much about," Myra answers.

Sensing disappointment, she adds, "It is possible to learn what magnetic force does to people. It requires experimentation."

The class releases breath.



That night Myra walks home through pine trees that line the road. They give off a pale scent that is like the scent of Qaln. It

cheers her, the light of coming winter, the hardening ground and her questions, which she has shared. She knows she has changed.

Change does not come frequently to Coatesville High School. Each night, the same gray man runs the waxer/polisher over the linoleum floors, as he has, he tells Myra proudly, for 23 years. A history teacher, making conversation in the lunch room one day, tells her that the history department always goes to lunch on Friday at Chat and Chew, and the four of them roll their eyes over the younger brothers and sisters of students they rolled their eyes over five and ten years ago. Mr. Dawson teaches *Catcher in the Rye* each fall, he adds, "as if it was the same daring move it was in 1965, when he first assigned it." Dust rises and settles and rises again. Flakes of skin, fallen hairs, spots of sweat from football seasons past constitute as matter and endure, and in this way the town keeps itself to itself.

Yet it appears that Miss Meyers teaches math in a different way. She organizes it around questions—"inquiry-based" one of the science teachers describes it—and that seems to satisfy the principal, who knows little about math.

She sees the principal in the hall one Friday and he tells her he's pleased with her lessons so far and "the youngsters seem to like you, so whatever you're doing, keep it up!" He also tells her he's had a call from another substitute, referred by the district, but that "must have been a mix-up. I told her we had somebody."

Myra turns in her paperwork, filled with numbers and scratches. and nods when the secretary tells her there are often processing delays. She does not know what the woman is talking about, and none of these administrative matters hold any interest for her.

But she perseveres with her students.

"If an angle is known, then more can also be known, yes?" she asks them. They follow her, even on these cold afternoons of approaching winter.

"Where do we take the angle's first line? To the vanishing point? That would be? Right. It would leave Earth as it departs from the planet's curve. And that distance? If that line were infinite, then how could you get from the end of it across to the end of its companion line?" She steps back. "If you cross infinite space do you ever make progress?"

She locks into their slow-moving thoughts, finding those thoughts more easily represented by mathematical symbols than words. But as they follow her lessons, her own thoughts are racing. What direction might Qaln have gone in response to the impact? How might multiple impacts have affected the wobbling escape of her moon? One student comes to the board and extends the two angle lines, then makes a series of arcs between them that connect

the lines as they diverge. Myra notes that the distances themselves curve. The arc shape might be a way back from infinity.

She zeroes in on impact and force. "If a meteor is traveling at 10,000 miles per hour," she asks her students, "and enters an atmosphere with a density about one-sixth of Earth's, what distance—and direction—could it drive a stationary moon, circumference of say 511 miles, composed of obsidian and other rock? How far, how fast, and where?"

"Yo, Miss Meyers," a smiling boy tells her. "Too many variables."

He is right, with his easy manner and inquisitive eyes. She is rushing. She forces herself to take one thing at a time. She breaks down the problems: the effect of weight on flight, the effect of atmosphere on speed, the range of directions in an atmosphere without gravitational force, the density of obsidian, of volcanic rock, of igneous rock, of loose earth. Some of the girls' grades improve.

As Myra pursues her lessons, she sees that the students develop some kind of understanding of her. There are days when she hardly speaks at all. She writes on the board; she may utter parts of questions: "which would give you ...", "taking the most probable angle ..." but she fails to state the problem. Then she looks up, alarm on her unusual face, and stumbles over an apology. "I didn't mean to stop talking. I am just looking for this moon, it's important..." and she stops again.

On those days, the students browse through their textbooks. Some draw interplanetary space travel comics, some flirt. "Miss Meyers," the smiling boy says one day, "you are mad desperate to find this moon. Is that where your boyfriend lives?" and she fights an urge to terrorize him, but the bright girl, the one who drew the ellipse, intercedes. "Leave it alone, Jimmy. What do you know about anything?" and the class supports her in its silent way.

