

The Astronaut's Boy

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"So Auntie's our new mama?" whispered Wendy, wiping her nose and eyes on Darryl's t-shirt.

"No. She ain't," said Darryl, patting her back.

"Who then?"

"I dunno."

"How 'bout the preacher? Ain't people like him supposed to help? Don't they have to or else God will kill them or something?"

"Reverend Twilight don't care no more than the rest of 'em." Outside Wendy's bedroom window the sun was coming up. "It might have to be me."

"Ain't it against the law for a sixth-grader to be a daddy?" she asked.

Darryl's response sat lazy in his mouth. Why did Wendy have to be so smart?

"So it's Auntie, then?" she said, sensing he had no response.

Darryl and Wendy sat still. The rising sun spread rays out from behind the grain silos east of town.

"This what it's like to be cursed?" Wendy asked.

"Yep." "I guess it is."

It should have been easy to feel sorry for Darryl and his little sister, Wendy. To arrange a fundraiser. Engrave a commemorative sidewalk stone or stand up a memorial park bench. Give them a funeral and a reminder, and leave them alone. But they were in the wrong part of Texas for that.

Their mama died on Wendy's fifth birthday, early in the morning. When Darryl found out, Wendy was still asleep.

After Sheriff Wayne riled Darryl from sleep, Darryl plopped down on the first thing he came across in the living room: the metal folding chair still there from the Thanksgiving kids' table—which was just him and Wendy. His sandy brown hair stuck straight up at the cowlick. The bird clock above the TV said 3:14, which meant the wren had just whistled. Cottonwood puffs clung to the front window screen like a filter for what the night air might bring in. It was early August and hot as the dickens.

Fat, old Sherriff Wayne sat on the squeaky plastic-covered couch Darryl's mama had inherited from her grandma. The night made Wayne sweat; everything made Wayne sweat. His belly played peekaboo beneath the untucked tails of his shirt. He tried to catch his breath and broke the news to Darryl the way a mechanic might tell you your transmission needed to be replaced.

"She up and died on you, son. Ain't coming back. Wrapped her old four-banger around a tree. Honda, was it?"

Auntie closed her eyes and nodded solemnly. Darryl was still groggy.

Dreaming, Darryl thought. I'm dreaming. But no. Because I never dream of Auntie. Ever. And she's sitting right there in the corner. And I can feel the smoke from her cigarette goopin' up my lungs. I need to cough. I've never coughed in a dream before.

Darryl coughed.

The image wouldn't let go: a car in a horseshoe shape—the unlucky kind—and a canopy of branches mixed with rusty, flaked metal gripping tighter. His mama sleeping peacefully behind the wheel.

“You hear me, son. She’s deceased,” the sheriff blurted at old-folks-home volume. He looked into Darryl’s eyes, perturbed the boy hadn’t said anything yet. Patience was never popular in Wishbone, Texas.

Darryl’s knew his mama would be mad if he cried. She was that way as long as Darryl could remember. “Tears ain’t gonna make life fair. So what’s the goddamn point?” And what if her ghost was watching from above just waiting for an excuse to haunt him? So Darryl pushed back by letting his mind go. Wandering and wondering came easy to him. He’d flip through the deck of cards in his head until he found an ace to carry him away from anything that might be bugging him.

Wonder what a car looks like when it’s wrapped ‘round a tree? What happens to the tree? Does it grow ‘round the car and suck it in so that no one has to be reminded of what happened there? Or does the car eventually kill the tree, tighter and tighter like a boa constrictor? We learned ‘bout boas in science last year. Where was it they live again? The Armizon? Antizon? Amazon. Wonder if it’s true the Amazon has enough trees to make all the air in the world. That’s what Mr. Reese said.

“What about the tree,” Darryl finally blurted. Sheriff Wayne stared, blank. “Must have had strong roots to take a shot and keep standing, huh?”

“I’m not an arborist, son,” mumbled Wayne.

Minutes before the news, Darryl was awoken by Wayne lumbering down the hallway to wake him. Handcuffs clacking against the rivets on his jeans, loud breathing. After that, Darryl recognized the sting of cigarette smoke. Auntie was in the living room taking long, stuttered drags of a menthol the sheriff had given her. Staring off toward the water-stained wallpaper by the front door as if she hadn’t already seen it a hundred times before. The grief-stricken sister—she hadn’t played this role before. She’d played sweet southern belle, that was her go-to, the role she was born to play and cracked footing from which all her other personalities grew and flowered like weeds. From there she’d played adoring aunt and bake-sale

philanthropist. Town preservationist and parade volunteer. And Darryl hated when she played innocent beauty queen, that mixture of feigned wide-eyed attentiveness, high-pitched giggles paired with the soft stroke of one's shoulder, and the ability to blush on demand.

