

The Physicist's Basement

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The Physicist's Basement

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Asymptotes

Aurora notices everything differently now as she drives down the highway to the hospital. She can see how the birch branches curve from their tips towards the trees; she sees how they no longer spring from the trunks. The merging of highways is not as smooth as she once thought; she imagines drivers slamming their brakes to avoid collisions. The book lying open on the dash has arched pages that sit together but never really touch, somehow less and more than just a sequence of lines on pages.

What an odd world this is, she thinks as she hears her phone ring, the sound filling her ears like water. Boris answers it for her. She glances over at him, and she notices the way his arms slope toward his shoulders and onward closer to his neck; she sees the shapely smile whose arc doesn't really meet the emotion it seeks.

"I'm sorry," he says when he has words only for her. He reaches out to touch her arm, but misses. "Your sister is dead."

The words are an apocalypse to her. The grief slides near her, sliding closer and closer but never really touching her. She knows that it will be nearby and lurking at the infinitesimally small gap between words and feeling.

Kepler's Laws

It could be summer: the sunlight is strong and warms the pines just like in the hot part of the year, releasing the smell of sap into the air. Snow has not yet fallen, or maybe it has melted with the warm air. Aurora can't tell.

These trees are familiar to her. Every summer, their father would take little Aurora and Maria here for weeks at a time. A half-mile to the west is a cabin, just across the river and behind a hill. Their father taught them the names of the plants

and animals of this land. Some of it has started to fade from Aurora's memory, but the scent of fresh pine and leaves and earth stirs old words.

Her father was most alive in the summer. He would smile and joke and—best of all—he would laugh. The long days and warm air brought happiness not only to him but to his daughters. They were happy when he was; often, it was weeks between smiles.

Aurora can hear the river ahead of her. She heads to the familiar sound. This is the river where she learned to fish. This is the river where she asked her sister why she didn't have a mother.

"Everyone has a mother," sixteen-year-old Maria had said. She kicked the water and looked at the river. "Your mother knew she couldn't care for you the way Dad can, so she left."

The way Maria said it made it seem so simple. Before Aurora is the same river, but it isn't warmed by the same summer sun. A thin layer of ice covers it; she pokes at it with her toe, and it breaks easily. It couldn't be summer, but summer holds her hand as she steps into river.

"Why couldn't she?" Aurora had asked, crouched beside the river to run a hand through the chill current. Maria put an arm around the little girl's shoulders and said, "I don't know, Ra. Maybe one day we'll find out."

Aurora stomps through the ice with her waterproof boots and takes huge steps across the river, leaving holes in the ice behind her. This other side of the river is devoid of evergreen trees; here, it looks like winter. Oaks loom over her and as she used to, she wonders why her father loved this part of their land so much. It makes her feel tiny. In summer, the leaves block out so much light it feels almost like night; in winter, the branches look like arms reaching out. Winter is crumbling now, and the branches reach out and caress her as she passes.

When she was little, this stretch of woods terrified her. While her father would go ahead—eagerly, at least for him—she always hung back at the river's edge. Maria had to hold her hand and pull her along, until Aurora shifted her fear from the darkness to the trees themselves. Somehow, that felt safer; she could defend herself against the trees. She even shot at a couple of the trees with her .22, but that did nothing to stop their arms from reaching. When her father died, their clutching arms petrified.

The ground steadily rises. Aurora leans forward and warms her hands in her pockets. Her breath clouds in front of her like fog. A cardinal calls, and another

answers. The top of the hill is open to the heavens. The midday sky frowns down clouds. Their father had taken them to this place. “When I die,” he said, “I want you to bury me here.”

They did. They buried him at the highest point of the hill so he could watch the sky and drink the magic and breathe the trees.

Aurora walks over to the the birch that marks his grave. It was small when they planted it, but now it reaches to above her head. Signs of Maria are here: found feathers and bones rest at the roots, but Aurora has no offerings and no words.

Absolute Zero

The sun has grown lazy: it goes to bed far earlier than Aurora does, and it rises so late she has forgotten what it looks like on the way to work.

Now, it is dark and all the lights are out. The snowstorm has knocked down the power lines to her house, and she has no electricity. It has been out for hours. She has a fireplace and wood enough to last for days. Aurora is curled up by the fire, asleep beneath several blankets. The fire sends waves of heat over her, and that is almost enough to combat the dark.

Boris arrives some time in her sleep. When she wakes, he has brought pillows and more blankets from around her home and has them warming them by the fire. “There’s no electricity at my place either,” he tells her, holding his hands over the fire.

“How long do you think it’ll be until the power comes back?” Aurora sits up, still cocooned in her blankets. “I don’t know.” His teeth chatter loud enough to be heard over the fire. His hands are shaking.

She opens her blankets and lets him share her warmth.

The wood runs out. The temperature plummets. They shiver. The power doesn’t come back.

