

Trick or Treat

So, it's my nephew's sixteenth birthday. He'll be driving soon. Maybe as soon as tomorrow, Halloween. On the reservation, you stop trick or treating only at the age you feel like it, so maybe he'll be driving himself and some friends door to door, faces smudged with make-up in a semblance of costuming. If he's like the rest of us, though, he'll hit a few houses for candy then find someone over twenty-one to run just off the reservation for beer and spend the rest of the evening down on Moon Road, the place we all find at about that age. In two years, if he decides to go to college, he'll have to sign up for the selective service if he's going to apply for financial aid, a violation of treaties, a violation I committed years ago. Back then, though, war was an abstraction, a vague worry, and the draft a mere memory, and these days, those words are in the nightly news-- reports on the "War on Terror" and talks of a draft are taken more seriously.

But tonight, it's cake and ice cream and greeting cards filled with cash and sentiment. Some of my nieces burst in from the porch, where they've been smoking, and they say "Can you come outside?" At first, I think they're talking to everyone, until they're lifting me by the elbows and handing me my coat.

"It's forty degrees, and besides, he's opening the cards," I say.

"We want to ask you what something is," one of them says, like I am The Encyclopedia Britannica, dragging me out. I'm picturing a possum or some kind of bug, but what more do I know about those things? A college education does not make me the Answer Man. So we promptly join those already standing around outside, as they light more cigarettes and blow clouds into the dark while I wait for my eyes to adjust. "What is that?" they ask, immediately. I look at them, raising my eyebrows in the international pantomime for "Well, what did you drag my ass out on a freezing night for?"

They're pointing their chins to the sky, and I look up to see something that, despite the fact that I've never seen it before in my life, I am able to identify. Off to the south, the lights of Niagara Falls and Buffalo poison the dark a little, but directly above us is a clear shot of the galaxy. The night sky is filled with undulating red ribbons of stardust, as bright as the kind you cut with those gigantic exaggerated scissors at an opening ceremony. They stream out of a black hole to the right of the moon, burning and gleaming against the star field as they glide down and wash the earth with radiation. We follow the ribbon's denser patches, trailing their way toward us.

This is a news story I've been following, explosions on the sun occurring in direct alignment with the earth, and scientists are vague about the effects, calling this a singular event in the time of recorded astronomy, but when pressed, they suggest it is like the sun has shot off a giant radiation gun, as it often does, but this time, the gun is pointed directly at the earth. Their simile isn't

comforting. They strongly suggest grounding flights for this period and advise that cell phone service may be affected by the radiation.

I call my family outside, drag them, cajole them, throw their coats to them, the way my nieces had for me, and a minute later we watch the radiation belt continue its path. "This might be bad," I say to no one in particular.

"Nah, we'd know," my nephew says in confidence. This is a kid who banishes every Border Patrol interrogation we received whenever we try to cross into Canada, despite the Jay Treaty. He calls it a necessary inconvenience, successfully forgetting the long line of broken treaties and small pox blankets and the threat of nuclear winter and the way the War in Afghanistan became the War in Iraq with almost nobody noticing. He can't picture the administration sitting in a bunker somewhere, waiting out what the astronomers don't know, watching a surface Geiger counter, telling us everything is under control, that there is nothing to worry about, that those blankets are fine, a gift. But I can.

"I've seen this before," my mother says. "Just before World War II started, at the old house." She recalls for us our house that has been gone for nearly ten years, burned down in one person's careless driving, and all the ghosts we left behind there, as the lawn grows back to woods. "It'll pass," she says. "Everything does." We wait, together, as we always have, and watch the future burn up in the atmosphere.