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I was born the day *Challenger* fell out of the sky, and I was born blue. At least, that is what I was told.

My mother went into the maternity ward around the time the crew made its way to the shuttle – a giant, blood-orange tank from which hung the orbiter and the rocket boosters. If you watch videos from that day, you can see the crew as they leave their base, wide smiles and eighties hair, their sky-blue NASA uniforms visible from afar. It was an unusually chilly morning in Florida, but even so, hundreds of people came to Cape Canaveral to send them off. They had caps and T-shirts and cheering banners, cameras and binoculars at the ready.

Space launches did not usually attract so much attention, but *Challenger* was no ordinary launch. It held a teacher on board, Christa McAuliffe, who would be the first civilian in space. Just before she enters the shuttle, a ground-team member gives her an apple, bright red. As she says her thanks, cheerful, she turns the fruit over in her hands, admiring it closely, as though it were a planet

itself, as though it held a whole world she had yet to explore.

Seventy-three seconds after lift-off, a heavy cloud of smoke and flames engulfed *Challenger*. It began breaking apart, its wreckage tumbling into the Atlantic Ocean. The crowd watched the fragments plummet, the billowing fumes they left in their wake, as confusion gave way to realisation and dread. There were no survivors on board. Later that day, President Reagan addressed his nation, quoting the poet John Gillespie Magee Jr, 'We will never forget them, nor the last time we saw them, this morning, as they prepared for their journey and waved goodbye and *slipped the surly bonds of earth to touch the face of God*.'

Later on, the investigation revealed that the failure at launch had been due to the temperature, much lower than expected. The small rubber O-rings, which were supposed to seal the joints of the rocket's segments, were stiffened by the cold and rendered brittle, causing fatal gas leaks. NASA had been advised by their engineers to postpone the launch, but too much was riding on it. Television crews and students watching from all over the country, all holding their breath, their childhood dreams, all holding some intangible hope on this launch. NASA decided to go ahead.

The names of the seven astronauts were: Christa McAuliffe, Francis R. Scobee, Michael J. Smith, Ronald E. McNair, Ellison S. Onizuka, Judith A. Resnik and Gregory B. Jarvis. If you watch videos from that day, you'll see them smiling as they leave their base, yes, and you'll see McAuliffe being handed the apple. And before that you'll see them having breakfast together, white-frosted cake emblazoned with the mission's logo. They're chatting and posing for the cameras, not a worry in sight – like they're going on a trip to the shop down the road, nothing extraordinary, nothing surreal, nothing that would take them out of this world and into the pitch-black skies.

It was around lift-off, across the Atlantic Ocean in a hospital near the village I would grow up in, that my mother gave a final push. I was quiet when the doctor first held me, and underneath the blood and slime my skin had a pale, ice-blue hue. My father assumed the worst. Not one to parade his emotions, he left the room dazed and numb, crouched in the corridor, and held his head in his hands. But as he was about to cry for the loss of his son, he heard tiny wails coming from the ward. He got up and ran back in, where he saw a nurse gently place me in my mother's arms, the blue already fading from my face. My cries grew louder as my breathing deepened and then, like the rarest

of miracles and the most common of occurrences, there was life.

It's funny. In my head, these events are perfectly clear – their hidden corners, their pervading emotions, heightened and tangible. But when I try to recall my actual memories, I see that they're much more slippery.

Lately, I've been thinking of the summer of '95. The simmering heat, my feet cool against the kitchen tiles, the hovering flies and the sound of the milk as I poured it into my glass in the morning. But when I try to picture these moments, I can only do so for an instant. I see them as flashing images, as if looking through a View-Master at glimpses of my childhood. And all I'm left with are its lingering qualities, like an aftertaste that is bitter and sweet. Sometimes, I wonder if childhood is best described as a feeling, rather than a period of one's life. But what I do remember vividly, from that summer in the village when I was nine, is meeting Philly.

I'd just finished helping my father in the garage. He liked renovating old cars and selling them on, and that summer, it was a sixties Mini. 'Ollie,' Mum said, as I entered our house. She'd been in the garden and her cheeks were flushed. She removed a strand of blonde hair that had stuck to her forehead, her movements sluggish in the heat. 'Do you mind dropping off some of our plums to Mrs Tan?'

'Sure,' I said.

'Thank you, darling. Make sure you're back before sunset, okay? You know how your father gets if you're late.'

I nodded, took the plums and my bike, and I was off.

Mrs Tan lived on the other side of the village, past the old church and the Shield and Joe Harding's field, which stank of manure most of the year. The smell would invade Mrs Tan's house, and to cover it she sprayed perfume on her velvet cushions. I never asked her what it was, but sometimes a whiff of it will hit me as I'm walking down the street, or when I'm at a party, or in a lift – a light, woody, citrus smell – and I'm brought back to Mrs Tan's house.