There can't be too many of these days. She must help these students too. She has stopped sleeping again, and November rains arrive, making her cold much of the time. Myra feels the tug of Qaln even while she has lost it, and she knows more about teaching now. It's not a volunteer activity. It finds you, and shakes you up.



The first Sunday in December, dressed up a bit with her silver shoes and a new sweater, Myra follows the movement of people and cars to the white building with the spire on top. It's

near the center of the town and she's seen how it draws crowds on the weekend. Stifling her fear, she goes in with them.

The big room is warm and light. Myra takes a seat in one of the rows towards the back and tries to settle her hands in her lap. Others seat themselves around her. She sees the pharmacist at the end of one row. He smiles when she looks over at him, as if he'd already seen her. She sees the boy Jimmy from class a few seats over. After that she does not turn her head any more. But she watches everything.

A man in black is leading them, but she doesn't know what he's talking about and lets her eyes drift. Following a line of sight upward, her eyes land at the high circular window above the man in black and she nearly gasps.

It is rose, a thousand pieces of red, held together somehow with plum and ruby, mauve, cranberry, crimson, fuchsia, violet and burgundy. The pieces burst from the center the way the world began, as if they could rain down light on the people below. The red light does something to the solemn, singing people, separates them from their surroundings and reassembles them. Myra remembers the day she arrived, when she was still able to see through people's clothes and skin, how beating hearts looked. If one had been released, it would have looked like the center of this window, she thinks: around the center, tear-shaped pieces of pure crystal, then crescents of blood, and then the circle of sapphire.

It is several minutes before she takes in the lines threading through the glass, holding it all in place. It seems odd that the obvious structural part doesn't stand out more. Then, once it does, how strong the lines are. The pattern, the circular way it holds the glass pieces together, how could it be made?

The service is over, and outside, someone is talking to her. She swallows an urge to get away, and turns her face to the speaker. It is the mother of the boy in math class. He is standing with her.

"I'm Carol Todd, Jim's mom. You must be the new math teacher?" the mother says.

"Hello," Myra replies. It sounds like dead birds falling from the sky to her. But she manages to answer: "Yes." The pharmacist comes to stand beside them too.

Jim's mother asks, "Where did you come from?"

A question she is not ready for. "I am from a place called Qaln."

"Where is that? Pennsylvania?"

"Yes, Pennsylvania." Myra wonders if this Pennsylvania is anything like here.

"And what brought you here?"

"A train." That sets off laughter, and Myra knows she has answered wrongly. "I was drawn here by the river," she corrects herself. Then I stayed." They all nod, and she sees that this river is a reason for them to be here too.

"And where did you get such good math training? Jim says you teach them advanced equations, and things that aren't even in the textbook."

"From the counselors." From the silence that follows this answer, Myra sees she has again made a mistake.

"You were in a special school?" the mother asks, apprehension crinkling her face.

"No. My father's counselors."

"Ah. You were educated at home?"

"Yes."

"Oh. I see," the mother says, and her shoulders lower slightly.

"Miss Meyers, what do you do in the summer?" It is Jim who speaks this time. She sees his mother direct a sharp glance at him, then decide the question can stand.

"Summer?"

"When school's over," Jim clarifies.

Ah, school would end. She would be alone again.

"I will go home," she finally answers.

"To Qaln? I'm sure it's nice there," the mother interjects.

"No, not Qaln. Qaln isn't there anymore."

"Oh my, that's terrible." Again the mother. "What happened?"

"No one lives there. It was knocked out of orbit." Jim looks hard at Myra.

"Like a lot of these small towns," his mother continues, unaware of her son's reaction. "It's a shame. The local company goes and then, bam! No jobs and then people leave, and the older folks have no one, there's no future there ..." Myra lets the woman answer. But she hadn't meant she'd go home to Qaln. That wasn't home now.

"Well, we must get you to dinner soon," the mother says. And the crowd carries them along the sidewalk until it pops Myra free, finally, at the second corner.

Or rather, she is free with the pharmacist, who falls into step beside her.

"You have an interesting background," he tells her. "I have relatives in Pennsylvania, but I've never heard of a town called Qaln."

"It's not there," Myra says.

