

*Jacqueline Doyle*

## LIGHT YEARS AWAY

Gina wondered whether anyone was watching her through the two-way mirror, and where they'd taken Darryl. The room was cold. She hugged herself for a moment, rubbing the sides of her arms, and then picked up the pen and began to write.

*I loved Darryl. He was a gentle man, and smart. He knew a lot about astronomy. Some nights we'd snuggle together on the chaise lounge on my patio and he'd point out the constellations, tell me about the stars and planets, about asteroids, nebulae, galaxies. He had a telescope on a tripod that we'd look through. I learned a lot from him.*

She could hear Darryl's voice and see the night sky above them, vast and unfathomable. "Most people don't know this, but there are maybe 300 billion stars in the Milky Way alone, and we can see only two or three thousand of them," he'd told her. "Stars disappear all the time. The big ones leave what they call black holes. The small ones turn into black dwarfs, detectable only by their gravitational pull. Scientists still don't know very much about them." His face used to light up when he talked about the stars.

But they wouldn't care about any of that. "Just write down what happened from the beginning," the officer had said. Gina stared at what she'd written for several minutes, and then inked it out with a row of continuous slanting loops from left to right, right to left. Tearing the top sheet off the lined yellow pad, she folded the paper carefully four times until it made a small square. She went to put it in her purse, and then realized they'd taken it from her, so she put it in the pocket of her jacket. She picked up the pen and began over on a new page.

*I met Darryl almost two years ago at the insurance agency where I work. We're a small office, only four of us, including the manager, and some days no one stops by at all. Darryl was a salesman for a firm that produced preprinted forms and he came in one day to talk to Al, that's the manager's name,*

She wondered if she should correct the last sentence. He came in one day to talk to the manager, Al Jameson. Maybe put in the name of the company too. But she was writing in ballpoint pen, and it wasn't really relevant, was it. Who cared what firm it was, and what Al's last name was? The police wanted to know about Darryl. She decided just to keep writing.

*I liked Darryl right away. He was easygoing, and made me laugh. Not just the usual salesman's jokes, you know? At least not a glad-hander with heavy-handed jokes.*

She wasn't quite satisfied with glad-handing and heavy-handed in the same sentence, but surely they didn't care about that either. It pretty much described what she thought. He wasn't the salesman type, all fake cheer and handshakes. He was funny, but not a type.

*I didn't think he was good-looking, at least not at first. He looked like he was probably a good ten years older than me, with thinning white hair and a paunch. I grew fond of everything about him later. That day I just enjoyed the interruption of my routine. I liked the way he made me laugh. When he asked if I was free for dinner, I was flattered. I'm 54, 52 then, I never meet anyone new, don't get invitations often. I checked to see if he was wearing a wedding ring, or if there was a white circle on his ring finger. I hate it when men take off their rings to make a pass. I'd rather they were just upfront about being married. But there wasn't. And besides, it was just dinner, wasn't it? He was traveling, lonely, only in Cincinnati for a few days. I figured what was the harm. So I said yes.*

That was more or less how it had been. Maybe she should have said that she hadn't been on a date for over five years, but it was embarrassing, and they didn't have to know that.

Probably she was telling them more than they needed, but she was remembering so much, writing it down.

*We went to Tequila Pete's, and started off with a few margaritas in the bar. He put his hand over mine when we were finished eating, and we talked and talked. Customers waiting for tables were giving us dirty looks, but we barely noticed. We drank more margaritas and told each other everything about ourselves. Turned out he was divorced. His wife had left him for another man eight years back, and what with traveling and his job, and seeing his grown kids once in a while, he'd just never met anyone else. His ex-wife had been his high school sweetheart. I liked that about him. We just couldn't stop talking, so after dinner we went back to my townhouse for a nightcap.*

When they'd left the restaurant they were kind of bumping into each other, laughing softly, getting close. It seemed natural enough to go back to her place. She had an old bottle of Bailey's Irish Cream and made Irish coffee and one thing led to another.

Probably it was pretty obvious they'd gone to bed together. Isn't that what a nightcap means? Gina wondered if she sounded like a slut. Maybe she should pretend that it took a few dates, or even a few months. She didn't know what was usual these days. There hadn't been anything sordid about it, though maybe it would have felt that way if they'd gone to his motel room. It just felt natural. She didn't regret it.

He'd been awkward, fumbling with the catch on her bra, stumbling when he stepped out of his trousers.

"Whoops!"

"That's okay, Darryl. We've got all night."

"I want to spend every minute with my arms around you, not flat on my face tangled in my pants."

