

AWAKE
IN THE
WORLD

For Connie and Seth,
without whom this book simply wouldn't exist.

AWAKE
IN THE
WORLD

J A S O N G U R L E Y

USBORNE

Even if it's very late at night.
Someone's always awake in the world.

Ann Druyan,
A Famous Broken Heart

I believe that it is very difficult to know who we are
until we understand where and when we are. I think
everyone in every culture has felt a sense of awe and
wonder looking at the sky.

Carl Sagan,
*The Varieties of Scientific Experience:
A Personal View of the Search for God*

I don't think I'll ever see Carl again. But I saw him. We
saw each other. We found each other in the cosmos,
and that was wonderful.

Ann Druyan,
"Ann Druyan Talks About Science,
Religion, Wonder, Awe...and Carl Sagan,"
Skeptical Inquirer, November/December 2003



ZACH

Top three unluckiest things to happen to me this week:

1. I dropped my house key into a storm drain.
2. Ms Grace informed me that I'm one credit short for graduation next spring.
3. I tore Dad's hoodie.

And it's only Monday.

The hoodie pissed me off the most. The impound lot is fenced in with chain-link, and the twisty-tie barbs atop the fence are as sharp as upturned ice picks. I dropped to the other side of the fence and examined the rip. I could see my jeans through it. *Damn.*

I hefted my backpack and moved through a thicket of rusted Hondas and forgotten Toyotas towards the lot's oddest resident: the fishing boat. Behind it, a sign hung on the impound lot's fence:

**SMILE,
YOU'RE BEING WATCHED**

Below the words was a picture of a camera with an eyeball for a lens.

But there weren't actually any cameras. I was certain of that. I'd managed to escape detection all this time, despite some close calls, but I sometimes wondered if it was because I was just that stealthy...or if I was fooling myself. Maybe everyone knew about my secret pre-dawn infiltrations. Maybe they left me alone because they felt sorry for me. It's like this: sometimes it feels like the whole town is waiting to see what wallop of bad luck will hit me next; other times, I can feel them quietly rooting for me. I'm never certain which is true when.

On the boat, inside the wheelhouse, I sank into the old captain's chair and snapped on the deck lantern. The warm orange glow chased the shadows from the walls, where my father's face stared down at me from a hundred tacked-up sketches.

"Morning, Dad," I said softly.

I opened my sketchbook and returned to an illustration in progress. Sometimes this was my only time to draw, these early hours on an impounded, slowly rotting boat. Between school and my job at the market, and the girls and their homework, and their bedtime stories – well, I didn't have space for much more than that. Quietly, I roughed in the structure of my father's boat on the page. It peeked through the haze of the marine layer, the shroud that blanketed

the sea on early summer mornings.

The sketchbook was a gift from my father four years back – in 2008, which had been a good year until it wasn't. "Things are going to change," Dad had said to Mama after the promotion at Bernaco. And he was right: they had, although not exactly how I think he'd intended. He'd given me a stack of sketchbooks like this one: bound in leather, or something like it; expensive, toothy paper. "I'm tired of seeing you draw on the gas bill," he'd said with a wink. Between then and now, I'd filled every inch of every page of each book, except this one. This was the last of them. Nothing I'd drawn in this book seemed good enough.

Not for the last thing my father ever gave me.

The pencil broke, etching a dark gash on the page. I sighed. I could fix it, but...The weight of the previous day had settled on me, and I was tired. I went to the window and pulled back the blanket that hung across it. From here I could see the credit union sign announce the time: 3:35 a.m.

I bagged my sketchbook, extinguished the lantern, and closed the wheelhouse door. When I dropped to the ground beside the boat, my ankle rolled beneath me, and I clapped a hand over my mouth to stifle a cry. I tested the foot gingerly. It wasn't serious – not a break or a sprain – but it qualified, I thought, as a small warning from the universe.

Remember whose side I'm on.

Yeah. Not mine. Got it, universe.

I tugged my hood over my head, then carefully scaled the fence and limped home, aware, as always, that when luck goes bad, it tends to stay bad. Some things just don't change.

The stranger rolled his ankle when he landed, and I cringed. I'd done that a few times, back when Mom and I played on the Santa Barbara public tennis courts. Those memories always ended with Mom helping me to the car. But the stranger limped away, and I reviewed my notes: I didn't know who he was, or why he broke into that lot a couple of times each week, or what appeal that old boat held. And yet, we weren't so different, except maybe for the breaking and entering. Two souls, wide awake in the most wee of hours.