But that day, instead of Mrs Tan, a girl about my age opened the door. She wore a pale-yellow dress that was smudged with grass, and her knees were covered with dirt. Her hair was tied into a dishevelled plait that came down to her waist, and her eyes were a colour I'd never seen before – a mix of brown and green and gold. She was pretty, I thought.

'Is Mrs Tan here?' I asked.

'Auntie Mel?' she said. 'She's gone to play cards at her friend's house. Why do you want to see her?'

I showed her my basket of plums. 'From our garden. My mum wanted me to bring them to her.'

She grabbed one and, before I had time to protest, took

a bite out of it. Juice splashed on her chin and dribbled onto her dress. 'You're lucky,' she said, her mouth half full. 'Auntie Mel doesn't have fruit trees. I'm Philly, by the way.' She reached out her sticky hand for me to shake. I had oil stains on mine, which I hoped she wouldn't notice.

'I'm Oliver. But you can call me Ollie.'

'Okay. I will.'

'Philly's a nickname too, isn't it?'

'Yes.' She paused for a moment. 'But I won't tell you my full name, if that's what you're asking. I don't like it.'

'But I've told you mine,' I said. 'Is it Phyllis? Philippa?'

She shook her head and I stood there, basket in hand, uncomfortable.

'Do you really want to know?' she asked.

'It's not that. I just think it's fair that we know each other's name.'

She considered this. 'I'll tell you what. If you help me in the garden, I'll tell you.'

'Help you with what?'

'Come,' she said. 'You'll see.' She went past me and out of the house, rushing to the gate at the side. I followed suit in a stiff, slow run, not wanting the plums to spill everywhere.

When I think of the garden now, I picture freshly cut grass and roses everywhere, flawless and fragrant and towering

over us. I see it as endlessly vast, but in truth, it couldn't have been much larger than a tennis court. It was on a slope and gave way to the river, which divided the village in two. 'This way!' Philly said. She hurried down to the bottom of the garden, her plait bouncing on her back as she ran.

By the time I'd caught up she was crouched under the old sycamore. She held a magnifying glass in her hand, its wooden handle scratched and faded. I observed her as she went from one patch of grass to the next, peering at it with great focus. The tree shaded us from the sun, and a warm breeze brushed against the lawn and Philly's dress. I crouched next to her. 'What are we looking for?' I asked.

'Shhh.' She put her index finger on my mouth. I felt my whole face blushing. 'Can you hear it?'

I listened closely. I could hear the wind cradling the sycamore, the river's flow and bees circling the roses. I could hear cars and Joe's tractor in the distance, but whatever Philly was referring to was lost on me.

'Hear what?'

'That very high-pitched buzz. Listen.'

We fell quiet again, and I pricked up my ears. And then, underneath the wind and the river, the bees and the cars and Joe's tractor, I heard a hum, barely discernible, but undoubtedly there. I nodded, and Philly smiled.

'*Cicadetta montana*,' she said. 'New Forest cicada.'

In response to my confused face she added, as if it was the most obvious of things, 'The insect!'

She seized a book that lay behind her and placed it on her lap, leafing through the pages.

'There.' She pointed at a photograph of a large, winged insect, its body black and orange. 'Most cicadas are very loud, sometimes as loud as motorcycles,' she said. 'But not the New Forest. This one is so high-pitched, adults can't hear it.' I smiled back at her. 'It's the only cicada species you can find here,' she went on, 'in the UK. They spend almost ten years growing underground, and when they're ready they come up to the surface for one last spring, lay their eggs, and after that they die.' She studied the page. 'Isn't that sad? They only get to be outside for a few weeks. Auntie Mel says I'm crazy to spend my whole day here searching for them. But she can't hear them. She doesn't understand.'

She looked up at me, as if for approval. Truthfully, I didn't have much sympathy: I've never been one for insects. I was tempted to say something mean-spirited, like I imagined the boys in my class would have done, that her aunt was right or that I really couldn't care less about any of this. But I took her in again. The magnifying glass was too big in her hands, and her dress was tight on her, as if she had outgrown it a summer ago.

'Well, let's search for them together, then,' I said. 'I'll

have a look on that side, and you here. You keep the magnifier. I have good eyes.'

We stood up. Philly patted her dress, removing the dirt and grass that clung to it.

'And then,' I added, 'you'll tell me your name?'

'Okay. Deal.'

We spent the whole afternoon looking for the cicadas, taking on our own patches of grass and eating plums, staying cool under the swaying shadows of the sycamore. We didn't say much to one another, yet an ease settled between us as the day went on. Philly's plait brushed against the earth as she examined it. I didn't care much about cicadas, no, but by the time I noticed the sun begin to slip behind the tree, I knew I wanted to spend the whole summer searching for them.

