

# THE GARDEN'S COMET

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The old man threw me out on the porch, swamped in sky and summer and the folds of pink fabric he always made me wear. It could've been yellow, or pea-stalk green, but the fabric was always sun bleached and faded and it was never as bright as it could have been. I always wanted it to be a red dress, something where the color was so lush that you could have seen it from anywhere. But we never grew roses, and so I never even had anything similar to a red dress.

As soon as she heard the boards clatter under all that fabric, Sissy came running out from the boarded up house, probably with something like a tea kettle and pot stove, a few washcloths... and for what? She could've been carrying something along the lines of a large pot of every-flower, sprigs of green-blue and braided grass hanging down from her shirtfront. Or she could've been holding a baby, her baby, someone's baby, clinging on to everywhere, with blue-green skin glimmering against the light from the moon.

Old Man and Sissy and her not-baby stood out in front of me on that rickety porch, the one that didn't even have a swing. I felt like some sort of stupid maiden, laying in my puffy skirts like it was blood and guts, all because I couldn't find the decency in me to move.

The morning creatures stirred around the land, frothing up and down out of the blue grass like all of that bubbly water swirling about in Sissy's pot stove. The cicadas and the locusts that once buried this house knew we had to leave, and they were ready to reclaim what was theirs.

We were bathed in a glowing summer season, but the entire world glinted purple, because the sky had taken to changing colors at night. Nobody could really see that far, so no one ever knew why. No one questioned it; because how could you? The sky just glinted like the firmly pressed opal that danced on my finger, but was there anything to show for it? No, and there never would be.

But there was the comet. It hadn't quite been in the papers, other than those old loons at the gossip corner writing up a storm until their fingers bled. That's why nobody believed it until the professor in town made the telescope, and he showed us a big blurring picture of what we assumed was our universe, or somewhere between where we were and where God was, hiding. I had waited in line all night to look into that telescope and see what I saw. I was wearing a white dress, and the wind finally took up as soon as I got up there, whipping around my thin skirts so that they stuck, plastered to my body like the stench of dead skunk.

As soon as I peered through that telescope, I saw a bunch of blobs and blurs and colors and shapes. But I looked past all that, and I looked for someplace that you could maybe make yourself believe was heaven, but I didn't see anything. Hadn't I looked?

I was looking for something that looked like a pillar of white clouds, but by the time I remembered I didn't know where clouds came from, my dress was wrapped up over my head and I heard everyone behind me howling with the wind, a terrible laughter. I felt bad for looking at heaven, and I scuttled away, no better than a rat from the gutter, my face a beaten red, and looking no lovelier, though they always wanted me to be.

At the house, we knew the comet was coming, but we didn't really think twice about it. Maybe it was fear, of being swallowed by the unknown, of going past God. We didn't know, and we didn't dare ask, because something told us that just by the church being closed, with the windows boarded up, that the nuns were going to board the comet too. We knew they were in there, and we heard them and their legs scuttling around like bugs trying to get everything ready. We wondered if they'd packed the Bible, or if it really even mattered anymore. Maybe they'd tell us we were all trying to get to heaven, and this was just the easiest way. I always thought that God didn't want us to go the easiest way, but that was before I realized I'd never even touched a Bible, and wouldn't be able to read one if I had the chance.

I wondered if the nuns would teach me how to read, when we were on board the comet, with our boxes and bags and trunks all wound up with what-stuff, with Sissy's baby and her pot stove and washcloths and her full bouquet of flowers that would've probably tilted over and wilted by now.

I thought of all this as I watched the rain start, lying there on the porch in a huge dress, that I all but wondered how I had got put in it in the first place. This rain wasn't the kind any of us had ever experienced, and it certainly wouldn't be good for the crops. The people in the town would've wailed for days after their lost money, but now, they had packed all their roots up into a case, stuffed their carrots and potatoes into hat boxes, and were ready to ascend whatever staircase was placed in front of us, that is, to board the comet.

"When will it come?" Sissy asked Old Man as the landscape began to blend and blur around us. The rain was liquid, but it was heavy, more dense than the bricks of yellow cornbread Sissy always baked in loaves. It looked the color of honey, dripped sticky like the draining of maple syrup from a tree. I wondered if this was revenge. It looked of melted amber, of vaporized stars falling from the darkness of nowhere. It felt like the beginning and the end of the world all at the same time.

And then it was there, submerged in the ruined corner of our string-bean patch, the mud thrown up against the rain, splattered against the shuddering wooden house and all of us, drenching my dress in sand, water, and splitting beans. I couldn't help but cry out for the ruin of the dress in spite of myself, but the fear got caught in my throat; everyone from town was flooding onto our land, their lives packed up and shut away, all heading to our destroyed vegetable patch. I saw the professor and the nuns, and all the girls from the grammar school that had always laughed at me with pastel baskets strapped onto their heads, as if they had come from another planet themselves. They all ran towards the comet like their lives depended on it, the comet upended in our garden. All I could do was stare as they passed me by.

Sissy and Old Man had gotten mixed in with the crowd, and soon I was sure that everyone was on board except for me. I still couldn't bring myself to move, watery tears of disbelief collecting in my eyes. I couldn't see straight, and I tripped and fell into the mud as I ran towards the comet, the sludge collecting in my hair. My dress was a torn brown.

"Wait!" I tried to scream, but the rain coursed down my throat. I was almost certain it was too late.

Then, an arm, extending, alien-like and solid from the base of the comet.

At first, I thought I was seeing God for the first time, but it was the arm of the professor, his glasses splayed, his normally neat comb-over flying wildly in all directions, fraternizing with the wind. His hand beckoned to me, and he looked into my eyes like he was trying to tell me something.

I stood up, grabbed his hand, and boarded the comet.