

Galaxies Collide

On her screen the galaxies glow brilliant blue, over a billion light years away and in the process of colliding. Clem stares at them, the stars and planets and moons, asteroids and dust, a complex scene reduced to a picture small enough to fit into the palm of her hand.

'I'm going out tonight,' Pavan says.

Clem looks up from the screen and blinks at the white office walls, folders on shelves, stacks of articles to read, and Pavan at the next desk, typing with her face close to the screen.

'Oh yeah,' Clem says. 'Is this the one you met at the gym?'

'Nope, someone new.' Pavan's fingers type and her voice stays even, neither hopeful nor despairing.

'Where did you meet?' Clem asks, even though she can guess.

'Tinder. I'm giving it another go.'

Clem purses her lips. She tries not to be one of those older women, full of warnings and advice for the younger generation. But sometimes it's difficult. 'Well, I hope it works out.' She glances at the galaxies, the points of light that seem so far apart but which are slowly, slowly, pulling together through the inevitable force of gravity. Once she saw a simulation of projected galaxy collision, back on that first day when she took her place in the lecture theatre, up the front with the other mature-age students, the snide comments about being too old still echoing through her mind.

'Where are you going?' she asks Pavan.

'A drink and then possibly dinner. What are you doing this weekend?'

'Ah, a swimming birthday party, I think.'

‘Party, eh? Anyone interesting?’

‘He’s turning nine; one of Edie’s friends.’

‘Ah. Well. That’ll be fun.’

‘Actually, it’s a bit stressful. Edie has this thing for the high dive at the moment.’

Clem knows – all mothers know – that kids need to take risks and make bad choices in order to learn for themselves. But her heart clenches at the high dive tower, after so many years of protecting them. Arguing in whispers, avoiding triggers, saying nothing. And now she can only watch as her daughter climbs the stairs, walks to the edge, and makes her choice. How do you do it, Ed? Clem says when she bobs to the surface, laughing and snorting chlorine. Edie grins and flicks water from her hair. I don’t know, you just jump, Mum!

‘You know, you could try Tinder, Clem,’ Pavan says, looking up from her equations, a smile in her voice. ‘Anyone can try it. You don’t have to be ...’ she leaves the sentence hanging, unfinished, in the air. Single? Young? Pretty? Pretty enough, her husband had told her, not so long ago.

‘Maybe I will,’ Clem says. ‘Does it compete with this?’ she gestures to Pavan’s screen, where a distant nebula blooms purple and pink and silver.

Pavan looks. ‘Well, no. Obviously not.’

Clem laughs. She loves looking at stars all day, but that’s not the best part. When she turned six her grandfather had wrapped her up and taken her out to the back veranda with a strange cylindrical tube and told her to look inside. The cold air stung her cheeks and her eyelashes brushed the lens as she looked up to the stars. Her grandfather explained light years and the stark poetry of constellations, but she had fallen for the telescope. Now she stares at her screen, where gravity pulls two small galaxies together. The light has taken billions of years to travel here, to Earth, which means that everything she can see has

already happened. The spiral arm of one of the galaxies straightens, unfurls, stretches towards the other, draws towards the collision.

‘Isn’t there a risk of jerks on Tinder?’ she asks Pavan.

‘Nasties, you mean?’

‘Nasties, then.’

‘Nasties are always a risk. Not just on Tinder, in the rest of the world too.’

‘So there’s no avoiding them.’

‘Yeah, you can avoid them. But first you have to identify them.’

‘Is that what you’ll be doing tonight, nasty identification?’

‘It’s the first step to true love.’

Clem looks back to the picture. The galaxy interaction could be benign. It could result in merging, or the galaxies could pass through each other without any stars ever meeting, like strangers in the street, hurrying on with their galactic lives.

Or stars could collide.

The hydrogen within the stars could explode, clouds of gas and radiation spewing into space at fantastic speeds, billions of atoms billowing purple and gold. So beautiful through the lens of the telescope; up close it would be pure destruction. That first night in the comedy club, his wide laugh that she had found so endearing, his ready smile and big hands. That same mouth laughed at her as she packed her bag for uni, told her that she’d never finish, she wasn’t smart enough, wouldn’t have time for all the reading, so why bother?

