

One evening after the sun had set, but before it was quite dark, a father sat on the steps of his back porch and watched his children play.

He loved his children, and he knew that there were only a small number of evenings like this before they grew up and left the back yard to live in their own homes.

After a while they came to sit by him on the porch steps: Abigail, Adam, and Gray.

"What were you guys playing out there?" he asked.

"Monsters," said Abigail, the oldest.

"Sounds scary," he said.

"Abigail's the scariest," said Gray, the youngest.

"I know," he said. "She scares me all the time."

"I do not," she scoffed. "You're not afraid of anything. Grown-ups aren't afraid."

The father smiled. "Sure I am. Everybody's afraid of something."

"What are you afraid of?"

"I'm afraid of losing you guys."

"How could you lose us?" asked Adam. "Like your cellphone?"

He laughed. "No, not like my cellphone."

"Like how, then?"

"Soon you'll be grown-ups yourselves. You'll move away to live in your own homes. You won't be my little kids any more. It will be like losing you in a way."

They sat quietly for a while, thinking about what their father had said.

Abigail asked, "What do you think we'll be when we grow up?"

Their father thought for a moment, then said, "Tell me what you see."

The children started to look at their back yard: the grass, the swing set, the forest behind, the mountains beyond, the glow of the porch light and the darkening night sky above.

Abigail, the oldest, spoke first.

"I see the grass and Mama's flower garden. I see the owl and the bats and our neighbor's cat climbing over the fence. I see the mother deer and her fawn looking out at us from the forest and the chipmunk running through the grass."

Adam, the middle child, said, "I see the mountains. I see the rocks you and Mama set up in the garden. I see the hole that Gray and I dug to find a cave."

His father laughed. "Did you find a cave?"

"Not yet," Adam said.

"Keep looking," his father said. "Gray, what about you? What do you see?"

Gray said, "I see the stars."

"Nice," said his father.

They all sat for a moment, thinking their own thoughts about animals and mountains and stars. Finally their father said to Abigail, "Have you ever looked at the veins, the little lines, in leaves?"

"No," she said.

He reached down and plucked a blade of grass.

"Look," he said. "The veins in a blade of grass run in straight lines all the way to the tip."

She looked.

"But if you look at an oak leaf, the veins are spread all over the leaf, running every which way."

He handed her the blade of grass and continued. "Watch the squirrel — watch how she uses her tail to balance as she jumps from branch to branch."

Abigail turned and looked out at the trees.

"Do you hear the birds?" he asked. "Do you hear how the cardinals and jays and wrens have stopped calling, and now the owls and doves have taken over?"

Abigail, now listening and looking at her back yard differently than she had before, stood and walked away from the porch.

Their father turned to Adam, who was holding a rock he had picked up.

"See the stripes in that rock?" he said. "Each stripe was once a layer of sand at the bottom of the ocean. As the earth changed over millions of years, that sand became rock, and then the earth pushed the rock up into mountains."

"Like our mountains?" asked Adam.

"Exactly. And see how smooth and round our mountains are? They used to be tall and rocky like Mt. Everest or the Alps. Over millions of years more, wind and rain have worn away the rock into sand, which washes down to the sea."

"And it all starts over again?"

"Right."

Adan, too, got up and walked into the yard.

Then Gray looked up at his father, who smiled at his youngest.

"Stars. That's a tough one, buddy."

"Why, Daddy?"

"Because they're so big and so far away. It's hard for us to think about how big they are." His father thought for a moment. "Do you know the picture of the solar system in your science book, with the sun and the planets?"

"Sure," said Gray. "The sun is in the middle, then Mercury, then Venus, then the Earth, then Mars... and I forget the rest."

His father laughed. "Then Jupiter, Uranus, and Neptune. That's okay."

He reached over onto the porch and picked up a marble that was lying there. "Now imagine if the Earth were the size of this marble. The sun would be as tall as our car, and it would be almost two football fields away."

"Wow," Gray said. He took the marble and looked at it, imagining the whole earth in his hand.

"If the Earth were the size of a marble, then from the sun all the way out to Neptune would be three and a half miles."

Gray looked puzzled, so his father said, "That's as far away as your school."

"Wow," Gray said again.

"Yeah. And then the closest star would be over 29,000 miles away. That's more than all the way around the real Earth. And that's just the closest star. You wouldn't want to walk that far!"

"No!" Adam agreed. He got up and walked out into the back yard, holding the marble and looking up at the sky.

All three children were standing silently in the now-dark yard, each thinking about the world they had chosen: Abigail, the plants and animals and all living things; Adam, the mountains and rocks and the Earth; Gray, the stars and the universe.

As their father watched, it seemed to him that each of them began to be surrounded by a gentle light that grew brighter until it was a beautiful glow all around them.

Then, as he watched, they rose into the air — they floated gently for a moment — and then they began to fly away, Abigail to the trees, Adam to the mountains in the distance, Gray to the stars and beyond — at first slowly, then faster and faster until they could no longer be seen.

Where they stood before, their father could see only a faint glow.

Then it seemed to him that many years had passed, many nights on the back porch, many days since his children had played. He saw himself older, grayer.

He heard the back door slam as his wife came outside to sit beside him. It seemed to him that she was older now too.

"Where are the kids?" she asked. "Did you lose them?"

And then he saw that no time had passed. He was still young and so was she.

"No," he answered with a smile. "I didn't lose them."

He looked out at the forest and the mountains and the night sky.

"I sent them."

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