Under all of it, Auntie was only actually grief stricken for herself—suddenly a mom to Darryl and Wendy because her sister couldn't shift and steer at the same time. For a moment, in between cigarettes, she fantasized about packing up, running off somewhere big like Houston or Dallas. But she'd spent years sweet-talking the town and petting its head. Convincing them all that she was the most vibrant flower within the city limits.

Appearances meant something to her. They did to everyone in Wishbone.

Darryl was a good kid; he'd always been a good kid. Never hurt another living thing, which he proved the one and only time he'd tried to hunt with his daddy.

If you asked anyone about Darryl, the first thing they'd say is that he's dirty. Dirt was magnetized to Darryl the way white coveralls attract paint. He hoofed at the loose red earth when he walked home from school and it puffed from his body when he lay down at night. After a few days you could almost see his outline on the Dallas Cowboys sheets he'd had since he was three.

He tried to avoid fighting, though he wasn't always successful. He was picked on, especially by the fourth grade's resident meathead, Bobby Kentucky. Didn't matter that Darryl was in sixth, he was still an easy target and got roughed up twice a week during the school year on the dirt baseball field. After a couple ham-handed attempts at fighting back, Darryl decided it was best to throw himself to the ground and give over whatever loose change he had.

Bobby Kentucky was not a poet. He'd been held back twice and couldn't read his own mama's tattoos if you asked him. Still, he was long-winded and adamant about "turds" like Darryl and why they deserved "bout a million knuckle sandwiches." Because they looked at him funny. They had a faces that needed beating. They thought they were better than him. There was

always a reason, which he'd narrate as he carried out his punishment, like shoving an unlucky turd's head into a toilet mid flush. But with Darryl, Bobby Kentucky never said a word, never shouted an excuse. He just gave Darryl hell every Tuesday and Friday.

Darryl flummoxed people that way because he was curious (uncommon). No one could figure what he was exactly. He wasn't motor oil, but he wasn't the puddle of water either; he was that rainbow sheen that appears when the two come together that you can't quite wrap your eyes around.

When he was little kid, four and five years old, if you asked Darryl about himself, he'd just say he wondered a lot, and if you didn't mind, he'd like to call you his friend. People could see his daddy in him, a man of 45 who gave Darryl his skinny frame and cowlick, and hadn't been heard from since before Wendy was born.

Curiosity and empathy had been Darryl's way since he could speak. They combined into this odd wisdom, as if he'd already been around the sun a few thousand times and knew people from past lives or magical powers or astrological predictions. He understood them, the heartache they'd been through, the cuts, the loss, and the joys, too. And because of that, he'd offer opinions and advice without being asked. The hell of it is, people listened but they also mistrusted him. They wanted to hear what he had to say, but they didn't, like he was a known spirit that had been following them around.

No one would admit it, but he made them believe in crazy things if only for an instant. He made them look at everyday life through a kaleidoscope, spiking the everyday with chromatic moments.

At four and five years old, he'd often give cryptic, unsolicited advice as he passed people by on the street or saw them in the post office. Innocent comments, frankly, that oddly applied to the secret parts of their lives and left the recipients with an emotional jolt, though they never let on. Things like: "The tooth fairy told me that once you apologize, she'll give you back your teeth," (said to Clete Peterson who'd had his two top front teeth knocked out by a spring calf the same

day he told his gay son never to come back), or “I know how you feel, but you can’t protect everything all the time,” (said to the postmaster, the widow Mrs. Behrens, who never allowed her beloved St. Bernard out of the house except for one leashed walk a day for fear he’d run away.) Darryl once told the overly bored cashier from the Fancy Market, Toby Tim, “There’s more fun to be had.” Toby never told anyone, but because of that he started volunteering at the retirement home and before long became the social director there. Quit working at the Fancy Market and had the retirees dancing late every Friday night.

The wondering part came naturally. Darryl liked to ask harmless questions to anyone within earshot, sometimes just to himself. As a young boy it was his entertainment, but as he got older and kept more inside, he used it as defense mechanism when he had thoughts that he didn’t like. But he was always thinking up things for asking or rehashing little mental notes he took at some point. A couple times when Darryl’s Mama was in a jam--she had to get over to D’s and the babysitter canceled--she knew if he got to thinking, it’d take a while for him to get out of it, much less make a decision to start some trouble. Darryl’s mama sat him on the couch and got him started by asking something like, “What happened to that old Nolan Ryan baseball card you used to have?” And Darryl would babysit himself just by thinking. When she finally limped in the door around ten, he’d be stock-still on the couch, pondering.

