

# *Starry Night*

Céline

I. Neil would sit at the only place in the diner where he could easily watch the television and remain undisturbed by the incomers. He would ask for one black coffee and a piece of lemon pie, and would hum waiting for his order. The *Info Live* program was on air, customers listened carefully to so-called breaking news with their eyes wide open. A music star arrested for drug use, a politician forced to step down for an offensive word... Neil probed into the media scenery, its lexicon, and felt a disdain for the fake emotions displayed. All of that was in his opinion a despicable spectacle. He had once laughed aloud at the N.Y.C. mayor weeping for the death of a well-known activist while the patrons joined in her outpouring of grief. Faced with customers thrilled by scandal, he wondered if he belonged to the happy few that were not deluded by the media.

In any case, he definitely mixed with a tiny minority of people who thought that wonderment should not be monopolized by the lucrative entertainment of movie theaters, but directly experienced in the spectacle of nature itself. Unfortunately, Neil had always lived in the Bronx where the only panorama is blurred by unprecedented light pollution. A little bit stressed by the mission he was sent to accomplish, he took a note out of his bomber jacket: "To be done by 7:16:23 pm." It was funny for nerds to choose a prime number for seconds. Surely, Neil did not like orders, which meant "bowing to a stupid hierarchy." However, this time the anarchist fringe of the *Amateur Astronomers of New York* had democratically set out a plan. He thought about the other members scattered through the city, in particular his closest friends Mayim and Chuck. They were staying ready next to Time Square, the place which would give the most astonishing result. Everybody wanted to experience that visceral feeling of power but only a few had been chosen. Everybody except Neil who had wanted to be in the Bronx.

Breaking news there will be tomorrow, all over the world, Neil thought. With his legs crossed and his body bending forward, he stared at the backdoor, the next step of his mission. The waitress, realizing he had finished his meal, approached to remove his plate. Neil did not even react a bit. He then took the remote control and checked his watch. 7:16:00 pm. The clock was ticking.

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II. The sun had already set around 6pm. Therefore, the riots had begun at 7:40pm when it had seemed the black-out was serious, and lights would not be back until the day after. The chorus of screams and gunshots accompanied by police sirens was muffled by the usual symphony of car horns. Michael was lying on the ground and his head was covered with blood. Rioters had smashed the windows of Michael's grocery store, which they sacked. Thousands of dollars had been robbed. He could not even move from his position for his legs were as badly broken as the glass sprinkled on the floor. Michael was among the many who would never see the culprits arrested. His life shattered in a flash would never meet the newspaper headlines.

Only three blocks away, Chuck and Mayim managed to infiltrate the New York Times building. They had watched Times Square's gigantic advertising screens all suddenly going black. Power was now in their hands. They were almost reaching the rooftop when Chuck paused. He could see the South Manhattan night timidly strewn with luminous spots. 'Mayim,' he said, 'look out from the window, some lamps are still on.' 'You know, the rich keep generators like hospitals, the poor use candles like in churches,' she answered. 'Now we

should keep going.’ They had indeed sabotaged the generators of the company, thus forcing out the whole set of workers, who had expected to stay until 4pm. On the rooftop, Chuck unburdened his heavy bag. ‘Watch out!’ shouted Mayim. ‘You gonna shatter the optics.’

The training they had followed made them able to set up the telescopes and the cameras in two minutes. They had to use a compass and a level to determine the exact direction to which the telescopes would be pointed to. Then, they would automatically take photos of star clusters, nebulae and galaxies. That was the core of their mission. Gathering all the photos taken by the telescopes of each team, they could make them public in the following hours. Later on, computations of dynamical projective geometry would give all the necessary evidence to conclude that they were taken in Manhattan during the black-out by a team prepared beforehand. It would indirectly signal to the world the hidden intentions behind this event.

Mayim doubted Chuck’s rigor so she verified his settings. ‘Can’t see the Statue of Liberty from here,’ Chuck said, leaning dangerously over the guardrail. ‘Focus on what’s up there,’ retorted Mayim. For the first time today they looked up towards the night sky. They inevitably froze in sight of the Milky Way. They stargazed silently, each of them feeling the *cosmic perspective* of puny primates living on a *pale blue dot*. At their altitude, the wind was calmly blowing. The cameras were clicking periodically. Now the underworld below in the streets sounded peaceful, almost religiously quiet.

III. Urbanites tend to avoid venturing to unchartered territories. They prefer merging into crowds who indulge in trendy supervised activities. Neil was ten years old. For the first time he was entering the Hayden Planetarium. His parents had always nurtured their kids' curiosity by exposing them to the arts and sciences. Going to the zoo, reading, painting - all of these activities filled their weekends. Solitude seemed vital for his amazement though. As a child, he still had this pure innocence which continuously rekindles the flame of curiosity.

This was what Neil experienced on the Planetarium sofas. His eyes shone like the constellation of stars represented on the ceiling. 'Mom, why aren't there so many stars on Earth?' he would later ask. 'I don't know... ask your dad.' Neil had not listened to the guide who had explained that stars were not *on* Earth. They lived billions of billions of miles away, and if they were hidden from sight, it was only because a veil had been put on men's eyes. Therefore, he kept visiting the Planetarium, again and again, as one may go to see cosplayers at Comic-Con in order to behold fiction in the making.

