

Jesse and the UFO

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"The stars keep moving," Poppy muttered in frustration, his neck craning back as he steadied himself against the patio table. He brought us out here because the moon was new. It was hiding from the sun--just like us, I guess--and he wanted to teach us about a hunter named Orion.

"Teacher splains they're satinlights," Jesse whispered, pointing skyward, her small legs balancing on the arms of the lawn chair. "They connect people."

She looked like an antenna, and Poppy was holding very still. In the darkness his body merged with the hogback overlooking our home. His head became a desert rock floating in stars.

"We're already connected," he replied.

It was after midnight and we just got back from school. Mom was making stew and Dad was at the wind farm. He wouldn't be home until 4AM. Poppy said to look for a belt with three stars, but my eyes kept grabbing onto satellites. He said the sky once was still, and, when a star moved, it was falling. That was called a meteor. Meteors and stars were different. Poppy loved to teach us about the world, but sometimes his words were just old things in boxes.

"Lunch time," Jesse squealed, looking at her ecophone. Mom had sent a foodmoji. Poppy grimaced and Jesse dismounted, her red hair flaring like shocks of fire in the backyard sensor light. We grabbed our backpacks and went inside, but Poppy stayed behind, squinting up and mouthing numbers.

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In the olden days school was like the movies: Monday to Friday, and in the daylight--before it got too hot. Now it was Monday, Wednesday, and

Friday for four hours and we got out at midnight. Everything else was Metaclass. In the day we stayed home, inside, mostly sleeping, and we had Poppy to watch us when Mom was in her office. She was an undertecht. She was building a playground under the school. Poppy said the whole world would be full of Morlocks. More words from old boxes, I guess.

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Poppy told us about the birds:

"The belted kingfisher, Megaceryl aclyon, sounded a bit like the whistle a coach wears, with that little ball inside."

Jesse was curled up at his feet like a cat, and I was drawing at the kitchen counter, doodles mostly. He bent forward in his lazy chair, chewing on his empty pipe. His hair glistened silver in the solars. Poppy was looking through the walls of our adobe again, making pictures in his head.

"It swept and dipped over a pool in the creek bed. It was Texas, and the cedars were full of ball moss. Bluest bird I ever saw, with a little tuft of brown underneath. It was a girl, fast like you two, with quick, ballerina movements. She darted from tree to tree over dark water." Poppy waved his hand from side to side, and then bent down in a flash, grabbing Jesse. "Then she would plunge, whoosh like lightening, into the rippling mirror, and just as quick rise with a small fish in her long beak, gulping from a branch." Jesse giggled and squirmed in his tickling fingers. "She was one of my favorites, with a spiky crest like she just came from a salon to show off."

Poppy told us about the birds before bedtime when the sun rose. We lived in Opposite World--that's what Mom called it. Dad said that history was full of change and every generation was different, but I knew that was a lie when I saw Poppy's eyes all green and full of sadness even when he smiled.

We watched the sun rise through the glass obserwall before the shades went down. First there was the shiny slit outlining the mesas with soft yellows leaking into the sky. Then the sun spilt into everything and there was blue and not-blue, with rock and dead trees splintering the land with long shadows. At school Ms. Yazzie was teaching us about dinosaurs, when everything was ocean and then green and now desert, and it was desert before Opposite World but now the desert was eating everything up.

The shades came down to keep in the cool. It was time for sleep. I looked at my doodle: a black pool with blue wings rising above it.

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Today Ms. Yazzie talked about the word s u s t a i n a b i l i t y, which was how to make things last. She said we had to take the salt and pollution out of oceans to make drinking water, and we used robodrones to put out fires in Colorado forests. Today plants grew in domes bigger than stadiums. She proudly said New Mexico was the leader in solar and wind farms, like where my dad worked. She tussled my hair. I turned red. Shiniya and Heather giggled.

Ms. Yazzie looked like she was floating up and down the rows in her long dress. She most always wore a bun, but today her hair flowed behind her back. It was October 10th, and she told the Cali and New York kids that she was Navajo. She shared stories about different worlds, about Tsoodzil, about Turquoise Boy and Turquoise Girl, and about blue birds and corn. Her dark eyes grew big and her voice turned soft. Even Heather listened, but it was confusing when Ms. Yazzie talked about worlds, like the place we came from was the place where we were going. I wanted to ask her what she meant, but I was too shy. Then we moved on to fractions.

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Poppy said that, even though history changes, garages stayed the same. Jesse was head-first inside a big box, her legs floundering in the hot, dusty air. I was already sweating, and Poppy lingered in the doorway like he was planning an escape.

"It's in there. Keep looking," he repeated in his crusty voice as he fiddled with the fan settings.

"It's not here, Poppy," her feet argued. The box was eating Jesse.

