

The Vacuum of Space

Charles Haddox

Grants, New Mexico, September 1970

Sweat-soaked in the cool darkness, her breathing shallow. Panic and terror. The beam of Heather's flashlight illuminated the floor of the mine shaft, dust and gravel; no tools, no abandoned equipment, no tracks, no fallen rock. She heard the sound of water roaring off in the distance. Or maybe it was the devil's motorcycle. Star had persuaded Heather to follow her into the tunnel as a kind of reckless dare, down the deep, horizontal conduit to hell that was excavated and blasted into the cream-and-nutmeg monzonite rock of a warm New Mexico hillside.

Heather was unable to lift the flashlight beam from the ground directly in front of her, no matter how hard she tried. She was convinced that a fall into a vertical shaft awaited her, the floor giving way to nothingness. Only a trembling hand traced the rough, uneven wall. She wouldn't raise her eyes to it, lift them from her path, couldn't let the shaft of light from the aluminum flashlight reveal the brilliant peacock-blue and bottle-green chrysocolla and malachite deposits that completely captivated Star, the precious pyrite vein that gave off sparks and a sharp sulfur smell as Star attempted to remove a bright, metallic fragment with the chisel head of a geologist's hammer—the worldly friend and wayward guide transmuted into an infatuated little miner.

Heather had braved the roughest waters without alarm, but she was terrified of dark, confined, unknown places deep inside the earth. She wanted to be back in San Francisco, beside the endless ocean, or at least in the little wood and cinder-block house of Star's dear father, Roberto. Something soft and light brushed past her, possibly a bird or a bat. Or perhaps it was just her fear, the fear that drove her to pray under her breath, "Oh God, if you get me out of this, I'll start actin' like an angel. I'll change, I swear, really; no more goin' to wild parties an' stuff, I'll cut out all the craziness, I'll go to church, I'll help out at an orphanage, I'll say my prayers, I totally swear."

Emerging back into the light, her prayers evaporating like tears in the wind, Heather was reborn to the sun, the blanched pistachio wolfberry bushes, tall, yellow-tasseled rabbitbrush, tangled desert olives, and sparse, ash-colored sumacs, to the clearest of skies. Heather felt the tension and the terror fall away; the door of life cast wide for her return. Once again, she became the element of a particular repose, the tamest of creatures, not the least trace of the ordeal of fire and stone about her at all.

She was insistent with Star, however, that she not be taken on any more perilous journeys involving darkness or confinement. No more dares, no more wagers, no more malefic realms. It was better to sit in the crease of a pale buff sandstone ridge, sky overhead, moss at their feet, and listen to the miracle of weeping mineral waters that tasted of moist copper, the fresh morning breeze whispering all about them in fragrant desert junipers and the solitary pinnacle of a lofty blackjack pine. Calls of flycatchers and kingbirds, songs of jays and daring mockingbirds, the rustle of cottontail rabbits and rock squirrels amid abraded cobbles, and sandstone talus blocks,

and irregular, resilient undergrowth that followed the trail of sporadic seasonal inundations.

In the quiet calm, Star Mora smoked a cigarette and stared at the heavens with dreamy brown eyes. Heather, wearing a broad-brimmed straw hat, was once again filled with unscathed tranquility, an unimpeachable ataraxia, and an overwhelming affinity with the Mother's embracing gaze.

Before going out for a hike they had fed Star's father Roberto's chickens, washed the dishes, and borrowed his pickup truck to buy green chiles at a roadside stand. They had to keep explaining to the old man from Ramah who was running the stand that they weren't in the area to fish.

"Goin' fishin' up at the lake?"

"No," Star answered, "we're here to visit my dad."

"Are you goin' all the way to the lake just for fishin'?" He leaned forward a little, supporting himself on an old wooden stick. His face and hands were as red as the dried chile ristras that hung from the rafters of the stand.

"No, we're here visiting my father."

"They say the fishin's good this year. You'll catch lots of stockers."

"We're not going fishing."

