**All The Way Up**

**by Brynnie Rafe**

Things are much worse than when you left. They don’t want us to go outside unless we have to, because of the radiation. From here, our town is just a patchwork of solar panels and radiation shields. Along the horizon, a few aerials still stand, but our communications are constantly disrupted by solar flares. Next year, they say, we might be living underground. I couldn’t live like that. The airless darkness would crush me. I’d long for this hilltop, this endless sky. I’d want to breathe. I don’t care about radiation. What sort of a life is it when you can’t go outside?

People used to say our future is written in the stars. I suppose they were right, in a way. We’ll spread ourselves across the solar system, the galaxy, the universe, or we’ll die here, on this dried out husk of a planet we call home. Looking up, you wouldn’t know anything was wrong. You could be subsumed in an ocean of starry dreams, think about how every pinprick of light is a distant burning sun, wonder if we’ll ever explore the distant planets that orbit them. You could think about how the Earth is part of something extraordinary, something beyond our comprehension, an endlessly expanding universe waiting to be discovered. Isn’t that what we used to dream about when we came here every night to watch the stars come out?

The grass is clammy under my bare feet. Summer-parched shoots surprised by sudden rain. They come in waves, these strange weather patterns, but there are definitely more of them this year. So many houses burned to the ground by sudden wildfires, entire buildings carried away by floods. The big windmill on the horizon is gone. Lightning made it crumple like a fallen giant, leaving deep scars etched in the hillside. The few trees are charred corpses, but I don’t know whether it was the lightning or this brutal summer, if you can still call it that. It’s already July, but it’s no cooler. No more frosty winter mornings. Maybe summer will last all year. The experts don’t even pretend to know anymore. Fifty years ago people might have rejoiced. A whole year of beautiful summer!

If only they knew.

I’m still stuck in the same job I was doing when you left, mapping flight plans for rockets we don’t have the fuel for. Finding alternative energy sources. Repairing our equipment after solar flare damage.

I don’t need to be clever like you to know it’s all futile. Water and oil supplies are running dangerously low. Thousands of islands swallowed by the hungry sea. Crops are failing, animals are dying and there’s no way we have enough power to sustain large-scale underground hydroponic gardening.

I’ve stopped caring.

Those who follow you might survive, finding a future among those faraway suns, but not me. The poor, the sick, the old and even just average people like me don’t stand a chance of getting out. History will not remember me. The survival of the human race does not depend on my skills. Once upon a time I would have raged against my fate, trying desperately for any way to follow my big sister to the stars. Now, I watch the rocket launches and silently thank some higher power that my feet are still on the ground.

How could I leave, after what happened to you?

The explosion was too far up to be seen from Earth. You’d already passed the Karman line, the boundary between our atmosphere and “outer space”.

I’ve heard that explosions in space are perfectly silent, there’s no atmosphere to carry the sound. Still, I can’t help imagining the roar of collapsing engines around you, the sound of metal and glass being ripped apart. Blue and orange flames lighting up your face before you are engulfed. Your ashes, the last remnants of you, are now scattered among the stars with the other debris.

They still don’t know what went wrong. A stupid electrical fault, perhaps. A computer error. Something wrong with the fuel.

Mum told me to stop thinking about it

“It’s not worth it. It won’t bring her back.”

I suppose I’ll never find out.

The sky is darkening and the moon has risen, a silver beacon in a sea of stars. I didn’t bring your telescope. It’s still in my wardrobe, gathering dust. You wrapped it in midnight blue paper and gave it to me, the morning you left.

“I don’t need it anymore,” you said. “I’m going to see the stars up close. It’s yours now, Molly.”

Tears on my face. My voice cracking as I said goodbye. Our last hug. Your long red hair streaming behind you like a banner as you ran towards the rocket that would show you the stars.

Or so you thought.

We watched your fiery tail disappear into the night sky, we clapped and cheered. I squinted at the stars, trying to make out any last trace of you.

The next time it rained, I wondered if there was a little bit of you in there. Were these raindrops your last tears?

I’m glad my future is here, not on some distant planet with no memories of you. I can imagine you here, feel your presence.

*I was born on Earth. I will die on Earth.*

There’s something comforting about that. This is my planet. The planet with the hilltop where we searched for constellations.

Did you get a glimpse of Earth from space, like you always dreamed of? A fleeting glance at all those stars you told me the names of, long ago?

I wonder if you knew. Did error messages light your screens up red? Did alarms ring in your ears? Or was it all over in a perfect burst of silence?

I hope you loved it. I hope you cried for joy as you watched the stars rush past, I hope you savoured every last second of it. All the way up.