



BETWEEN THE AXIS AND THE STARS

by Chloe N. Clark

HE was too close to me. His car too small. I leaned against the window to get some distance, thinking that if we so much as brushed shoulders my body would betray me. We'd driven for hours, at that point, and were far enough into Iowa that everything looked the same. It was the edge of spring and the fields were still empty, save for the occasional mashed over and rotted corn stalk.

“God, it’s so empty here,” Peter said. I didn’t want to turn to him, to sacrifice even those centimeters between us.

“It looks different in summer,” I responded. I wanted to tell him how the fields of corn had looked like oceans to me, those waves of green as the wind hit, when I’d visited Callum. But I didn’t want him to look over at me, to see me staring out the window, as if I could push myself through the glass and into somewhere else.

“I bet,” he said. Quieter this time.

I saw the house before he did. It was on top of one of the tiny uplifts of land that Iowans sometimes called hills—an abuse of language, I’d once said to Callum, getting a laugh out of him. It was an old farm house: two stories with a tiny attic, windows that all looked a little crooked from the weight of time settling onto the house.

“I didn’t know we were so close,” I said.

Peter didn’t say anything back. Maybe because there were so many things I could have been referring to.



On the station, everyone called Callum “Cal” and he never told anyone that he hated it. I knew, though, and so I never did. It was just something about

the way the corners of his eyes winced, just the tiniest bit, whenever someone said it.

We weren't part of the same unit. I worked in research and he was a Jumper, but I saw him in the mess hall and sometimes he'd come into the research bay and look around. He never seemed like he had a set course when he did that, more like he was trying to figure out what element of the research might be interesting to him.

I'd heard about him, because everyone had. He was one of the top three jumpers in the world. A jumper's job was both easy to describe and impossible to do justice to in that description. When pods were out floating, gone black for some reason or another, a jumper had to make the leap to attach the cable that would pull them back into the ship. Pods went dark for so many reasons. They were cheap but flawed as fuck because of that cheapness. It was easy for them to explode if a jumper wasn't gentle, or if they weren't gotten to in time. It was something a machine could never be programmed to do, because they wouldn't have a human's reactions. Jumpers were different than anyone else in the Out, if only because they relied more on intuition and athleticism than on intelligence and planning.

The first time I said hello to Callum was maybe the tenth or eleventh time I'd seen him. He was strolling around the research bay, eyes drifting from one area to the next.

“Hi,” I said. “Are you looking for something?”

His gaze landed on me and he smiled. He had a quick smile, as if it belonged on his face and so he had to do no work to put it there. “I’m not, no. I just like seeing what everyone’s working on.”

“I can show you what I’m doing, if you like?” I tried.

He nodded and walked closer. I moved so he could stand next to me. He was tall and lanky—the body of a runner. I’d have called him gangly, except that he held himself with a certain kind of grace, like dancers do even when they’re off the dance floor.

I showed him the camera I was working on. It was one that could be submerged in water of unknown acidity levels. I’d been helping design it for the past year. We still didn’t quite know if it would work.

He leaned over me to look closer. The light caught his red hair and I was reminded of copper pennies at the bottom of swimming pools, how they shimmered just so and it made them seem worth so much more than just a penny. I always dove for them.



There were other cars already there. Three of them. Peter parked behind a black sedan. I wondered who had arrived before us and stared out the window, trying to will myself to open the door.

I sensed Peter, next to me, trying to decide if he should touch me. There was a long moment and then I heard his door open and he stepped outside.

I pressed my forehead, hard, against the window. It was cool and sharp. Then I opened the door and stepped out. The ground held the hint of softness to it—mud that had been frozen slightly. Peter stood waiting for me. I walked up next to him, but didn't take his hand—as much as I wanted to, wanted to feel his solidity, the warmth of his body.

“You ready?” he asked.

I nodded. We walked up to the house.

Peter knocked. Two hard knocks. No hesitation. I would have tapped lightly, would've prayed not to be heard.

After a moment, the door opened. Callum's mother, Ruth, saw me and broke into a smile. She was older, harrowed by the past year, but when she smiled everything always fell away and I'd see the almost startlingly beautiful young woman who decorated the photos that hung all over the farmhouse. I remembered a photo of her, age twenty-seven, holding baby Callum. Her dark hair loose around her face and her whole being beaming at the chubby child in her arms. I flinched, thinking about Callum as a baby, as someone young, as alive.