"Where is it, then?"

"I don't know." She wants to tell him. From this close-up angle, she sees in his eyes that he has traveled. *At least say something*, she urges herself. "Do you know how that red window was made?"

"The rose window? That's stained glass."

"And how is it held together?"

"With lead," he tells her. "They heat it and then bend it with special tools." He looks at her inquiring face. "Lead, the metal." And then, "I have a book on chemistry I'll loan you. It has a chapter on metallurgy."

"Thank you," she finally says.

Back home, she crawls under the porch and retrieves the cup.

She brings it to school the next day in her handbag, and during lunch she stores it in the chemistry lab, on a high shelf, out of sight of the janitor.

The pharmacist drops off the book at school and she starts to read about chemistry on Earth. She finds the school's chemistry lab and goes through the shelves, methodically cataloguing each chemical.

The chemistry teacher, a loner like Miss Meyers, invites her to use the lab when she's not teaching, and a few students join her there during their free periods.

"Now," she says, when her mixtures are ready. "Watch what happens to metal." She drops a student's keychain into one, and the keys turn green. She puts a girl's earring into another and it starts to disintegrate, with the girl and two of her friends shrieking in horror and delight. Into a third she lowers a tape player and the sound continues for half a minute before the music changes to halting bangs and whistles. For this she gets a round of applause, while she insists they write down all their mixtures, their quantities and results.

She pages through the book, examining the diagrams and formulae for metals. So many properties, so few of them as stable as they seem. The book often instructs her to add heat, but she does not know how to manufacture heat. Heat on Qaln came from the sun, and at night the Qalnians used stored heat from their bodies to keep them warm. She tries putting the cup in the window when the sun is out, but that's not often in this cold season.

"How do you add heat?" she finally asks some chemistry students one afternoon, as if she is quizzing them, and is astonished when they all take little wooden sticks, strike them against a strip of sandpaper and hold them gingerly as they flare orange and blue. In a moment they have touched them to small metal hoses at their desks and—orange flares again!—accompanied by a steady whooshing sound.

"What is that?" she asks, trying to keep her voice flat.

"Fire, Miss Meyers."

"What are its properties?"

"Heat," says one. "Light," says another. "Transformation of oxygen to carbon." Others call out too, but she is lost in astonishment. This is another secret that Earth has been keeping from her. Was Plath keeping it from her too? Fire. And it is so evident when you see it. She thinks back to the jolt on the tracks of the ghost platform, to the bursts of orange light she saw sometimes while watching Earth, to the blackened wood she'd found in the iron cauldron in her borrowed house. There is another transforming element, and its name is fire. She waits impatiently for the day to be over.

That evening she returns to the school and convinces the janitor to let her in. Hurriedly, she goes to the chem lab and strikes the wooden stick against the sandpaper. The first time it flares up she is scared and drops it. It dies out on the laboratory's cracked linoleum. On the second try she holds on, then touches it to the metal hose, turning the handle as she'd seen her students do. Flames shoot up, burning her hand and arm, but she hardly notices. She backs off the handle until the fire is burning steadily as it had that afternoon. Then she reaches up to the windowsill and retrieves the cup. She holds it in the flame and waits. Slowly, the obsidian softens. She sees red, she sees gel emerge. This time there is a good amount, a spoonful or so. The janitor's footsteps remind her she cannot stay. But Friday afternoon, when she gets a chance to check the lab, the gel has taken on the rich magenta color.

On Saturday she awakens while it is still dark and goes out to the porch with matches she has swiped from the lab. One by one she lights them and watches them burn. They become tiny curved black sticks, held together by nothing but the memory of themselves. A pile builds at her feet. But what makes fire flare and grow? What is in the hoses in the lab? How is fire sustained?

Late in the afternoon, clutching the book, she knocks at the pharmacy's side door. The store is closed but she hears the pharmacist's footsteps coming down the inner stairs. Then the door opens and he is standing there, bathed in yellow light.

"Miss Meyers."

"Hello." It still sounds bad—hoarse and hollow. She doesn't know what else to say and so just asks what she has come to ask.