"If I wasn't workin', I'd be fishin' myself right now." He rubbed his hands on his soiled blue apron, which was emblazoned with the more or less unexpected motto, "Deep in the heart of Texas."

"We just wanna buy some chiles."

"Trout, catfish. You wouldn't believe 'em. I caught a ten-pound cutthroat a few years back. You ever seen a ten-pound cutthroat? Maybe you will today."

"We would, if we were actually going fishing. But we're not. We're here to see my dad."

"If you haven't been up to the lake before, you should hire a fishin' guide."

On and on.

"Do you think he ever got that we weren't going fishing?" Star asked Heather, as she listened to the birds, and the softly murmuring leaves, and the solemn, dying summer drone of insects.

"Don't think so. Have you ever been fishing?"

"Nah. You?"

"Never," Heather answered. "Remember, I grew up in El Paso. I'm not from San Francisco. So where'd I be able to fish, anyway—livin' in the middle of the desert? An' the Rio Grande's pretty much like the toilet of everybody north of there. I'd a' only gone fishing in it if I was fishing for tin cans."

"That's 'cause nobody cares about ecology." Star laughed softly to herself. "You know, kids

are so literal. I remember how, when I was a kid, I heard about ‘the vacuum of space.’ I used to imagine that there was a vacuum cleaner out there in the universe keepin’ all the stars, and the planets, and all the comets clean and shiny. But really, people must think there’s some giant vacuum cleaner out there that’s goin’ to suck up all the smog, and uranium, and plutonium, and insecticides, and all the plastic crap. Because nobody who’s in charge seems to think it’s their problem, and we’re all drowning in it.”

“None of these birds or critters need any of that stuff.”

“Yeah, Heather, it’s true. ‘Consider the lilies of the field . . .’ ”

“Wanna go fishing?”

It had been a long hike from Star’s dad’s place to the dreadful mine shaft and beyond; to the varnished ridge rising above the lava fields where resolute life slowly reclaimed the rough terrain. The weathering of fire rock made rich soil for the intrepid grasses and shrubs that descended from the islands of the sandstone cliffs, following snow and rain-fed seeps that attracted swarms of coral and turquoise dragonflies and were home to the rough-skinned, brilliantly-speckled canyon tree frogs.

“I’m gonna write all about this for one of the street papers when we get home,” Heather said. “Man, it’s such a dramatic landscape, you know, so harsh and yet so totally rich and amazing. The coast is the same way—full of life and yet rocky and rough—but they’re different. Each has its own beauty. On the coast, everything’s shaped by the ocean, but here, it’s the wind and the rain. Here, the animals use stealth and concealment to survive. Even the predators. But you can’t hide on the beach or in the ocean. You either have to be ready to go head-to-head or to move real fast. Or depend on your numbers. There, everything’s nakedly exposed by the sand and the water, and the horizon goes on forever. But this landscape seems to be hiding a secret. Like you could so easily wander away and end up in the spirit world that exists on every mountain peak, behind every rock, in every meandering cave and lava flow. There’s so much we miss, wherever we are, and if we could just stop for a moment and look around, we’d finally understand. If we could only accept our lives and not keep gettin’ lost in the little games, we’d see what actually matters. We’d stop chasing after everything and just sit still.”

“I love it,” Star said, smiling. “Tell me more.”

“Sorry. If you want some more, I guess you’re just going to have to pick up the next edition of *The Sandpaper*.”

“Man! Okay then, I’m gonna be quiet for a sec’ and let nature speak to me.” After a moment, she turned to Heather, who was staring off into the distance, and said, “See that jagged little line of silver an’ midnight blue storm clouds sittin’ way out there on the horizon? Up there, over the mountains. They’re late monsoon clouds. Bringing the rain.”

Author Bio:

Charles Haddox lives in El Paso, Texas, on the U.S.-Mexico border, and has family roots in both countries. His work has appeared in a number of journals including *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *The Sierra Nevada Review*, *Folio*, and *Stonecoast Review*.