They'd both laughed. He'd slid his arms around her, kissing the curve of her neck by her collarbone. She hadn't felt self-conscious, maybe because he didn't. His white slack belly was soft, cuddly. She liked the gray hairs on his chest, the sensation of his heart beating against her, the slight musk of his sweat.

"Do you have, uh, something for ..."

"Sure. Just a minute." He scabbled for his wallet in his trousers on the floor and pulled out a condom, almost dropping it as he tore the foil across. "Haven't used one of these in a while. I feel like I'm in high school again."

She'd liked that too. He only had one condom, and she had the feeling it had been in his wallet for a long while. When he visited the second time, they went out and bought a box, ducking into a Rite Aid in an unfamiliar neighborhood so she wouldn't see anyone she knew.

And candles, they'd bought five vanilla-scented votive candles that they lined up on the dresser. They cast a warm glow on the ceiling, flickering as they burned down.

*I loved being with him. He was sensitive and caring, really listened. He managed to stop by Cincinnati a couple of times a month after that, sometimes only for a night on his way to somewhere else. Being with him always felt good.*

*My parents have passed, and I don't really have a circle of friends or any other family nearby, his kids live in Florida and Georgia and they're not very close anyway, so it was just us. Dinner, sometimes a movie, or just a walk, holding hands, and then the night at my place. Darryl was an astronomy buff, and we went to the Observatory on Mt. Lookout to look at the stars a few times. Got so I lived for his visits. Working in the insurance office was just down time waiting for my life to start up again, waiting for Darryl.*

*It was a Friday night in December. It had snowed earlier in the week, I remember. I was afraid Darryl's plane might be delayed because of the weather but it wasn't. The snow had*

*become gray slush. We got back from dinner really late. The night sky was overcast and you could barely see any stars. I remember that particularly. Venus was supposed to set two hours after the sun that night, and it would have been visible with Darryl's telescope, but it was too cloudy to see. There was a chill in the air. I'd forgotten to buy eggs that afternoon when I did the grocery shopping, and Darryl wanted to make Saturday breakfast for us.*

*I was really tired and he said, "Go ahead and go to bed, Gina. I'll take a quick trip to the EZ Mart and pick up a carton of eggs. It won't take fifteen minutes."*

*We'd just pulled into the garage. The garage door was still open.*

That was what he said. "You go ahead and go to bed. I'll be right back." They hadn't kissed goodbye or anything. Who knew? Gina found herself tearing up. Wasn't it just like him to go out on a cold night to buy eggs for their breakfast? To be thinking about making her breakfast. He was considerate like that. A real gentleman.

He didn't get to cook much, on the road all the time, and he loved to make omelets at her place, or pancakes, or sometimes French toast. She'd wake to the smell of coffee brewing and bacon sizzling and pull on the furry pink robe and silly bunny slippers he'd given her for Christmas. He'd have the table set and orange juice ready for her when she got to the kitchen, and he always turned from the stove with such a delighted smile. They'd linger over breakfast, read the newspaper, trading sections and talking about the news. Then they'd do the crossword puzzle together. Both of them loved words.

*It seemed like the whole kitchen was bathed in sunlight those mornings.*

*So I went up to the bedroom, undressed, and got into bed. I remember looking at the clock. It was about 11:30. I must have fallen asleep. It had been a long day at work.*

*At 2:15 I woke up with a feeling like something was wrong. Darryl. Darryl wasn't back. At first I thought maybe I'd been dreaming, that it wasn't his weekend to visit. But then I*

*remembered. He'd gone out to the EZ Mart. I ran down to the garage in my nightgown, no robe or slippers or anything. I must have kicked them under the bed, and couldn't find them in the rush.*

Gina realized they didn't need to know about the slippers, or that they hadn't kissed goodbye. She didn't want to cross things out, though, and it was too late to start over. It was all connected in her mind, like a constellation that only becomes a picture when you draw lines between the stars.