"What sustains fire?"

"Fuel," he answers her simply, quizzically.

"What is fuel?"

"Anything that feeds it, really. Wood, gas, coal."

"Rock?"

"Not rock."

"Lead?"

"Not lead. What do you want to burn?"

She cannot find her voice. He opens the door a little wider for her. She climbs the stairs behind him, silently admiring his length and sinewy step. At the top he opens the apartment door, but turns around to face her, an arm across his apartment door, blocking her entry.

"Miss Meyers," he says. "What is your first name?"

She feels the lizard in her rise. She would like to say her name the way it really sounds in the harsh, whistling Qalny language. She imagines him staggering backward at her exhalation. But she cannot do this.

"Myra," she answers in the Earth sound.

"A nice name," he says. "Mine's Stephen. I'm from New York City, so I recognize your style, which is kind of East Village hybrid, I'd say. I also recognize your mathematical skills. But I do not recognize your home town."

It's a challenge, she knows, but she cannot answer. She looks at him and says nothing. He watches her, bemused until he sees her eyes darken, and then he steps aside for her.

Myra enters, resolved to get the formula for fuel and go. But she is caught off guard by his place. Against one wall is a long table loaded with instruments, beakers, tools and smooth metal parts. At one end there is a moving sculpture of some sort made of shiny metal rods, balls and lights. The opposite wall has a canvas drop cloth along the floor and cans of paint on top. The wall is partly painted, and though the place is dark, she makes out swirls of smoky color and looping line. She hears music playing, something she doesn't recognize that seems to have dozens of instruments and voices.

She takes a long lingering look at the room while he waits. Then at last her eyes light on the far wall. It is dark and filling with stars—a window! huge and uncovered. In front of it is a long metal tube on a tripod.

"Telescope," he tells her, and motions her to it. She stands at it uncertainly. To demonstrate, he stoops and presses one eye against the telescope, holds his breath and is gone from the room in concentration. When he straightens up she tries it. She sees the white moon, far, near, impossibly large. Idiotically, she looks for Qaln.

"How is this possible?" she asks.

"Glass, and mirrors. The glass is bent, with heat again."

"How do you see the whole sky?"

"Look." He stoops beside her, and puts his hands on the scope, moving it to scan slowly across the sky. Then he reaches an arm out for her and slides a hand along her back to show her where to stand. She freezes. He must feel the remaining scales, the ones she hasn't been able to reach. Maybe he thinks it is underclothing, but when he turns to face her she sees he knows.

"Where are you from?" he asks.

"The second moon of Earth," she says. "Qaln. It has spun from its orbit and left me here."

He blinks, then nods. "Are you alone?"

"Not completely."

"Are you going back?"

"I don't know."

"Mmm-hmm," he says, not taking his eyes off hers. "This is a lot to fathom in one sitting." Abruptly, he turns to the telescope. "Well, I don't know how you're going to find a moon that's bucked its orbit." He swings the instrument widely. "Where do you think it went?"

"I think it may be following an overlapping pattern of ellipses. Looping the way the lead holds the glass in the church window." When he doesn't say anything, she continues. "We always imagined Qaln escaped the solar system in the inter-epochs, but I do not believe it has traveled so far. Lost things are often closer than you think."

"You haven't yet gotten lost with me," he says, grinning. "I get way way way off track."

She laughs, the first time she has made this Earthly sound. It pleases her.

"Please show me, how do you use this telescope?" she asks. "Everything's huge, but you cannot see any patterns."

"You have to map it, very systematically, quadrant by quadrant. It's quite boring," he tells her. "Takes forever." She does not reply.

He watches her for a minute, then drags a chair and table over next to the telescope and puts paper, pencil, a compass and ruler on it. She works intensely, whispering to herself as she draws and looks, draws and looks. He lets her be, moving about his place, painting or reading, sorting things on his worktable.

She returns the next night, and the next, as cold envelops the outside world. She is lost in the sky, the pad of paper rapidly filling with sketches, formulae, and geometric drawings. Stephen sometimes comes to stand over her shoulder to watch, struggling to discern her design. He says little, which seems to be what she needs, and if she occasionally mutters in Qalny, he does not reply.