"It's the big, red book full of birds. All my photos."

"No, Poppy. There's nothing," the U-Haul box squealed. "But there's a black box. What's in the black box?"

His tangle of eyebrows sunk over his wrinkly face but then arched in amazement. "My typewriter!"

We unearthed it, set it on the kitchen counter inside, and Poppy pressed a secret button. "Pull it back, Bowie. Nice and easy."

I opened its black jaws and it smiled with metal teeth. It had a shiny white alphabet but its outside was black and scratchy to the touch.

"Arrow," Jesse peeped, fingering the word on the back.

"To point us in the right direction," Poppy whispered over us, smiling. He slid the back part and a bell dinged.

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"That's gross, Poppy. Did it have scales?"

"Yeah, Poppy. Gross. Did it bite people?" Jesse echoed.

"No," he chuckled. "It was called the snakebird, but it was just a big, beautiful, black bird. But the neck was like a snake, long and windy."

Jesse was at the typewriter on Mom's desk. I was drawing on the floor. Poppy said she looked like a stenographer. He spelled out the word: s t e n o g r a p h e r. It was long. He then

spelled out a n h i n g a. Jesse became a frownmoji. Sometimes he forgot we were kids.

"It was a long, black bird, so still on the branch over the canal. Baby gators peeped in the patches of lily pads. Peep, peep!" We laughed. Sometimes he remembered.

He was sitting in the corner chair. Jesse did her best to keep up, but her hands were small. Sometimes he fixed words with a pencil. She was wearing his gray cap, on which he taped the words press core, and her tongue peeked out of the side of her mouth. I was the i l l u s t r a t o r. We were making a new book to replace the lost red one, and I was using my new colored pencils. Brown and green for branches. Blue for water. Black for the long neck like an S.

"I was in the Everglades. They used to go for miles and miles. So many birds, some taller than you, Jesse. Herons, cranes, turkey vultures--but the anhinga was the best. Still as a sculpture with its wings drying in the sun. Waiting. Watching. Then swimming and diving. Whoosh!" His hands brought the bird to life.

"Like a kingfisher, Poppy?" Jesse beamed. The clacking on the typewriter stopped.

"Yes, Jesse, but much bigger, and he sounded like a frog, or creaking wood." He was looking through the wall again. I couldn't draw sound, but he said the wings should look like an M and his sharp beak should point up like he's remembering something far away.

Before bedtime, we glued Jesse's writing and my drawing into another page in the book. So far we had belted kingfisher, northern cardinal, Stellar's jay, great-tailed grackle, black-crested titmouse, and now anhinga. Poppy typed out the Latin words, but Jesse was in charge of the stories, even though she was just eight. They weren't just birds, Poppy said. They were the birds he had met. That's different from pictures in the Metaverse.

He said my drawings captured the unique beauty of the birds. It brought them to life and made

them last. I loved him so much. That's when he went away.

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Mom told us about Route 66 as Jesse and me watched the mesas glowing under the Megasol towers. Everything night became light as we neared Gallup. The stars washed away, and over one mesa a hot-air balloon blinked Somnalax: Life to the Max. Her brown eyes glowed beautifully in the rearview mirror. As she drove, she described how people used to drive for adventure and stayed at motels all across the country. Cars were long and sleek. Motorcycles roared like a pride of lions. She was trying to distract us, but all I could think about was Poppy at the Stroke Recov Center. I was scared to see how he had changed. Yesterday I heard them talking in their bedroom. Dad said it was happening more and more. People didn't sleep right, and no one knew what to do about all the strokes. Mom's crying was muffled. Their feet were close under the door. They were hugging.

We pulled into the solar parking lot under Panel 27. Jesse, looking at the building entrance, tightened her grip on my hand. Dad met us inside. After he and Mom talked to the doctor, we all shuffled into the white room. It smelled like chemicals. The nurse slid the curtains back and Jesse made a small sound hard to describe. There he was, curled into himself like a bug trying to protect itself, somehow tiny, gray as ash, but his eyes green as ever. I held his hand, which felt like a falling thing. There was no pencil to make that green. Mom and Dad sat on the couch, and Jesse, sitting on the edge of the bed, read from our book, starting with his belted kingfisher. I thought she would cry but she was strong, stronger than any of us. I did my best. He was still there, even with his broken body, and as she read his eyes sharply gazed through the wall. His face was a sleepmoji, but there was something smiling inside. It went like that every

Saturday for two months, and each time he seemed stronger, but his words had become sounds no one could understand.

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Mr. Lasiloo had big arms made of tattoos. One was a bear with a mountain spine under a moon and sun. Another was his wife's name. Another was an upside-down flag. Another was a naked woman blooming into a tree. He had been a marine but now was a nurse, and Poppy looked like a small child in his arms. We walked up the steps to our front door. Poppy was home at last.