‘How long does it take to identify a nasty?’ Clem asked.

‘I give it twenty minutes.’

‘Then what do you do? I mean, if they are nasty?’

'You politely back out.'

'That's acceptable?'

'Yeah. You just let them down gently, and run.'

'Huh.'

'It helps if you do the "it's not you, it's me" routine. Give them an easy way out.'

'You mean, let them blame you.'

'They'll do that anyway.'

Clem wonders if they see it, the galaxies. Could they tell, from so far away, what the nature of a star might be? Perhaps this one would be a keeper, someone to settle down with. But would they merge, or would it all end with explosion and blooming clouds of hydrogen? He had said, one day when Clem was reading theory, her mind in the calm logic of equations, There's something I want to talk about. Then he muted the TV: it was serious. She imagined the words before they arrived – I've met someone else – and found herself filled with fear and sadness, and also, somewhere in the background, relief. It rushed into her, liquid and cool. I think we should go on holiday, he said. We could try camping again. And just like that, the feeling was gone, replaced with that creeping tension, the anticipation of fear. His frustration at the tent poles, anger over the burnt dinner. Lying in the tent next to the kids, wondering if she could fall asleep yet.

'I'm off,' Pavan says and unhooks her jacket from her chair.

'But Pav,' Clem says, spinning to face her. 'It's not just the nasties you have to watch out for. I mean, don't date nasties. But keep away from the blackholes.'

'Black holes?' She frowns and pulls her handbag over her shoulder.

'Yeah. The ones that pull you in, and then suck all your energy.' The insults she had grown so used to. The feeling of being pulled by gravity, deeper and deeper through space.

It started slowly, and she had asked him to stop, and he had promised, but he never did.

One day the kids played under the kitchen table, the toys in a pot-and-pan house, and her son called her daughter a bitch. Her daughter had said nothing.

‘Oh yeah,’ Pavan says, ‘they’re the worst of the nasties. Don’t worry, I stay the hell away from those ones.’ She looks at Clem’s screen, the blue where the galaxies meet.

‘Collision?’ she asks.

‘It will be, in a few million years.’

‘That gets me.’

‘The destruction?’

‘No, the time. We won’t even see it happen in our lifetime.’

‘I love that part,’ Clem says.

‘You do?’

‘Yeah. It will take millions of years for the light to reach us,’ Clem smiles, ‘but actually, it’s already happened.’ The hallway full of packed bags and cardboard boxes. Those horrible, bitter last arguments. And then: the apartment with its bunk beds and new-paint smell. The little balcony, where Clem had set up the old telescope so she and the kids could look up at the night sky.

‘Yeah, that messes me too. Everything we see has already happened. It’s all inevitable.’

‘It’s not.’ Clem knows something about blackholes.

‘Huh?’

‘It’s not inevitable.’ She turns to face Pavan, still smiling. She does try not to be one of those older women, with her stories and her advice.

‘How? It’s gravity and time and space. What can you do if a blackhole is sucking you in?’

‘You get the hell out of the way.’

Pavan opens her mouth to respond, but Clem cuts her off.

‘Gravity may be inevitable, but people were made to jump.’

Pavan snorts, and then laughs.

‘Have a good night,’ Clem says.

‘I will.’ Pavan turns for the door. ‘You too, Clem.’

‘Make good choices.’

‘I will!’

Clem turns back to the picture. Later tonight she will wrap the kids up in their dressing gowns and take them out to look at the moon. They all stand solemnly around the telescope, holding mugs of warm milk, and take turns to look through the eyepiece. She will tell them about the stars, the moon, the planets in the solar system. Her youngest son promises that he can see them all, even though his eye is shut when he presses it to the lens. He’s only two; there’s still plenty of time to see the stars.

On her screen, the distant galaxies slowly, slowly, pull together. One day they’ll meet, heady and excited, and so, so unprepared. The first glimpse, the approach, the explosion when they touch. And then, eons later, beyond her lifetime and the lifetimes of her children, the swirling particles will meet again. Hot and burning in the emptiness, they pull together to form a new star.

Maybe it’s already happening.