By Tuesday night they are both exhausted, and he tells her he will make them dinner. He goes to the kitchen, and as the stove flares she leaves the telescope to watch him.

"What is it?"

"Gas—fuel," he tells her. "Look, it is released through this small vent, here, in a controlled stream. You have to be careful or it will burn you. Move your hand away."

She doesn't respond, and he pushes her hand off the burner. But she is not to be moved. She leans close to sniff the gas and rears her head back sharply as the smell and burn startle her.

"Myra, be careful!" He speaks sharply.

"I need to see."

"Stand over here," he says, pulling her to the side. "I'm afraid of what you'll do."

"I need to stand here," she insists, moving hard against the stove. "I have to be able to use it."

"Just let me show you."

"You aren't showing. You are lecturing."

Stephen takes her upper arm and again pulls her away.

"There are safety things you have to know."

"I know," she says angrily. "I can see."

"Then what is this burn on your arm?" he demands, turning her arm over.

"My first try, that's all," she says.

"You don't get all the tries you want with fire, Myra. You can get killed very nicely on your first try."

"You're keeping this secret!" she cries. "You keep things secret from me!"

"Oh Myra, for God's sake, just listen."

"I won't listen."

"Well, I won't be fried to embers!"

Myra is backing up as he says this. When her back touches the wall she slumps down, squatting on suddenly prominent haunches. Her eyes are as dark as the obsidian in her cup. She feels her blood thickening.

"I won't listen to you," she hisses at him. "I won't listen."

Stephen swings his shoulders away from her, slamming a hand down hard on the stove.

"Who taught you?" he demands. "Who taught you so well and left you so goddamn stubborn?"

Myra finds no words, though there are thousands of thoughts pounding at her temples, trying to get out of her head. A shriek escapes, a Qalny sound that could only register as madness on Earth. Horrified at her loss of control, she grabs for her coat and pulls the door open. She descends the stairs in two bounds and she is out the bottom door, racing across dark streets and far into the

pine forest. She is howling but only animals hear her, and she is of them and not of any humans ever, never again.

She recalls the counselors, refusing to instruct her. She strides home through the frozen silent woods. When she nears her place she begins to snap low branches off the trees, saving some, hurling others away. Finally, curled into her furs, she allows guttural sounds out, one after another, striking a wood branch against the table leg with each growl.



In the morning she goes to the track and watches Stephen from her hidden rock. He is just like the counselors. Just like the ones she despised. She wants to drag him to her own place on Qaln, in the rocky wilderness of the dark side. She wants to steady him, then let fly her vituperative self, her long tongue flickering at him, stripping pieces off. After that she wants to have him, squeeze out his juice and seed and cast away his carcass, unusable, dry. She suffers over this carcass, weeps. She is so cold. On Qaln, without scales, an Earthly person couldn't live. She could, but she couldn't bring anyone else home. They couldn't breathe. She can live here with the things she's learned, language, endurance. The steps of the dance are all her own, all parts only she has played.

She crawls home and prepares for school, slowly pulling on her used clothes, her wig and shoes. Walking there, she pulls off two more scales, wanting the pain. Her students find her utterly silent during the morning and cannot make out what she wants. In the chemistry lab they think she is ill but do not know what to do. No one asks her. Even the bright girl finds it impossible to ask.

Myra brings the cup home with her and stuffs it back under the porch. Then she sits on the porch all night, until it is time for school on Thursday. She is dimly aware of her students' excitement during morning classes. There are some new smells at lunch, more talking in the hallway. The principal stops in to her class and hands her an envelope. "At least we can get you a local check while we're waiting for the district paperwork," he says. "Happy holiday." She stuffs the envelope in her bag. When the last bell rings there is a roar and a rush out the door. Myra follows desultorily behind, sees the students' faces glowing brighter, their goodbye hugs and waves intensified, but does not know why.

When she arrives the next morning the school is closed. There is a red and green sign over the door that says "Season's Greetings. Peace on Earth." After staring at it a while, she returns to her place, takes off her wig and sits on the porch.

