

"ELI RAPHAEL ANNOUNCES HERSELF AS A WRITER TO WATCH. THE BOOK'S EMOTIONAL CENTER...ELEVATES THIS NOVEL INTO SOMETHING TRULY MEMORABLE."

—LIZ MOORE, AUTHOR OF *GOD OF THE WOODS*

NIGHT OBJECTS

A NOVEL
ELI RAPHAEL

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CENTRAL

New York Boston

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*For every rabbit who became a wolf—
I see you.*

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PART I



I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope.

—T. S. ELIOT, *FOUR QUARTETS*



Antediluvian

Before we begin, consider: In 1687, Newton published his law of universal gravitation, which states that where F is the force, m_1 and m_2 are the masses of the objects interacting, r is the distance between the centers of the masses, and G is the gravitational constant. More poetically, gravity is the force that causes two objects to attract one another. Over two hundred years later, Einstein refined that. He said that gravity isn't a force so much as a curvature of spacetime. It is predictable until it isn't.

I already gave my statement to the police, of course. Detective Thibeaut knows everything—or rather, she thinks she does. I just need to make one thing clear. It's true that I wished him dead dozens of times. Hundreds, even. But I, Lenny Winter, did not kill that boy.



1

Before

I was fifteen the summer I learned to do brightwork. This was the same summer I first tried—and failed—to view the Virgo A galaxy.

My mother and Yip sat me down in April: When school let out in early June, we would leave Miami. My mother felt guilty about the whole thing. She chewed her lip. Her overbite gave her a leporine air, which always made me feel oddly wistful and tender. But I did not wish to feel wistful, nor did I particularly wish to feel tender. I didn't mind that we were moving, but the decision had been made with such quiet and sudden finitude. I wanted to feel sullen. I tried out a brooding glance.

"Don't be like that," my mother said. The pay she brought in as a community college sociology adjunct didn't stretch far in Miami. Yip, who'd been medically discharged from the army after a traumatic brain injury, received a small disability check each month. They wanted to move somewhere quiet, somewhere with affordable housing.

That was the other big news. My mother and my stepfather had decided to pack all our belongings into a U-Haul and drive across the country to move onto a small houseboat. Yip had grown up sailing on Boston Harbor. He said he'd never forgotten what it was like to fall asleep rocked by the waves.

"Think of how easy it'll be," said my mother, "to stargaze from the boat."

She kept twirling a hank of her hair, tangerine strands long against a freckled hand. Her paternal grandfather had been a Glaswegian, his wife a Muscovite. The other grandchildren had inherited the wife's dark coloring,

but my mother had her grandfather's reddish hair, which paired oddly with her sallow skin. She was a copper penny, emitting a humming, quick glow—equal parts alert and nervous, an animal in the wild, coiled and ready to release.

She looped another strand of hair around her finger and tugged.

“Okay, kitten, look. The high school up there has a joint astronomy program with the community college. Or...” She paused, rested a hand on Yip's knee. “There's a boarding school nearby. Near-*ish*-by. Blanchard, I think. They have their own astronomy lab. Tassia Dex went there, actually. Remember? The one who served on the Kepler exoplanets mission?”

She was desperate; my parents could never afford to send me to boarding school. But what was there to cling to in Miami? I had few friends to bid farewell to when we left.

“Doesn't it rain a lot in Seattle?”

“We're not moving to Seattle,” said my mother. “But yes, it rains in Washington. Not during the summer, though. There's good visibility then.”

Had I been more uncertain, that alone would've convinced me. I'd wanted to be an astronomer for as long as I could remember. I had no good reason for thinking this would be possible. My mother, who'd been a physics major in college before she failed fluid mechanics, approached stargazing with an exaggerated corniness. We had a cheap tabletop telescope that we brought on camping trips; she'd cheered the first time I located Venus on my own. In the strange alchemy that transmutes a parent's dreams into their child's, her excitement became my own.

And then there was Carl Sagan. I was allowed to watch TV only on Saturdays, and we got only PBS. In elementary school, I'd eat bowl after bowl of cereal on the green velvet couch, poking my toes through the spots in the fabric worn silky thin, watching *Cosmos*. The way Carl Sagan explained the mysteries of the universe made them seem simple, as if anyone could understand them with enough time and hard work.

He also looked almost exactly like Yip, my stepfather. When Carl (as I called him in my head) spoke, it was as if he was talking directly to me. There

was an episode where Carl explained that apple pies and stars were made of the same chemicals. I watched it so many times I could say his lines along with him. Thinking about the universe beyond Earth's atmosphere, about a space so huge and different that I could never fully understand it, made my head swim in a warm, woozy way.

And so, on an April morning twelve years ago, when my mother said that I'd make new friends, that I would hike mountains and learn to rock climb and see stars I hadn't known existed, I considered what Carl would do were he to find himself in my position.

I told my parents that I would love to move to the Pacific Northwest.



Our journey from Miami to northwestern Washington state wound through the muggy swampland of the Florida-Georgia border; the flat khaki scrub and curved turquoise sky that make the snow globe of New Mexico; a freak late spring blizzard coming into Montana; and finally—the thick, fresh, gray salt air of the northwest. You make it over the mountains of Yakima, past the peach fields and red dust, and you can't yet see the ocean. But you can lick the breeze or the back of your hand or your lips, and you can taste the salt. It fills your eyes and your lungs, and you become puffy with the weightlessness of the air, the sky, the clouds, the spicy piney needles that litter mudroom floors and settle into dark flannel crevices in the beds of loggers and beauticians and fishermen.

The town was called Port Angeles. Highway 101 was the only way in. Just as we crossed town limits we were spit out at the top of a hill. There was a brown building with a sign that said PIZZA PIZZA PIZZA! An older woman wearing a mullet and a nametag stood outside, smoking a cigarette. Then four coffee huts in quick succession: Bean Me Up Scotty!, Joe-nsing, Café a Day, and Deja Brew. Beyond Café a Day was miles of ocean. We drove down another hill into downtown: two streets running parallel to the water. Many

of the businesses were closed. Still, there were people down here, packs of middle schoolers eating chips and Entenmann's doughnuts, a couple of women with plaid shirts loose and baggy over leggings. A man wearing jeans, steel-toed boots, and a safety vest sat outside the dollar store.

"Oh," I said. "Whoa."

One of the cross streets had revealed a mountain range, comically lovely, with vicious peaks and purple-white snow. My throat tightened. It was like realizing you hadn't breathed in several seconds and then taking in so much air you thought it might kill you.

"Hurricane Ridge," Yip said. "The Olympic Mountains."

We continued. Something pleasantly fetid moved through the car's rolled-down windows, the iodine-rich stink of tangled seaweed and slippery fish. Now we were on a wide street called Marine Drive, which contained a gas station, another coffee hut, and two hangars, each with a large depiction of a boat. A few blocks later, we arrived. The marina's parking lot was quiet. There was a small diner, closed for the day. A dozen cars, mostly beaters, but one or two newer models. Dotted around the edge of the parking lot, on slings of wood and cinder blocks, were several sailboats. They'd likely seemed tamer in the water, but they loomed over us as we exited the car, land-wrecked storks dozens of feet tall.



My mother was right. The visibility was outstanding. The stars in Miami were a weak, smoggy blanket scattered across a bleached sky. On the Olympic Peninsula, it was the exact opposite. I sat on the top deck the night we arrived. We were far enough north that dusk did not fall until nearly eleven, at which point I was swimming through a thick soup of starlight and indigo. The sky pulsed with a silent urgency that demanded closer examination. I'd known there were billions of stars in our galaxy, but I had not believed it until we arrived in Port Angeles.