"Cece," Ruth said. She reached out and pulled me into a hug. My body shook, but I didn't cry. "Are you cold, sweetie?"

"Maybe," I replied, though I knew it wasn't the chilled air making me shiver.

"Well, come inside, love," Ruth pulled me over the threshold. Then turned back to Peter. "It's good to see you, Peter." I wondered if she meant it.

Peter though showed no sign of uncertainty, he reached out and placed a hand on her shoulder as he passed her. It was the kind of subtle tenderness I loved him for—when I was sad or sick, he'd always do some

small thing that would bring me back out of it and to him. It had been days since I hadn't flinched when he touched me.



We shouldn't really have been on the same station, there were regulations against onboard romances. But everyone turned their eyes to when Peter would sneak into my cabin at night. We'd be quiet; though, once he'd needed to press a hand over my mouth, a gentle kiss of palm to lips, when I'd come. Afterwards, when I pressed into his body as we fell asleep, he'd whispered something sleepily into my hair. I didn't catch what it was but the warmth of his voice let me fall into dreams.

We met at a party, not even anything space related, and had fallen so easily into conversation that it felt as if I'd always been waiting to talk to him.

He was a Jumper's Voice, there was a more technical term for it but no one ever used that. If every station had a Jumper, they'd have to have a Voice. Someone who spotted the Jumper, looked out for variables that couldn't be gauged in a jump and then also controlled the jump cord to

pull the Jumper back once a pod had been retrieved. Voices were known for a few things, but the most important was the ability to not only see all the possible variables of a situation but to predict which ones would happen. If Jumpers were about intuition, Voices were like the other side of their coin—thought and logical precision.

Most Jumper and Voice relationships were close in hard to pin down ways. Someone described it once as sibling-like, but that wasn't exactly true. They were closer than friends but always there was some other undercurrent—a keeping apart that kept them from getting sloppy in the field. Callum and Peter didn't have that closeness.

Peter had started out with a different Jumper—Harlan—but Harlan got transferred out and Callum was brought in. Peter and Harlan's relationship had always been great, the way they could bounce ideas back and forth to each other in a conversation made it like following an extreme sport as they got more and more ridiculous, until they both were in tears laughing.

When Callum and I had become friends, Peter watched us with a careful look. Later, I realized he was going through the variables, trying to figure out what would happen.



In the living room of Ruth's house, people were crammed into every possible space, crunched into couches and three people in one love seat. People even sat on the floor. I recognized so many faces, from the station, from the Academy where many of us had trained, from Callum's extended family—cousins he'd once pointed out to me in photos, whispering their stories to see if they'd get a reaction from me. The cousin who'd been in jail, Jon, was leaning against a side table. The one who'd been divorced seven times, Leann, was sitting cross-legged next to the fireplace. Everyone waved as Peter and I walked in. I took a seat on the floor next to Marcella, the station medic. Peter stayed standing for a moment more, looking at all of the people there, before he sat next to me. He sat down with care, trying not to brush against me. It was the first time I realized how he'd been careful to not touch me for days, to keep the slightest of distances from my body. I shifted slightly further from him and brushed accidentally against Marcella's hand. I looked down, was going to say sorry, and then I saw her hands. She had long fingers, a simple wedding band, a small scar on her

thumb. Unremarkable hands. And they'd been one of the first things to touch Callum after the accident, had cradled his head.

“I think everyone is here now,” Ruth said. “As you all know, my boy wasn't one for sadness. He smiled so early as a baby, laughed so much. So I'd prefer we stick to happy stories.”

There was a long moment of silence. I looked among the faces, everyone was in thought. I didn't look at Peter. I didn't want to think about what moments he might be remembering.

“When we were like ten, he used to do graffiti,” someone said. I couldn't quite remember his name, but I think he was a childhood friend of Callum's. “He'd find places he thought looked lonely, that's what he called it, lonely, and he'd try to give them something to keep them company. I remember he graffiti'd a cow on Mr. Alliban's silo. The cow was like one of those cartoon ones with eyelashes and the biggest eyes. Alliban caught us and you could tell he wanted to yell, but he saw that cow and started laughing. He said ‘have you ever seen a goddamn cow, Callum?’ and Callum just shrugged. You know, that noncommittal, could be nonchalance, could be the end of the world, shrug of his? So Alliban took us to the barn and made us spend five minutes looking into the face of each cow. Weirdest two hours of my life, but he kept the cow on the silo.”