Slowly, she talks herself down. She sleeps, which she needs. She finds some food. She uses the last of the lotion from the pharmacy bottle.

She is on the cold, broken porch, striking matches and holding them against frozen pine branches when she has her first visitor, bouncing down her rutted road in an old brown UPS van.

She looks up, angry with her hope that it is Stephen, then astonished as a familiar head emerges, the jutting shoulders, the solidly-built legs.

"Ducat."

"Found you," he says, clambering out. "Are you impressed?"

"I don't know."

"I come on a mission. They're ready to try going back."

"What have they found?"

"They think the signal is strengthening. If you were there, if we were all together, maybe we could attract more notice and they could locate us."

"Who could locate us?"

"Whoever's there. Whoever's left"

"So you are planning to be rescued? That's your plan?"

"Don't you want to be?"

"Ducat," she says. "I have a message for them. Tell them there isn't a way back right now. No one's coming to rescue us. They could get badly hurt rushing it like this. We have to wait. I have more work to do."

"I have a surprise for you," he replies, turning toward the van. Myra watches him open the side door and sees an ancient lizard, or so he seems, climb slowly down from the back seat and onto the dirt of the drive.

"Piro!" she says.

The counselor nods to her. He has not outfitted himself as Ducat and Myra have. He is simply swaddled in a long piece of some rough cloth, and his eyes blink constantly against the light.

"Piro, why have you come?" she asks him.

"To help you," he answers. And she feels she is lost.

Myra shakes her head to cut off the anxiety. *Think*, she says to herself. *You must think*. She sees home. It's not a moon, not another universe, but the solid core she has seen and touched a few times already. It has come in half-dreams, in a form that she senses is very old. She cannot find words for it. Perhaps it has no sound. But she fears she will lose it if these two remain.

Ducat moves his stuff in and takes over the second bedroom. He sets Piro up in a makeshift den in the kitchen.

Myra resolves to wait, stepping around them, sharing her stash of fallen apples, garden growth, whatever she has collected.

Ducat has brought a few magazines, metal cans of food, a tennis ball that he tosses up and catches for hours on end.

Three days pass as they sit in uneasy silence on the porch.

Myra thinks constantly, her mind whirring. She understands her loyalties are to two worlds, and where they intersect, she is in danger. Something is rushing her, bearing down. Why does she want to keep hidden? Why does she not want to release the cup? Why does fire terrify her? What if she could find Plath? Would she find the orbit? Then she could go back to Qaln, grow more scales, marry and reproduce, and at last be done, with a burial suiting a princess-savior. That, or she could try to wrestle with a deeper secret, which she knows is there, but which she cannot see.

"Up to you," she says aloud, and a dust-ray widens, lighting the whole scraggly field as the red evening sun sets.



At the end of the third day, Myra sees Ducat is restless and lonely. Piro hardly ever appears. She doesn't want to speak but Ducat forces a conversation.

"Myra, do you remember the rituals in the palace?"

"It's not that long ago," she replies.

"Do you sleep?"

"Not all the time. Do you?"

"Nah," he answers. "A lot of times I just dream."

"What dreams?" she asks him.

There is a long pause. Myra senses his thoughts, spiraling through layers of atmosphere, circling Earth, arriving at the place where Qaln once was and finding the absence that pulls his heart from his body.

"I dream of the mating dance," he tells her.

She wishes he'd chosen something else.

"Especially the last one, a couple of days before the meteor." They each envision it. The newest ones gathered in the center, nearly boneless still, entwined and crawling over and around each other. Around them the young and strong, at the most beautiful phase of their lives. The outer rim was made of the aged, holding together the frayed edges of their circle, while sinewy guards swirled through the bands of dancers keeping the centrifuge strong. Two would step to the center to copulate, long strands of milky fertility trailing them as they turned to each other, and the circle would chant as they pulled aside scales, as blood met blood.

That was the act of procreation on Qaln. Here, she senses it is a more private affair.