Why do they call it a square root? What about that mangy horse we saw beside the road a couple Easters ago? Wonder if Daddy took the only hose we had with him. Wonder what he’s watering now. Who ever liked the cheese that doesn’t come in the plastic wrapper? Who ever saw God in church just by drinking grape juice? Wish I could crawl on the wall like a spider. What age is adult?

Inwardly, these parts of Darryl never subsided. But outwardly, as he got older, they slowly started to sink away. That is, he let them sink away. Around eight years old, Darryl started hiding pieces of himself little by little. An observation buried in his sock drawer. A question lodged under an oak tree root. A piece of advice tucked away in his medicine cabinet. Little parts of him spread about town like grass seed. Crumbs of personality he thought might shrivel up and die if he left them along. That’s what he hoped for anyway.

He wasn't stupid; he'd seen what the wrong kind of attention got his mama. So he tried his best to get as little attention as possible. Granted, it squeaked out at times, maybe a question here and there, but nothing like the volume and intensity it once was. No grand gestures, no hunches. Nothing to call attention to himself. The hope was that if he did the negative view would fade away little by little until he was camouflaged. Not a pillar of the community all of a sudden; he just wanted to go unnoticed. And maybe Wendy would see the happiness of going unnoticed too.

Darryl's mama had crashed on her way home from D's, where she waited tables. D's sat like a neon sign just off of highway 87 between Tulia and Plainview. The *iner* part of the neon sign burned out long ago, so folks called it by the only remaining letter. Other than people who lived around there, D's was only a place for those who were lost, considering that 87 was within spitting distance of Interstate 27, ran the same direction, and was slower. The only reason for someone to be on 87, and thus arrive at D's, was if they'd taken a wrong turn somewhere and weren't in much of a hurry.

The crash took place about 5 miles north of D's on 87. When the firemen pulled her body from the car, Darryl's mama was still wearing her apron, the pens hanging from the pocket in a neat row.

Darryl desperately wanted to know what happened.

Did she try to stop? Did she hit a coyote? What did the car look like? How long were the skidmarks? Were her eyes opened or closed? How dead was she?

"How dead is she?" Darryl asked Sheriff Wayne.

"I don't know what that means, son," said the sheriff.

"What?" said Darryl.

“How dead is she? I don’t know what that means,” reiterated the Sheriff.

“Did I say that out loud?”

Sheriff Wayne turned to Auntie like “how do you even deal with this kid.” She wiped a tear from her face.

“I mean,” Darryl started, “do ya think ... was it the kinda wreck that’d make everyone remember her? Good memories, I mean? Like they’d forget ‘bout the bad stuff and she’d live on forever?”

The sheriff said, “Let’s just say we weren’t in much of a hurry once we saw her. The wreck, I mean.”

Darryl felt bad; he knew Sheriff Wayne didn’t want to be there. The way he pulled his sticky Wishbone Sheriff Dept. button-up away from his chest and down to cover his tummy like a self-conscious teenage girl. The way he gazed just past Darryl’s head, his line of sight brushing Darryl’s temples, rather than looking the boy in the eye. This was nothing more than a job, a last observance for the night. Darryl pitied the man for the news he had to deliver and the way he could let it jump so freely from his mouth with no sadness holding it back.

That’s my fault ‘cause he had to deliver it to me. If it was someone else, he might give a care.

What happened next was an honest mistake. Darryl’s heart taking over unchecked. While Wayne intended to lean forward and pry himself up off the couch, Darryl anticipated a move toward him. A hug, a pat on the shoulder, a hair tussle. Something to cling to. Anything that might feel like a breath. So when Wayne teetered toward him, Darryl wrapped himself around Wayne’s chubby belly in the most earnest hug. Could barely get his arms halfway around. But Darryl suctioned to him, found something to cling to alright, and buried his head in the sweatiest part of Wayne’s shirt.

Sheriff Wayne jumped back as if he had a scorpion under his bare foot. “Gah, kid.” He straightened his belt.

Auntie snapped up. "Darryl!" Then it clicked with Auntie; she remembered Wayne was still there. She softened seamlessly. "Now's not the time for that, sweetheart. I know you're sad, but let the sheriff go about his business. You must be tired, Sheriff."

Darryl slumped back down, and he finally began to cry. He cupped his hands over his eyes. His skinny legs tightened, bolted to the ground.

"I'll leave it to you and your Aunt to tell your sister." The sheriff didn't wait for an answer.

"Evening, ma'am." *Whack*. The screen door slapped shut behind him.

"Sorry, Mama," Darryl whispered. It had been 22 days since he last cried, and now the clock would have to start all over. At least Wendy was still in bed.

"Jesus, Darryl. Make sure when you tell Wendy, you don't start that blubbering shit again," said Auntie in the middle of a long, smug exhale. She leaned back and her shoulders relaxed.