A Boy's Guide to Outer Space

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Prologue:

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Like all good stories this one starts with an exploding star.

It happened three weeks ago, around two o'clock in the morning. Unable to sleep, I had wandered into my son's bedroom—he's in his second year of graduate school now—and sat there gazing through the telescope I bought him for his sixteenth birthday, when I noticed a sapphire-blue dot high in the eastern sky where there should have been nothing but a black void. At first I thought it might be an airplane or a satellite. But the way the dot just sat there, motionless, alone in its isolated corner of space, rendered those possibilities impossible.

Suddenly the blue dot burst apart, splitting into a dozen bright pale orbs of different pastel colors. The smaller stars danced around a central bright blue nucleus before shooting off in various directions, with one especially brilliant blue star shooting straight down to earth, where it appeared to explode, lighting up the eastern horizon with an ice-blue camera-bulb-like flash.

The next morning I was out walking Mr. McDog, our black Lab (so named for his love of a popular fast-food chain's golden french fries). It was the third month of the Covid epidemic. One does lots of walking during a pandemic (this was before Governor DeSantis ordered all the beaches closed). McDog and I were taking our usual route along a stretch of shore here known as the "Space Coast" when we chanced upon an exceptional bit of flotsam: pale-blue, cone-shaped, metallic, about the size of a two-person tent and shaped like a giant hat. From underneath its scorched brim a tangle of wires, cords, and cables of various colors slithered spaghetti-like.

McDog and I are dedicated beachcombers, ever on the lookout for the Atlantic tide's noteworthier offerings. You'd be surprised by what washes up on these shores. Last year, the

ocean's generous but capricious currents delivered a sperm whale—eighty-six feet long and categorically dead—to our sandy front doorstep. Despite repeated dustings with truckloads of quicklime, for over a week the whale's putrefying corpse claimed the beach with its apocalyptic stench. The county had to hire a tugboat to drag the thing out to sea.

Not all of the sea's curious offerings have been organic. Since Mr. McDog and I began walking here four years ago, rarely has a month gone by without our encountering some surf-scoured, wrack-robed, salt-bleached testament to human ingenuity or folly. And I don't mean your typical maritime rubble: water-logged hatch-covers, beached bell-buoys, and so forth. I'm talking space junk: charred heat-deflector shields, spent rocket boosters, the occasional GEM (that's Graphite Epoxy Motor to you earthlings)… They don't call it the Space Coast for nothing.

But what made that hat-shaped object truly uncanny is this: one morning fifty-seven years ago, in 1963, I came upon the very same object, or one exactly like it, on a horsetail fern-lined trail in Hattertown, Connecticut, the town in which I supposedly grew up. That exploding blue star? It too had its equivalent one May morning in Hattertown, an extraordinary morning heralding the extraordinary year that followed: the year Jack Thomas entered my life. The year my stepbrother Gordon lost his.

What follow are my memories of that year and of those days. They're the memories of a seventy-year-old pensioner living on Cape Canaveral, Florida, an old guy who just happens to share his young subject's DNA along with his name: Leopold Napoli IV, though to his friends back then for reasons to be explained he was known simply as "Half."

This is Half's story more than it's mine, the story of an ordinary American boy who, like most ordinary American boys, longed for things out of this world.

In Half's case he just happened to find them.

Part 1

The Back Shop Boys

When I was ten years old my father gave me some advice, or tried to.

"Son," he said, bobbing a marshmallow over a campfire that we had built, "I've got three pieces of advice to give you." He swigged from his ever-handy bottle of Rock & Rye. "The first piece of advice is: Never stick anything in your ears. The second is: If you're going to build a rope swing, use a thick rope. The third bit of advice…"

My father paused. "The third bit…" he repeated.

As the campfire's glow glazed my father's gaunt, stubbled, sweaty face, the focus of his gaze turned inexorably inward. His slate-blue pupils lost their luster. He chewed his lower lip, pulled at his nose, sniffed several times, furrowed his brow, nibbled his tongue, scratched the short stiff hairs on the back of his neck.

"…the third bit…"

We were watching the Crofus & Corbet Hat Manufacturing Company's main building go up in flames. One of the chief forms of entertainment in Hattertown back then was watching hat factories burn down—something they did, or seemed to do, obligingly, on a regular basis, as if burning down were the primary purpose for which they'd been constructed to begin with. Dad would seek out a vantage point high on a hill in that town of many hills. On cold nights he would sometimes build us a campfire, a miniature blaze to mirror the one raging down in the gulley below us. While roasting marshmallows we'd take in smoke, flames, and the whirling red lights and puling sirens of fire engines. If the view was accessible by car we'd sit side-by-side in my father's banana-yellow Studebaker Champion, the bones of his sunken cheeks burnished copper by flames. He would swig from his pint bottle of Rock & Rye while I munched Cracker Jack from a box, just like at the drive-in theater.

The hat factories burned gloriously, the orange flames

licking utility lines, shooting up star-like sparks that joined the constellations, or formed their own. If the wind blew our way we'd cover our mouths with damp rags Dad provided for the occasion, aware that the smoke carried toxic fumes from the chemicals used to turn the raw pelts of rabbits and beavers into high-quality felt. One evening while we watched the Sutton-Dexter hat factory burn down a flurry of burning half-finished hats swirled into the twilight, miniature flying saucers of flaming triple-X felt. One came within inches of landing on my head.

"Now *that's* something!" my father said, slapping his knee first, then mine, his outburst as singular as the event itself. My father was a man of very few words. Winks, chucks on the chin, pats on the back, and slaps on the knee were his main forms of communication.