Some people laughed and some just smiled. I felt my stomach churning, hot and nauseous. I wanted to get lost in memories of Callum, but my body wouldn't give in.



He came to the research bay every day, after I'd shown him the camera, and we'd talk as I walked between different projects, explained different researches to him. When we ran out of things to talk about that had to do with the science, we moved onto other things, longer walks around the station. We told our lives in a couple of hours every day. He made jokes about the way that I said words, my Boston accent so different than his Midwestern one in such similar ways—his drawn out A's and hard pressed N's—as if both our voices had heard the same advice and interpreted it in a different way.

We were on the same rotation and ended up headed home on the same day. Peter was staying an extra month to help out with training a Voice who'd be headed out on a mission.

Callum invited me to Iowa. He said “you like to look for beauty. I want you to find it in Iowa.”

He drove me across the state, we stopped at every field. He said, “what do you see?” The fields stretched out and forever, I thought.

The first morning at his mother’s house, he grabbed my hand and said we were going for a walk. He took us into a field of corn. It was one of the hottest summers on record and as we walked, I could feel sweat trickling down my throat, catching in the slight gap between my bra and skin. The corn rustled around us in the breeze. I wondered how he could seem like he knew where he was going, when I just felt lost.

Then we broke out of the corn and onto grass, overgrown with wild prairie flowers. There was a small creek running and we walked along it until we came to a pond. The sound of frogs filled the air, their songs heavy with longing.

“It’s spring fed, cool, practically cold when you find one of the springs.” He kicked off his shoes, began to undress.

I watched him for a moment and then began to do the same. I was wearing a sun dress and the zipper caught on my hair as I pulled it off. I didn’t realize he’d moved closer to me, until he was gently helping me

untangle it. Then he was standing in his boxers and I was in my bra and panties. We stayed, standing facing each other for a moment or two, and then he slipped a hand around my waist and then the other hand. He took a step forward to bridge the gap between us and our bodies pressed lightly against one another. I could feel my heart beating so hard I wondered if the frogs could hear it. He bent his head and kissed the top of my breast, where the pulse of my heart was vibrating through. And then he stepped back.

“I love Peter,” I said. And I could feel the truth of the words on my tongue.

He nodded, “I know.” He let his hands slip from my waist and then he walked to the pond. He didn’t look back as he jumped in. He let out a yelping laugh. “Jesus it’s cold!”

And the moment had passed. We were only friends again and I followed him in.



The stories came faster. Everyone jumping in when people were telling them, to make corrections or just to add in exclamations of joy. The time five year old Callum had tried to have a pet frog but had let it loose in his bedroom because he thought it'd stay asleep on the bed next to him. The time he lost a high school basketball game by missing a free throw and then had hugged everyone on the opposing team. How he'd once gotten in a fight at the Academy with another Jumper trainee, a true fight, with punches, and no one knew what it was about, had just witnessed the two scrabbling on the ground. Then both had just stopped, stood up, walked to separate rooms. The next day, they ate lunch with one another.

“And no one ever found out why?” Leanne asked.

“Nah. Callum kept some things to himself. I always thought he should've been a poker player, the boy could hold onto secrets,” the guy telling the story said.

Beside me, Peter shifted his body. A small movement. No one else would have noticed it, but I could've felt it from a thousand miles away.

“When he was a boy,” Ruth began. She hadn't spoken yet, not since the first moments in the room. We all turned to her as she continued, “people called him the well. You ever hear those stories, fairy tales I think,

where someone told their secrets to a well. That way you got it out of your system, but nobody heard you. You'd shout it down a well if you had hurt someone or lied or if you loved someone you shouldn't."

She didn't look at me, no one did, but I wondered how many of them wanted to, if they wanted to catch my eyes, see what I said with them.

"People told him their secrets, because they knew they were safe with him. You couldn't get anything out of him if he didn't want to tell you." Her voice faltered. "Jesus, I miss telling him my secrets."

And then we all were quiet, watching a mother as she bowed her head and shut her eyes so tight that all of the laugh lines around them stood out like sharp edges.