I got up so suddenly I startled Philly. 'Sorry,' I told her. 'I've gotta go.'

'But we haven't found them yet.'

I hesitated. 'I'm sorry. I have to be home before it gets dark. But maybe . . . maybe we can try again, if you'd like.'

Without meeting her eyes, I ran up the slope. Before opening the gate, I glanced back at the garden one last time. Philly stood there, magnifying glass in one hand, book in the other, looking at me. I saw that I'd forgotten

the basket, now empty of plums. I made a start to go back for it, but then I feared that if I did, nightfall would catch up with me. After a brief wavering, I left it there on the lawn, toppled on the grass next to her. I turned away from the garden, and as I shut the gate, a wave of shame swept over me.

When I arrived home, shortly after sunset, my father sent me up to my room without dinner. To pass the time I started playing with my superhero figurines. Downstairs, my mother spoke in strained whispers. I opened my door by a shred. 'He was only half an hour late,' I heard her say. 'There was no need for that, Lar.' I closed my door quietly and went back to my figurines, making up an elaborate plot in which Superman and Gambit had to save Earth from an incoming meteor strike. Superman and Gambit were my favourites. They weren't like other superheroes, rich or bitten by radioactive spiders, or experimented on. Rather, they were *born* extraordinary. It wasn't an alter ego they had to conceal to fit in but their true selves. I liked that idea a lot: that someone's oddness could be their exceptionality. 'You're too tough on him,' Mum said downstairs, her voice raised just enough to pierce the floor beneath me. 'He's only a boy.'

I was starving and restless, and I was woeful. Not so much because I'd been grounded, but because the more I

replayed the afternoon in my head, the more I was convinced that I'd made a fool of myself. I'd run away too quickly, cowardly, and I'd not found a single cicada. I hadn't even got Philly's full name. I put aside my superhero figurines, as if I was undeserving of them, and nose-dived into my bed.

Once the strained whispers had stopped, replaced by the low sound of the nine o'clock news, I heard my mother coming up the stairs. It was easy to recognise my parents' footsteps. Hers were quicker, lighter, less ominous than my father's. She gave my door a delicate knock. 'Ollie?' she said. I lay stiff on the bed. There was the clink of cutlery, and something being left on the floor, Mum's footsteps receding. The smell of grilled meat slowly reached me. I got up and opened the door, and there, on the landing, was a tray with a plate of potatoes, green beans and two sausages. I brought it to my room, and when I put the plate on my knees, sitting on the edge of my bed, it was still warm.

I woke up the next morning feeling blue. As on most early mornings my parents were asleep, so I went down the stairs as quietly as I could. The village slowly rose around me, the postman beginning his route. As I passed the front door on my way to the kitchen, I caught, out of the corner

of my eye, a piece of torn paper that someone had slipped through the door. I have it with me, up here on *Talos*. It's tucked neatly into my journal, and when I long for home I'll reach for it, careful not to tear its edges, careful not to let it float away – a tangible proof that Earth was once my home and my entire world, that my memories, as slippery as they are, don't fool me completely. That there was a day, back in the summer of '95, when I picked up this note from the mat, and broke into a smile. For it said, in scrawly yet poised writing: *It's Philomena*.

PHOENIX MISSION
Commander Oliver Ines's Personal Log

Talos, Day 402. We're getting near to Mars's orbit: thermal control is working as planned, but the heat is making us lethargic.

Earth is now a pale blue smudge. Morale is good so far, but I worry what'll happen when it's no longer visible. We've had no contact with Earth for almost a year now, so having it within our sights feels like our only anchor. I often catch Shane and Lucia looking out through the round window, as if willing it to stay, to accompany us on our ten-year journey.

We've been trained for this, of course. We've been tested and observed. But I think, deep down, we know that nothing can prepare us for that juncture. Nothing can prepare us for the infinite, and the silence, and the realisation that we are utterly on our own.

We'll need to find ways to cope. Music helps, books and movies too. Dom likes to play guitar and keeps a Bible in his compartment, but when I asked him about it, he expressed uncertainty in his faith. Shane favours TV series, especially comedies he grew up watching, like *The Simpsons* and *Father Ted*. 'They're comforting,' he told me. 'Reminds me of after-school telly. When these two shows were on, it was the only time my brothers and I didn't fight for the remote.'

Lucia plays chess, sometimes with Dom or me, sometimes with A-T. She's made much progress, over the past year. I suspect by the end of year two she'll be better than even Dom.

As for me, I read a lot, but find it hard to engage for more than half an hour at a time. I especially like to revisit the books I loved as a child or teenager, which are easy to read, and which I see anew. Last week, I reread *Lord of the Flies*.

Anything, really, to bring us back to Earth – to remind us that it is there, bustling with life, waiting for our return.