I'd found him entirely by accident, of course. Mom and I had just moved into Aaron's house in the hills of Orilla del Cielo. From the window of my new room, I had a panoramic view of Orilly and the Pacific beyond. (That's what everyone calls the town, I quickly learned. As in *O, RLY?*) The vista was lovely, but it held secrets, too. Aaron had pointed out the scars left by a severe storm that hit the coast years before: an abandoned trawler, mouldering on the rocks, saw grass growing through holes in its hull; the rubble of an

old stone pier that had collapsed, dumping Aaron's favourite seafood restaurant into the sea. And despite the million-dollar view, Orilly is an oil town, strictly blue collar. Bernaco Oil, where Aaron works, owns most of the land, and its drilling platforms stand like sentries offshore, watching the townspeople. It's the polar opposite of Santa Barbara, where I'd lived before and where one might bump into Rob Lowe at the supermarket or sell Girl Scout cookies to Oprah. Orilly has no such glamour. There isn't even a movie theatre. Highway 1 serves as a neat seam, separating the town into two halves: the hills, where Aaron and the rest of the oil executives live among bright lawns and lush eucalyptus groves, and the lowlands, where the oil workers are stuffed into little boxes among nail salons and strip malls.

But that view. The sunsets, practically nuclear, transform the ocean each night into a shimmering golden blanket. The grimy, bulky oil rigs become blazing, floating cities, strung across the horizon like Christmas lights.

That view is the reason OSPERT has a permanent home in my window, and the reason I spotted the stranger. OSPERT is my Orion SpaceProbe Equatorial Reflector Telescope. He's got an aluminium Newtonian optical tube, a rack-and-pinion focuser, and two Kellner eyepieces. All of which means he's exceptionally good at tracking anything that moves: comets, the International Space Station, Mars.

And strangers who break into the police impound lot.

I found him because of Twilight Guy, a weekend stargazer who keeps an amateur-astronomy blog. That night, weeks and weeks ago, TG was all lit up about a supernova: *Supposed to be a real light show*, he'd exclaimed. And that was good for me, because if TG could see something, then I probably could, too; he blogs from Monterey, just a short hop from Orilly. You'd expect an exploding star to dominate the night sky, but alas, even the brightest supernovae are hardly more than a pale smudge among the stars. The magic, though, isn't in what they *look* like, but in what they *are*: the final echo of a stunning symphony, performed a million miles away, a thousand thousand years ago. They're a flourish of history, preserved against the cape of night.

Unfortunately, while TG is a perfectly competent astronomer, he's a shitty meteorologist.

Supernova a bust

by Twilight Guy | June 23, 2012 • 1:48 a.m.

Sorry, folks! Low pressure system from the northwest made its way down the coast late last night, effectively ruining any West Coasters' chance of seeing PSN J11085663 + 2635300. Major bummer. International folks, send your own photos so those of us in the dark (LOL, *in the dark*) don't miss out!

Major bummer, indeed. I'd loaded up on caffeine and couldn't sleep. So instead, I turned OSPERT towards the earth, adjusting the finderscope until I found the oil rigs, glowing in the dark. Even that late, they were alive with activity. Eventually, I turned the telescope towards Orilly himself. And that's how I spotted the stranger. He was practically the only thing moving at that hour. He wasn't hard to spot.

Jesus, if Mom knew I was spying on people...could just imagine the headlines.

LOCAL VOYEUR STRIKES AGAIN

Peeping teen allegedly points telescope down,
not up; neighbours scandalized

But Orilly was dead tired, everyone asleep. Nobody would know.

Anyway, Mom already felt scandalized by OSPERT. And the stars, and the Carl Sagan posters, and the Cornell pennant tacked to my bulletin board. Though, of course, her true feelings had nothing to do with any of those things, and everything to do with my father.

Who I don't think about.

Below me, the stranger limped into shadow. With a yawn, I covered OSPERT's big glass eye with the lens cap and dragged myself to bed.

The administrative office of Palmer Rankin High School hummed to life around me. Derek – my older brother – was somewhere in the back offices, meeting with Ms Grace, my adviser, about that missing course credit.

So I waited.

Always with the waiting. When you're a kid, that's just the way it is: you wait for the bus. Wait for the bell. Wait for summer, the weekend. Wait to grow up. Except then you do grow up, and you realize adults are always waiting, too. Waiting for a pay cheque, for a letter from the lawyer, for your food stamps. Waiting forever for that moment when something just *clicks*, and your life finally turns into the life you *thought* you'd have.

You wait and wait and wait, and then, as you wait some more, you die. It's morbid.

While waiting, I opened my sketchbook. As I worked, the world went out of focus, until there was just me and the page. Me and the eraser, reminding the clock of the gash