Mr. Lasiloo pushed against Poppy's legs and pulled at his arms. He spread Poppy's thumbs from his fingers and Jesse practiced on her Flower Patch doll. Mr. Lasiloo said that Jesse's doll would be right as rain before she knew it. I made a playlist of birdsongs, and it wasn't long before Poppy could shuffle down the hallway, spoon food to his mouth, and read sitting up on his own. At school, Ms. Yazzie said that Mr. Lasiloo was a medicine man. He had healed soldiers at the VA hospital. He healed himself after the Water Wars. Maybe that's why Mr. Lasiloo said that Poppy had to do the rest. A man must heal himself from the inside, he said. Poppy read, and he even smiled at us, but he did not speak. We sat in silence as the sun rose and the shades fell.

When he first arrived home, I read to him from our book, and Jesse would act it out, craning her neck, swooping to the floor, flapping her arm-wings. We didn't know the sounds, but we tried. Then our mom asked us to stop because it was making him sad. She thought it was the stories, but I knew better. The book was unfinished. He had more birds to share. So we put it away in a drawer.

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There was a ceremony for the opening of the playground. People made speeches and my mom got an award. Ms. Yazzie smudged the monkey bars, swing set, and slide. We could still play outside at night, but underground would be cooler in summer. Heather said that they were thinking ahead, which is what people didn't do in the past. I said that's why we lived in Opposite World.

There was basketball and tennis. We even had a pool and a waterfall connected to a moat that followed the walls. The ceiling was covered with murals of forests, mountains, and birds, with the Zia sun on one side and the moon and stars on the other, but the walls were blank. The principal, Mr. Livingston, said those were for us to fill in. He said that it was our a l l e g o r y, whatever that meant. Shiniya, Heather, and I added something new every day. We painted mesas and rivers and elk. We made children dancing with bears. Heather painted a naked woman, but Mr. Livingston removed it. He told us to stick to nature. I invited Jesse to join us, but she said she had other things to do. Sometimes she sounded like a grownup.

One day I noticed that our book was missing from the drawer. I asked Jesse if she took it, but she said she hadn't. Maybe Poppy had it. A week later I thought I heard the typewriter after bedtime. I walked down the creaky hallway and listened to his door. There was only silence. Then I listened to Jesse's door. More silence. I must have been dreaming, but it kept on happening, every two or three days, and Jesse was always tired when the sun set. What was she doing? I thought of Poppy's birds and became worried, each nestled into its habitat of word and color. Finally, one night, with four pairs of socks on, I stormed into her room. There was typing coming from the closet. I opened the door and there she was, a flashlight swinging above her, the typewriter at her fingers, the book open at her side. I was furious.

"What have you done, Jesse James O'Connell?"
I bellowed.

"Don't be mad, Bowie," she squealed with her hands holding her head in alarm, her green eyes startled. "Please don't be mad. I have a secret. I'll tell you. Just don't tattle."

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She fretfully watched me from her bed, hugging her knees to her chest as I read the new pages. She described it, a pecking behind the shade of her bedroom window, always just before sunset, before anyone was awake. She had pressed the button to raise the shade but nothing was there. Then she described another time when she heard a quick, throaty sound after sunrise, and a shadow danced on her shade. That's when she took the book and began typing. She thought it was a bird who had come to find Poppy. She was sure of it. The writing went on for pages. I became worried. Was she dreaming all of this? Was she making it up? Was she depressed?

Then she described an encounter. It sat outside the window, looking at her. On a pole it shined like purple-black oil, and its small eyes were deeper than midnight. She described its sound, "daw daw," with rocks in its throat, like it was calling for Poppy. On the last page, on the margins of her frenzied type, she had sketched a drawing: black wings spread wide, a beak sloped like an old man's nose. As I read the pages, my worry turned into anger. Why was she doing this? This was our book. These were Poppy's birds. I asked her why she was lying. She curled into herself at the corner of the bed. She told me that I would believe her when I saw it with my own eyes.

For two weeks, before every sunset, in the hour before Dad would wake us, I crept to her room. Each time nothing came. Each time I felt anger and worry. I asked her what she thought she saw. What was it called? Did it have a name? Why didn't it come now? We argued in whispers. She

begged me to believe her. I called her a liar. I hid the book. She cried.

Mon and Dad could tell there was something wrong between us, but we stayed silent. At school, Shiniya, Heather, and I played basketball. Jesse mostly sat still on a swing. Sometimes she walked along the walls, her hand sliding along the stone. Other times she dipped her feet into the moat and looked at nothing. At home we did our homework and then went to bed.