Dad conveyed his feelings otherwise, too. The summer of my seventh year he spent building a trolley car in our backyard. Powered by twin Briggs & Stratton lawn mower engines, it had caned seats and a bell Dad rang as it clacked along tracks made from plumbing pipes. Dad wore his striped pajamas (the closest thing he had to a conductor's uniform). Though the trolley car's route extended only as far as the clothesline pole and back, I imagined us rolling across America, over hills and across meadows, through sleepy towns and noisy cities. Over the twin engines' roars my father sang:

A ride on the trolley is jolly
Whatever you pay for the fare…

Some wondered how it was that my father always seemed to know when a hat factory was about to burn down. A few even insinuated that he himself set the blazes, a suggestion that I refused to accept. My father was a crude man: uneducated, inarticulate, reeking of Rock & Rye and hat-factory fumes. He loved hot dogs, fireworks, Gene Kelly, baseball, bourbon, and me, his son. In one of her less-sober moments my mother admitted to

me that the only reasons she married him were because he was a good dancer and he knew how to make her laugh.

"Your father was the price I paid," she explained, "for having a sense of humor."

But Dad was no arsonist.

However he came by it, when it came to predicting hat-factory fires my father, Leopold Joseph Napoli III, was possessed of a Promethean foresight.

At last—with a bony arm around my neck and a heavy sigh (his breath a rye whisky blowtorch)—my father said:

"Sorry, son, but I forget what the third bit of advice was."

He burst out laughing then, his head thrown back, his laughter echoing out across the flame-lit distance, until a coughing fit seized him and his laughter turned to viscous hacks. So ended the longest conversation he and I would ever have.

We went back to watching the hat factory fire, letting its tongues do the talking for us.

That night I dreamed that I was drowning, a recurrent dream. I'd fallen into a lake or a stream or some other body of water, or maybe I'd been pushed. In the dream I gasped and groped and thrashed toward the pale green light of salvation but couldn't reach it. Awakened by and still gasping from my nightmare, I opened my eyes to see my father standing there, in the bedroom doorway, his oblong silhouette framed by moonlight.

"Dad?" I said, propped up on one elbow, catching my breath.

The silhouette swigged from a bottle.

"What gives?"

"I remembered the third bit of advice, son," my father said.

I waited.

"Follow your fears."

"Huh?"

"Your fears. Follow your fears."

As suddenly as it appeared my father's silhouette was gone. A patch of dawn filled the space where it stood.

My father died on a Wednesday. Mom was working in town that day, at Mr. Stevens'—the town optometrist's—office. I found Dad sitting on the toilet, his mouth agape, head thrown back, gazing up at the bathroom ceiling as if waiting for a hole to form there. A bluebird tapped at the windowpane. Dad smoked like a burning hat factory all his life. But long before his lungs gave out, he suffered from headaches, fatigue, depression, irascibility, vertigo, sore throats, and tremors so violent at times he couldn't hold a screwdriver or tie his own shoelaces: all classic symptoms of mercury poisoning, also known as "Mad Hatter's Disease"—or, locally, as "The Hattertown Shakes."

Everyone who worked in the hat factories was exposed to some mercury, but none more than the Back Shop workers, those who processed the raw pelts of rabbits and beavers into felt. Though they stopped using mercury soon after World War II, by then my father had breathed in twenty years' worth of the stuff, having worked in hat factories ever since he was old enough to reach the foot pedal of a hat blocking machine, as had his father, Leopoldi di Napoli II, and his father's father, Leopoldi di Napoli. Like them, and though the official cause of death was entered by the coroner as "lung infection," my father died of "the shakes."

And though he knew he had been poisoned, my father never said a word about it to anyone. To have done so would have broken a tacit agreement among the Back Shop workers, and anyway it would only have gotten him fired. So my father kept his illness a secret—until the shakes got so bad they forced him first into an early retirement, then into an early grave.

Hats killed my father.

I had just turned eleven.

The trolley car went up on cinderblocks. For a while I tried taking care of it. I varnished the cane seats and polished the bell with a mixture of toothpaste and Worcestershire sauce as

my father had taught me. I smeared moving parts with marine grease, wire-brushed iron wheels, freshened yellow paint and pinstripes. Still the bell tarnished; rust froze the drive shafts in their bearings. Vines crept over the seats, strangling them first before splitting them apart. Eventually Mr. Dingy, our landlord, had the thing carted away.

With Dad's death all the colors seemed to drain out of my world. Trees didn't talk to me; birds didn't sing or fly for me. The sky was a cement wall over my head. A taste of ashes filled my mouth and embittered my days. I felt the vague restless yearning experienced by many kids my age, but with a sour, disconsolate twist.

What little consolation I found wasn't on earth but among the stars. By then Sputnik had spun around the world, launching us into the space age. I gave myself over to daydreams of outer space and took comfort in amassing astonishingly useless trivia from encyclopedias: *the sun is 330,330 times larger than Earth; Venus is the only planet in the solar system that rotates clockwise; in Nakhla, Egypt, on June 28, 1911, a dog was killed by a meteor*…flights of mental frippery designed to propel me, as sure as any rocket, out of the dull atmosphere of my freshly fatherless world.

I longed for something, what, exactly, I couldn't say. Something out of this world: a spark, a flame, a gleam or glimmer or glitter of hope or transcendence or redemption, a heavenly hat factory fire to brighten up my gloom-filled days. To touch or be touched by the uncanny, the mysterious, by something unfathomable. I longed to partake of something of the infinite.

So things stood till the summer of my thirteenth year. The summer I followed my fears.

The summer I met the Man in Blue.