I didn't notice Peter get up, until I saw him wrap his arms around her. His hug so tight that she could bury her face in his shoulder, so that her sobs didn't sound like anything but echoes down a well.



It was a normal jump. Not one where anything unexpected should have happened. We had been back on the station for six months. I was in the

research bay when I heard the alarm go off. And I couldn't have known, but I ran anyways. Ran to the jump bay, saw his body being brought in on the jump cord. The frantic rush of people. The pod had split a few moments before his jump would get him there and though Peter had already begun the pull back, the debris still hit Callum.

I saw Marcella kneeling over him, her hands as she cradled his head. Peter was standing a few feet away, whispering something over and over under his breath. I saw his lips moving but no words were coming out.

“He's breathing,” Marcella yelled.

And the words had sounded like a benediction, like grace.

But he didn't wake up. And he wouldn't wake up. He was transferred down to Earth, to home, to doctors and hospitals. They transferred down Peter on leave, as they always did with a Voice when a Jumper was lost. I'd read it once, a memoir by a Voice, “we don't come back from losing them.”

They gave me leave shortly after. “Be with your fiancé, he's going to need you.” When they said it, I'd looked down at the ring I wore, startled.

“Thank you,” I'd said.

“I'm sorry,” they'd said in response. And I knew they weren't talking about Peter.

Callum held on for a year. The doctors didn't say anything helpful. They said it takes time. They said we never know what the body will do with this kind of injury. In my dreams I yelled at them, I said "we can send people to the stars, but we can't understand their brains?" But they didn't answer in my dreams. We went back to Boston, left him at the Iowa hospital where Ruth could watch him.

At home, Peter walked in a daze. The first time we had sex, after, he pushed so hard inside me that I'd gasped out in pain and he'd stopped shocked.

"Babe, I'm sorry. I just. I don't know." He moved away from me, fell onto his side of the bed.

I'd shifted to my side, wrapped my arms around him, kissed his neck and the side of his face. "I love you. I love you. I love you." I'd said it over and over again.

When Ruth called me, at the end of the year, said, "he died," I stayed calm on the phone and only threw up after, my body shaking so hard that the hair on the back of my neck stood up.

I told Peter when he had gotten home, from a counseling session to see if he was ready to be a Voice again, and he reached for me and I

couldn't bring myself to go into his embrace. Because I wanted it too much, because I wanted Peter to take me in his arms, because he was the one I'd always be in love with. And it felt like a betrayal in a way that I couldn't figure out.



People left throughout the night, wandering off to their cars. But Peter and I were staying the night, Ruth had insisted. I helped her carrying cups and plates from the living room to the kitchen. As we washed dishes, she turned to me, “did you love him back?”

I kept my gaze on the cup I was drying. “I loved him so much.”

“But not like...”

“Not like that.”

She nodded. “It was the way he talked about you. He could keep secrets so well. But he didn't keep you like a secret. He beamed with you.” She paused. “But he liked Peter, too, you know. He always smiled when he talked about him.”

I bit my lip, bit back anything I might have asked. We finished washing the dishes in silence.

After, I walked outside to find Peter. He was sitting in the grass, staring up at the night sky. “We don’t have stars like this in Boston.”

I sat down beside him, laughing. “You’ve literally been to the stars, why do you need to see them from so far away?”

“I can see them all at once like this. Find the patterns.” He reached down and clutched his hand into the grass, I saw the tendons in his hand flexing with it, as if he was trying to hold himself down.

“Peter?”

“I didn’t see it. I didn’t see it as a possible outcome. It was so ordinary. And I didn’t see anything going wrong.” His body was so tensed and yet so still. I could see his chest moving with the pounding of his heart.

I moved closer to him, wrapped my arms around him. “You can’t see everything coming.”

He reached his arms around me and we held each other. Above us the sky made patterns we didn't know how to read.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chloe N. Clark's work appears in *Apex*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Uncanny*, and more. She is co-EIC of *Cotton Xenomorph*, writes for *Nerds of a Feather*, and teaches composition, communication, and creative writing at Iowa State University. Her debut chapbook, *The Science of Unvanishing Objects*, is out now and her book, *Your Strange Fortune*, is forthcoming from Vegetarian Alcoholic Press. [@PintsNCupcakes](#).

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