They shroud themselves with blankets and shawls. They tell stories and jokes and they laugh to distract themselves from the plummeting temperature. They burn candles and hold their hands and faces to the hint of warmth, until they run out of candles and then they shove hands down into pockets that are colder than frozen wax. They read many books.

They get frostbite. They fight over stupid things like their jobs and people that they don't even know and what they'll do when the electricity finally comes back. They don't talk to each other for hours, but Boris falls asleep and he looks too pale.

It takes Aurora too long to wake him up; she apologizes the moment his eyes flutter open and she would've cried, but her tears freeze and she cannot blink them back to stop ice from forming on the curve of her iris. Her tears have no place to fall; no lower space to inhabit, no lower place to turn upward. But the sun does rise, and there is the shadow of frost on the floor.

The lights flicker, distant stars that melt the dark. Aurora and Boris don't move for more than an hour, waiting for their stars to turn off and the temperature to fall. When the temperature rises and the light stays steady, they extricate themselves from the blankets and heaps of clothes.

He doesn't leave, and she doesn't ask him to. They fold up the blankets and clothes and smile at each other. Barely any words pass between them as they pick up.

When he does finally speak, he hugs her and whispers, "I'm glad we're not dead."

She corrects him, "I'm glad we're alive."

Heat Death

I stand on the long expanse of black rock. The rocks are filled with heat, filled with the heat of a summer day after leaving air conditioning set too cold. The warmth rises from the stone, washing through my bare feet all the way up to my head.

Other people are here, all but a few gathered around the cliff's edge. They talk and—when someone jumps to the water far below—they cheer. The sounds roll across the black stone and tangle me in their arms.

I race across the rocks and down the steep path away from the cliff. Where the path ends, rock slopes into water and heat meets cold. The wind here skates off the water and cools my flushed face. I stop at the water's edge, waves lapping at my toes, and I know what I want to do. I strip off my tank top and shorts and slip into the water. I can barely feel the chill.

The water is clear, like his eyes were. Every rock is visible, each fish clear. The chill of the water caresses me, imploring me to dive deeper. Its knotted currents lure me from the wet rocks, whispering. I want to go deeper to hear the words, feel the fish brush my ears.

I could. It would be so easy. All I would have to do is duck beneath the surface and try to reach the bottom that lies another cliff's depth below, where there are no people and no words to disturb me. The fish have become the cliff divers; they fall at me from far below.

I take a deep breath, and the cold bites me. This is a Canadian lake with no reason to be warmer than the glaciers from which it drinks. The cold smolders against my skin, breathing the heat from me. Any pain I receive is pain I deserve.

A man wrapped in towels wandering by pauses near me. "You alright?" he calls out. He looks like Boris, but his voice is different—it doesn't have a humid southern twang.

"I'm fine," I say. My teeth begin to chatter, and I clench my mouth shut. I was going to suffocate him at first, press a pillow over his face in his sleep. That way, he wouldn't know it was me. It would have taken too long. I think that's why I decided against it. He might still be alive if I tried it that way.

The guy ambles closer, looking at me. "I don't get cliff divers," he says. He doesn't look at my face or head, but everything beneath the surface. I cross my arms over my chest even though it hinders me when I tread water.

My second idea was to strangle him. I eliminated that almost immediately—he would be awake and know it was me. He would have been so hurt. "My wife likes to jump," he says, nodding to a woman standing at the edge who's wearing a sky-blue swimsuit. He adds, "I love her, but she's crazy."

"Aren't we all?" I smile because that's what I'm expected to do. My thoughts are everywhere but this conversation. Boris wasn't as crazy as people thought him to have been. He just didn't speak, his silence hovering like the fish at my feet.

His death was quick; I just shot him in the head. He didn't see me until the last moment. The pleading look in his eyes broke my heart, but I shot him anyways.

"She's finally convinced me to jump." A grin crosses the man's face. Raising his voice to call to his wife, he yells, "I'm on my way, sweetie!"

As I watch him walk to the cliff's edge, I think of the gun. I don't know anything about guns, but I do know I used a handgun. It was sticky when I held it to his head, almost malleable. I felt as if I could change it to whatever I wanted, as if I didn't have to kill my Boris.

I find myself out of the water and running after the man. When I catch up, he is standing at the edge of the cliff, smiling at his wife. They're about to hold hands when I tackle him, taking both of us into the air.

I am weightless for a moment, free of all crimes I have committed. Then the water hits us, and I am struggling to reach the surface. I can see the blue of the sky, just inches away.

The man is still tangled in my arms, and he too is struggling. I keep him with me, away from the surface and air and noise.

Laughter bubbles from my chest and escapes in the air streaming from my mouth. Darkness gathers around the edges of my vision, and I wonder how long I have been beneath the surface. It feels like only seconds. I can only see the fish scatter. The water isn't as clear as it was—everything is blurry, even the hand that floats inches from my eyes.

He said something too, but I don't remember. Now, I think it might have been a plea for help.