One night I sat on the patio, watching satellites dart into the distance. I remembered that night before Poppy went away, his head floating in stars. Jesse had been balancing on the lawn chair. We had been looking for a man in the sky. What was his name? Between the stars and satellites was the darkness. Most everything between things was darkness, and I couldn't remember his name.

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One day we spotted Jesse at the playground wall where we had painted a small neighborhood. Shiniya, Heather, and I had created a town where only animals lived, but they could talk. The mayor was a buffalo. The baker was a horse. The undertecht was a bat. Sometimes we made stories. Mr. Nez, who was a mountain lion, had a crush on Mrs. Chavez, who was a deer, but she was married to the mayor. Most everyone was playing basketball that day, but Jesse was painting. Shiniya saw her.

"She's changing our town! She's painting on our town!"

Heather grabbed the paint from her, and I grabbed her wrist. Jesse squealed. I was furious. Then I saw what she did. There, above the town square, was a black shape.

"What is that?" Heather scoffed. "What is that supposed to be?"

"A bird," Jesse rebutted, her hands on her hips.

"That's not a bird," I countered. "That's nothing. You made nothing."

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"This weekend I want you to think of your own word to describe humanity. That's your assignment. Just one word," Ms. Yazzie said. Her eyes made contact with each of us. Even the boys in the back of class listened. I hoped that I would be like her someday.

The word humanity was on the digiboard in big blue letters. Today she talked about humans who had changed history: Charles Fritts, Martin Luther King Jr., Greta Thunberg, and Tokata Iron Eyes. We then worked on the new garden in the playground. Jesse's class was down there, too. She was returning from the moat with a bucket of water. It was heavy, and she nearly stumbled. She was so small, but her green eyes, like Poppy's, burned brightly. I helped her lift the bucket, and we watered the squash together.

Dad was home for dinner that night. Mom was working late in her office. We ate bean tacos, and even Poppy finished his plate. Whenever Dad made dinner, we took turns sharing our day, and we had to say something good about the world. Jesse and I talked about the garden, and I told him about Ms. Yazzie's homework assignment. Dad asked me what word I would choose. I told him that I needed to think more. Jesse said, "Farts."

Later I brought the book into Jesse's room and I apologized to her. I said I was her elder. I was almost thirteen, and I should have known better. We leafed through the book on her bed. Penciled words connected to typed words, and words connected to drawings. Each bird was a world of story and art. We were proud of our work. I tried to explain why I had been mad. That was Poppy's book. Those were the birds he met, and they had been real.

"My bird is real, too," Jesse murmured.

"It couldn't have been, Jesse. They don't exist here."

"Then what would you call it? I saw it fly. I saw it in the sky."

"It wasn't a bird, Jesse."

"Then what was it?" she insisted.

"If we don't know what it was, Jesse, it's called a UFO--like those stories of Roswell."

Jesse looked long and hard at me, gave me a hug, and then turned to the last page. In pencil she wrote three letters.

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Days had passed, and it was getting hotter. Sometimes there were brownouts, and I sweated in bed. Poppy slept less and less, and we often found him in his lazy chair in front of a blank TV screen in the living room. Other times I heard slow and fitful typing from his bedroom. Jesse asked him what he was writing. He answered with a fakemoji on his face and patted her head. The next day I snuck into his room. His room always smelled like wax and stained wood, but I never knew why. There was a stack of books on his desk, mostly about wildlife. One book was open to a page on herons. Next to the books was my old homework assignment. Ms. Yazzie had given me an F for not doing it. On the page, humanity was circled in red, and a typed word appeared underneath it: t r a n s g r e s s i o n. My ecophone explained it as "a violation of a law." I wondered why Poppy had typed it, and I wondered what he meant.

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The sun would rise soon, and we had gathered before the obserwall: me, Jesse, and Poppy. Jesse was sitting at Poppy's feet, and I had my sketchbook. I wanted to draw the sunrise, but I wasn't sure how to capture the change. Would I draw the beginning, middle, or end? When did the sunrise start? When did it end? Ms. Yazzie said time was a circle.

A slip of yellow traced the edge of the mesas. In the dark landscape faint shapes of rock, brush, and dead trees appeared. Then a dark purple washed over the sky and the last lingering star faded. The yellow grew brighter and began to spill over the hogback, with the purple sky turning into blues. The first light said the sun was coming, and then the sun came gushing with the blinding brightness everywhere. It was so beautiful that my heart was pain. Poppy's green eyes looked straight into it, and through it, and Jesse marveled at all of the colors and shapes. Her small arms tightened around his legs. Then Poppy made a sound and he pointed. We followed his finger shooting like an arrow into sand just beyond the glass. Jesse gasped, but I couldn't see anything. The shades were falling. I followed his finger again, straining to see the line extending from it, and then there it was. One black feather in sunlit sand.

Olympia SGI
"Mr. Rumpus"