She looks at Ducat and sees the pain of memory on his face. But she knows that the threads that bind the others together have frayed with her. They were loose even before the collision. Yet it is different face to face with him here.

The moon comes out, and its rays sneak under the eaves to create heavy shadows on the part of the porch where they are sitting.

"Myra?"

"I don't want to go back now."

"But look at it from my side: you don't leave the princess behind and find a big welcome back at court."

"I know how to get the gel. It's called fire."

"What is it?"

"I can show you."

"OK, show me. Because the signal is strengthening."

"Who says that? They don't know."

"No, it's really strengthening, Myra, we have all warmed several degrees. Haven't you?"

She stands up. "Perhaps I have." His words have unleashed her tongue. "There is a pattern to the inter-epoch. I saw it in a rose window. Qaln is probably moving along an ellipse, and maybe it is coming towards us and reassembling some parts."

"So you do know."

"I'm guessing. And we can't get there."

"Piro needs to go home," he tells her. "Soon."



Late that night she heads into town alone. When she gets within sight of the church it is nearly midnight, but the building is lit up and there are people gathered in the doorway and on the steps. She sees an aura of moonlight around them, their breath in the black air. She catches sight of Stephen at the edge of one group, talking to the mother of her student. She sees him take leave of the mother and turn towards the pharmacy. She hesitates only a moment and then follows, matching his long, absorbed stride. When they are clear of the church she quickens her pace and touches him.

He whirls. When he sees her, his face hardens.

"Please," Myra says.

He stands still.

"I need to learn to make fire."

"I thought you learned."

"It won't catch."

"That is why your moon is lost," he says.

"Stephen ..."

"That is why you cannot understand. You know nothing of fire and that means you're still animal, Myra. You have no warmth. Anything. We couldn't live without it. Only reptiles like you."

She withstands his angry curse on her. "Please," she says. "I am asking you to come to my place and show me there."

"Where is your place?"

"Not so far. You just have to follow me."

Stephen looks at her remorselessly, and she sees all of his thoughts, anger and confusion. She sees too that something about this winter night has made him sad.

"Come," she pleads, and takes his hand. "I need your help." Because he is as alone as she is, he comes.



Ducat flees upstairs when she breaks through the trees, leading Stephen toward the house. From the porch, she calls him in their language. "Ducat, come, see what I can show you."

He appears slowly, descending the stairs step by step.

"There is another of you," says Stephen, speaking to Myra but staring at Ducat. "Are there more?"

"Yes," says Myra. And to Ducat, "It's all right. He knows me."

She leads Stephen to the pile of branches on the porch. Ducat remains where he is.

Swallowing a lecture, Stephen sweeps the branches off the porch and with his feet shoves the pile into a clearing. There he begins to build a circle of stones. Ducat watches from the porch until Stephen has tugged too long on one half-buried rock; then he swoops over and dislodges it in a quick motion. Stephen adds it to the circle.

They pile small twigs and magazine pages in the center of the rocks, and on top of them the branches. Finally, a log. Then Stephen takes a match from Myra's hand and turns to her.

"The fire would burn the house down if you built it on the porch. Do you understand?"

She doesn't say anything and finally Ducat answers, "Yes, she does."

"I won't light it until she does."

Myra turns her back and climbs back onto the porch. Piro appears in the shadow of the doorway. "Where are you going?" he asks her. She doesn't answer. "Get the cup," he whispers, his breath rattling in his throat.

She cannot move, but he holds her gaze. "This is what you want," he whispers.

She disappears under the porch and returns with the cup. Ducat takes it from her and then tilts his chin expectantly.

There is a pause, then Myra speaks. "Fire consumes."

Stephen nods. "It does indeed. What puts it out?"

"Water."

Stephen nods. "Water, dirt, sand, anything to smother it."

"OK, I understand," she says.

"OK then," Stephen says.

He strikes a match and touches it to the paper. The fire flares small, then grows as the twigs catch. Ducat's fascinated face is illuminated in the flame, and Stephen grabs his arm just as Ducat reaches into the pile. "It burns!"