*The garage was dark, except for the streetlight shining in through the open door, and the cement floor was cold on my bare feet. My car was in the garage. When I got closer I could see that he was there, still sitting in the passenger seat. When I knocked on the window he didn't stir. I thought maybe he was asleep. I tried the car door but it was locked. I rapped harder on the glass. He still didn't move.*

*I'd given him my keys to drive the car to the store. The car doors were all locked, I don't know why—maybe that happens automatically when you sit there for a while. So I ran back into the kitchen and rummaged through the junk drawer for the spare set of keys. I was shivering from the cold and from nerves because I couldn't understand what was going on. My feet were like ice.*

*When I got the door open he was so cold. His face was gray in the dome light. It was dim and I couldn't see very well but I knew right away he was dead. His eyes were wide open and had no life in them at all. I felt for a pulse in his neck the way they do in the cop shows on TV and there was nothing. I guess I was in shock at first. I climbed into the car and sat in his lap for a while, shivering. He wasn't a young man, but he wasn't that old either. We'd just been talking about breakfast. Dying just didn't make any sense.*

*So now you're going to ask what I was doing sitting in his lap, and why didn't I call the paramedics. Well, I knew he was dead, you see. At least one part of me knew that it was too late for the paramedics. And another part of me just wanted to pretend it wasn't true, that I was cuddling in his lap and we were laughing like usual. After a while, I don't know how long, I realized I was frozen stiff. So I pushed the button on the visor to close the automatic garage door, shut the car door, went back into the house and back to bed. It was the middle of the night. I couldn't think of anything else to do.*

Gina felt sick remembering it. The frantic pawing through the junk drawer, looking for the keys, knowing already that something was very wrong. The weird feeling that Darryl's body was just a dead weight as she curled up in his lap, laying her head against his shoulder. His wool coat was scratchy on her cheek. His arms were heavy at his sides and she was wondering why he didn't put his arms around her, she was so cold, he must know that she was so cold, she was trembling so, but he just sat there, and she pulled her legs and feet up under her flannel nightgown and curled up in a ball on his lap and waited for him to notice how cold she was. Darryl, Darryl, she was thinking, it's so cold out here. Please let's go to bed.

*The next morning when I went downstairs, I didn't know who to call and there didn't seem to be a big hurry or anything. Like I said, he and his kids weren't close. They kind of sided with their mother after the divorce. Probably I should have called the police. To be honest, I didn't even think of it.*

*Maybe I didn't really believe he was dead. I got to thinking about how cold it was and how Darryl's ears were always half frozen when we were outside. He was always losing hats, you know those wool beanie hats you pull down over your ears. So I pulled his hat down over his ears, and got this plaid blanket out of the trunk of the car and draped it over him real careful. I reclined the seat some, so he'd be comfortable.*

*I liked having him near, in the garage when I was in the house, and right next to me, when I was driving the car.*

*I never turned on the heat in the car and Darryl seemed to be okay. When the weather started to get warmer, I bought some boxes of baking soda, you know the kind you use for your refrigerator, and opened them and put them on the floor by the passenger seat and that helped some with the smell. It was pretty bad, but I drove with the windows open, and after a while I sort of got used to it. Even with the smell, it was a comfort having him there, talking to him like he was just waking from a nap. I knew it would look odd to other people, so I bought gas and did my shopping at the supermarket late at night, when no one would be looking into the car. At work I parked behind the empty building next door every day, said I was trying to get some exercise by walking more.*

*I guess when the policeman stopped me for the burnt out tail light he was pretty surprised. And I can see why he might be surprised, but really I just wanted to keep Darryl close. I know when you do tests or a postmortem you'll see that it was natural causes, nothing of my doing. Why would I want to kill Darryl? He was the gentlest soul I know, maybe the only man I've ever loved. He was worth everything to me alive, nothing to me dead. Go ahead and check his wallet. I didn't take anything.*

The buzzing of the fluorescent lights was giving Gina a headache. She wondered if anyone was outside the door. Seemed like they'd asked her questions for hours. Then they'd just given her a pen and a pad of yellow paper and told her to write it all down like she remembered it. She wasn't sure what they wanted her to say.

She couldn't really explain it. A dwarf star takes billions and billions of years to implode, but the human being decays and returns to the universe much faster. She knew that. She didn't

know why she'd held onto to the physical body that Darryl left behind when she knew his spirit was somewhere else.

*This probably seems strange to you. If I've broken any laws, I'm sorry.*

She hoped they understood that she wasn't a criminal, or crazy. Skipping a few spaces, she signed her name and the date.

Darryl told her once about X-ray ghosts in space. Not long ago, astronomers discovered a high-energy apparition left behind after the eruption of a black hole. It was over three billion years old, ten billion light years away. Gina wanted to believe that human beings left some residue of their being in the world too. That even gone, Darryl was somehow tangible. Sometimes when she stood at the sink rinsing dishes she remembered how he used to come up and put his arms around her from behind. His absence became a kind of presence. She sensed him now, when she pushed the chair back and stood up from the metal table. "Darryl," she whispered. For a moment she felt his warm breath on the nape of her neck, and the gravitational pull of his body. It didn't matter that he was light years away.