

Rivers Above

A short story

Generated for the user

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The night the town lost power, Mira took her telescope to the hill beyond the last porch light and found the sky had been hiding a river. It spilled from horizon to horizon—white, granular, alive—with a slow, ancient current. She set the tripod, breathed out to steady her hands, and began to wade.

Galaxies don't tell you they're there. They let you discover them the way you discover a scar on your own knee: by accident, then forever. Mira traced the dark lanes where dust braided the light; she counted the tight pearls of star clusters until numbers gave up and awe took over. Between her and everything was only air, and between that and everything else, a silence that felt like a held note.

Her phone buzzed with the last of its battery. The group chat glowed: a grocery list, a complaint about the bus, a picture of a cat. She loved those small planets. She put the phone face down on the grass and leaned back into the eyepiece. The hill smelled like warm rock and dry weeds. Somewhere, a fox found something to eat.

When she adjusted the focus, the star she'd been staring at dissolved into two—tight as seeds in a pod, circling, patient. The handbook would have a name for them; the sky did not. She thought about the people who had looked before her and called what they saw the same thing, and then been wrong, and then been right, and then, mostly, content to keep looking.

There is a rumor that space is empty. It isn't. It is threaded with leftovers and beginnings: photons that left when mammoths were alive, ice the size of islands, radio whispers, iron hearts of dead suns, a thousand ships we haven't built yet. It is filled with distances that can be crossed by the simple act of knowing they exist.

The wind climbed the hill and pressed the grass flat, and the river above seemed to ripple. That was an illusion, she knew, but so are most first truths, until better ones arrive. She thought about how, in class, the teacher had called light a messenger. She wondered what it felt like to travel with a message for so long that you forget the sender, then find, at last, a receiver with an open eye.

A satellite slid by, a bright bead on a dark string. It wrote nothing, but it underlined everything.

Her father had once told her that the universe is not obliged to be beautiful, and yet it often is. Maybe, he said, beauty is what happens when we misunderstand

something in a useful way. Mira looked, misunderstood, and felt her chest loosen the way it does when a hard math problem suddenly cracks and the pieces fit.

When the power came back—first the thrum of a refrigerator miles away, then the town blinking on in squares—Mira kept the phone dark. The telescope gathered old light and offered it up like a bowl of water to a guest. She considered the bowls on their kitchen shelf, chipped and faithful. She thought of the word “home,” which had always meant coordinates, and now, also, coordinates plus everything within reach of a telescope.

Later, when dew began to bead on the metal, she lowered the tube and lay in the damp grass. The stars, freed from the magnifying frame, went back to being points. That was fine. You don’t need to read every letter to know the letter’s intent.

She tried a game she’d played as a child: choose a star and promise that, if someone else chose the same one, you would be friends forever. It had been a way of dodging loneliness with probability. Tonight she chose a dim fleck near the tail of the summer triangle and felt, absurdly and truly, that someone somewhere might be making the same promise. Perhaps not a person. Perhaps a fox with a sense for light, or a satellite of another world, or future Mira, older, kinder to herself.

On the walk back down, she kept glancing over her shoulder the way you do when you’ve heard your name whispered. The sky said nothing. The sky said everything: that there are rivers above us and inside us; that currents run whether or not we notice; that our small planets spin, complain, make lists, share cats, and still, somehow, belong to the same water.

At her door, she looked up once more. A meteor stitched a brief seam, bright as a thought arriving. Mira didn’t wish on it. She felt the wish she already had—clear, ordinary, enormous—turn into a route: look up often; learn the names and be ready to change them; carry a bowl; share the water.