Ducat, less argumentative than Myra, settles back to watch. After a few minutes Stephen settles beside the little circle too, and finally Myra squats on her haunches near Stephen. Piro remains in the doorway, watching.

The fire takes the chill out of the night. Myra digs her fingers into the loose ground where Ducat dislodged the rock, absently kneading the earth in her hand as she watches the fire climb.

Ducat holds out the cup. Stephen slides the cup handle onto one end of a forked branch, then shows Ducat how to push the cup into the bright orange center of heat. At first nothing happens. Then, as on the train tracks, it begins to glow.

Soon the magenta color emerges. The cup contracts in the middle, as if age were reversed and it was regaining a waist from a heavy torso. It tightens at the surface, growing a smoother, thinner skin. The magenta hue radiates. Ducat's eyes boil with the yellow fire.

"Good man," Stephen tells him. "You've done well. Found your missing element."

Stephen takes Myra's hand and brushes the dirt off the back of it, moving along each finger, watching Ducat's cup glow on its stick.

"What if we keep going?" Ducat says. "What if it makes blood right here?"

"Not here," Myra remonstrates. "You need Qaln."

"If you knew where it was." Stephen hesitates, but Myra and Ducat turn to him, wait for him to finish. "The pattern and direction are not impossible to decipher," he adds.

Myra looks up quickly, then down. That light that used to be in her face when she came back from a day on Qaln's dark side plays about her now, and her newly-growing skin is as human as Stephen's.

Ducat clenches his hands, and they hear Piro's scratching movements as he steps onto the porch. "It is coming closer," Piro says.

"We have to go to the Bronx," Ducat says.

Stephen speaks directly to him. "That moon of yours could just about snap back into place by itself. When spring comes in the northern hemisphere, the larger land masses may attract it back to its place. How do you call it?"

"Qaln."

"Well, Qaln may come back of its own accord. Then you may be able to bring matches and wood. The oxygen—maybe we can get you a couple of tanks. Of course, if it does come back, if it's been in an orbit that's at all like like the one Myra describes, all your ... whatever buildings you had, your monuments ... they'd be ..."

Ducat goes inside to get his clothes, his bedding, the car keys, and reemerges with a look like he is already 100 miles down the road. "However it comes," he tells Stephen.

Myra gives him the cup, her matches, one of her best furs. She hesitates with her locket and Ducat presses it back into her hand. They walk on either side of Piro to the truck. Stephen stands back a little ways at the edge of the fire. It is Christmas morning.

"Why are you hurrying now, Ducat?" Myra asks.

"I need to get out of here."

"Because you're angry?"

"How would you feel, Myra?"

"Angry too, I guess."

"Good girl."

"Ducat, there are so many questions."

"When you find the orbit," Ducat speaks into the side of her face, "Piro can raise us up at the closest point. Do you remember how we used to catch comet tails?"

"Nothing behaves here like it does at home."

"So I've noticed."

"And what can lift any of us up then?"

"Whatever carried us down. You have a guest, princess, and I have work."

Ducat and Myra settle Piro into the back of the van. Then Ducat swings his large haunches onto the driver's seat, kicks over the engine as if he's been at it all his life, and rattles down the rutted road as the winter moon sets.



When spring came, Myra got to see the transformation of the planet up close. She had not felt the loss of light and heat so

much as she felt their return. It was extraordinary to be part of the tipping planet's lunge for the sun, the stretch and reach of its northern half seeking warmth. The green growth did not come from Earth's core, as she had once believed on Qaln. She knew now. It came from moving, a shift toward the sun. So many things she'd misunderstood. She went to see the rose window over and over, deciding at last that whoever made it was, like her, from another moon, even Qaln. The elliptical orbit it described was quite accurate. One night, peering through the telescope, Myra saw two moons.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Maisie McAdoo** is a writer/researcher for the New York City teachers union. Before joining the union staff she worked as a journalist for Reuters, Knight-Ridder and several newspapers and wrote extensively on education, law and business. She began writing fiction several years ago in a Brooklyn writers group. She still lives in Brooklyn with her husband, two children and an old dog. You can reach her at [mpm80@juno.com](mailto:mpm80@juno.com).