Throughout his teenage years, he delved into science books and spent much of his time in libraries. Occasionally his mother went home with math books from higher grades, the second-hand ones, bought at a price they could afford. He grew up inspired by scientists - such as Carl Sagan or Richard Feynman - who dared to attend TV shows to explain how a scientific understanding of the world was not an obstacle to find beauty in it. Far away from the mad scientist stereotype, those were his models. He enthusiastically repeated by heart the famous Feynman words about the magnificence of a rose enhanced by the detailed explanation of its budding. It was difficult to shift other people's outlook on nature. So he did the best he could to express the elegance of knowledge, to drag *mysteries* out of their pedestal, letting them only be a driving force for vanquishing ignorance.

After passing his high school diploma at the Bronx High School of Science, Neil graduated in Astrophysics at Cornell University. The sort of political lethargy disguised as neutrality, he found in Cornell, naturally led him to the *Amateur Astronomers of New York*. At a seminar on *Observation of Pulsars in the Milky Way*, as a sophomore he met Mayim, a senior student from Columbia University. She looked serious and sensible and her eyes sparkled full of intelligence. During the last conference she raised two questions that definitely revealed some sort of relevance to what had been a boring talk. This kind of superpower attracted Neil. He went to see her to further discuss the topic. Rapidly, she mentioned the club of amateur astronomers where he would find the motivation he had long sought for.

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IV. From the diner rooftop, Neil could see barely half of the sky since it was surrounded by tall buildings. He didn't care a bit. He was not seeking to observe either Orion, the Great Bear, nor the Little Bear. Like an explorer admiring newfound territories, he let his eyes wander up among the stars. He imagined his *own* constellations of shining celestial bodies. Naturally, they could not be found in any encyclopedias filled with Greek and Arabic names. Neither were they the result of any universal pareidolia which inserts real and mythological fauna into them. Even though he was ignorant of the endless celestial inventory that Mayim could recite by heart, Neil knew that each apparent magnitude of a star seen from Earth encoded a fundamental relation between its energy and its remoteness.

He was sitting directly on the floor with his back against the door, which he had locked up lest any possible rioter might go up. He had brought a notebook with him to set his feelings and thoughts in stone, for his *future self* would certainly lose **that** memory. Finding the very words to encapsulate this moment was as hard as finding the right mathematical equations to sum up reality. He suddenly remembered the common saying: “some stars are so far away that when we see them, they are already dead.” But he knew that was not true. Nature is always more complex than an easy catch-phrase whose simplicity explains its popularity. Stars were in fact at such a dizzying distance – some even so far away that a galaxy of hundreds of billions of them appeared as one single light –, that you could not even talk about what was *happening* for them. Observing the night sky amounted to perceiving tiny bits of information from a web of *parallel* worlds.

Occasionally, screams and honks reached his ears. That did not really disturb him because he was able to silence parasitic sound in order to concentrate. He was writing and then crossing out overwrought sentences. Neil had never gone to great lengths to read books or exercise writing. Yet, his interest in lyrical music made rhyming easier. Therefore, a poem took rapidly shape:

*Standing on Earth, I wonder*

*Why I am here and not up-there in the sky.*

*I failed to birth an answer,*

*And concluded that this question should die.*

*Entities bear self-reference,*

*Thus appear autonomous.*

*But the intricate lattice of existence*

*Makes everything anonymous.*

V. Coffee was spilled on the floor where the broken TV lay. A dumpster had been thrown through the windows, and so had spewed its disgusting content. Neil made his way down the stairs and across the diner, avoiding the trash on the floor. An oncoming police patrol with blaring sirens made the remaining robbers flee. The policemen saw a passing shadow through the diner and rushed out of their car. Neil was carrying the backpack containing the material that caused the black-out. ‘Hey! Put your hands up!’ shouted Rick, one of the two policemen.

Neil fell down. On the floor, he struggled to his feet. For Rick, this revealed a potential danger of him bearing a gun. So Rick jumped on him while the other took the cover with a shotgun pointed. Neil was stuck more because of Rick’s weight than the poorly executed arm lock. The handcuffs round his wrists hurt, yet he did not fight back as he knew that it would worsen the situation. He then was violently thrown into the car. ‘Another one of them rats who left the den to reap what they didn’t sow,’ grumbled Rick. The backpack was confiscated as part of the looted goods. Fortunately, their poor knowledge of electronics prevented them from understanding the full use made of this material. On the back seats, his head against the window Neil could watch the apocalyptic landscape go by. In some street corners, stones were thrown at the police who therefore could not resume their cleansing operation. In spite of the circumstances, it seemed worth having summoned the demons of anarchy in order to worship radiant stellar gods. Neil knew that their behavior was unleashed by the sudden black-out and yet fantasized about the full-moon-like effect of the shining stars.

VI. The day after. Everybody was talking about the black-out. Even though the problem had been fixed at midnight, the toll amounted to at least one hundred million dollars. A short clip of the mayor insisting on new measures to improve the council's response in case of a black-out, and to prevent it from happening in the first place, was on air until 1pm. Then, in the course of the day, it rapidly got back to the daily subjects: the stock exchange, politics,... None of the media had understood the set of pictures sent by Neil and his pairs. Editors-in-chief knew these would not have made the headlines.

Out of desperation, Mayim decided to bring the pictures to the knowledge of several government intelligence services. Naturally, there could not be replies for such delivery of information.

Now, that someone would get their message was as far away as *Proxima Centauri* is from our sun.