

Southern Cross

Pop used to tell me that stars were holes in the sky that God peeped through. The moon was a telescope so He had a bigger lens to watch through. And the sun was just a way to keep His hands warm.

“Everybody likes a good fire,” Pop would say, turning the spindly twig that held my pink marshmallow kebab over the open camp fire. “Even the big man upstairs.”

“What’s he looking at, when he peeks through, Pop?” I would take in a mouthful of the sweet burnt caramel and smoke.

Pop’s lips would appear between his peppery moustache and his salty beard and he’d be grinning real wide, a low wheeze bursting from his chest. “He’s looking to see if all the little girls in the world are learning to take care of themselves.”

I still remember the feeling of his fat, dry finger pads ruffling my hair. The way his callouses would catch at my scalp and I’d smooth it back down. I still remember the Southern Cross above us.

There’s a magic about the rash of stars that erupt across a country sky. Ink-dark one moment, alive with sparkling lights the next. But they’re dead, aren’t they? Stars. At least, they’re dying. Burning up their hydrogen and helium so that they’re all out of gas.

Back then Pop used to laugh at his own joke.

“Imagine being that beautiful, Emily, but you’re only that beautiful because you’re firing up your cylinders too hard and you’re going to run on empty until you fade to nothing.”

My Dad faded to nothing. Burnt out too soon. Between working and not working, being married and not being married, farming and waiting for the rain, his skin shrivelled around his bones, as dry as the earth he turned. His cheekbones cut diagonal shadows across his face. His fingers shook. He barely made a dent in his bed. Pop stayed with us. And old man looking after his own son, waiting for the cancer to use up all his gas.

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In those last days the sky pressed low over our house. The sun singed the tips of the grass. God's hands must have been hot. The stars were like glitter all over the roof and if He was looking through the moon, He'd have seen our tears like glitter too. Pop's got caught in his whiskers, sticking there like dew on a bottlebrush.

On the night Dad died I laid out under the stars and watched them die beautifully. Dad's passing was ugly; raspy and croaky and grey and cruel. I could see how Death took Dad and then looked at Pop and he opened his arms to it. God got things in the wrong order. But at least Pop's gas lasted a little longer. At least we got to go camping again.

Under the widest of skies we lay under a tarp and poked holes in it in the shape of the Southern Cross.

He laughed and laughed.