

City

By Lilli Blackmore

It's impossible to see Pleiades or any other constellations from where I live now, when the sky is stained pink by electric lights. A heavy shade on my bedroom window keeps out the glare of the neon sign next to my building, but if the lights don't keep me up, the heating bill, my empty fridge, the impending alarm for work, and the cold do. During these nights, I close my eyes and retell my favorite story.

As a girl I lived in a mild wilderness of rural Florida. Street lights were rare, usually existing only in the most heavily-traveled streets, and the only shops within five miles were a couple of convenience stores carved into an expanse of pines. On weekend mornings I rode my bike on exploratory missions, and sometimes found rare patches of land without trees, where Burma reeds grew to my shoulders and the sky was so wide I could imagine being in the middle of the ocean.

At night, the only sounds of machinery came from the humming of our refrigerator or an occasional passing car. All of the insects had gone to sleep, and there was a calm that worked its way inside. When I looked out of my window, the shine from the stars and the moon illuminated the entire yard. Then one year, for Christmas, my aunt sent me a field book of all the planets and stars visible in the Northern hemisphere, and I found Pleiades. The book told me the cluster was also called the Seven Sisters, and provided a brief piece of the mythology.

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How could I not be taken by the story of seven ice-sisters who traveled the earth, but never chose to marry or show an interest in any man? Such an existence seemed lofty, pure. But on a visit to Earth, two of the sisters were kidnapped and forced to marry a human man. For years they lived on the planet, their starry light growing fainter with each lunar cycle. They escaped, finally, by climbing a pine tree back into the sky and rejoining the other five, but their glow was never as bright again, having spent so much time away from their home.

I lay in the back yard, looking up through the clear patch of sky framed by dark scrub pines, and tried to see which of the sisters were the two who had been missing. I knew that the entire time they spent on earth they were looking for ways to escape. At night, after the man was asleep, they stared up at the other five, who shone like beacons to help their lost sisters home. The book didn't give them names, so I called them Celeste and Artima. Every night they talked and reminded each other of the life they had in the sky. It seemed so close, like they could reach their arms up and touch the beautiful lights, but when they tried they remembered how far they were. And even though they said to each other, "Someday we'll find a way," when they looked up to the five, they each secretly felt they would never return.

I thought about them during the day, too. During chores, for instance, it was Artima's job to wash the dishes, while Celeste had to sweep and dust. Artima always washed the earthenware in cold water, even though her husband (who really did love her, as best he could, in spite of forcing her to marry him) offered to heat it for her. Celeste swept the floors in a precise rotation that looked almost like a dance.

At night I added any daytime stories to my larger collection, and

carefully pieced them all together in my head. Once I actually fell asleep in the yard, and woke to my mother standing over me.

“What do you do out here, Mara?” she asked as I jumped up, brushing the dead grass off my back. “Are you looking for the mothership?”

I knew she knew about the field guide, so I didn’t say anything.

Even after I went to bed, I continued working on the stories. The book said that the two sisters were gathering bark one day, when they found a tree so tall that it reached to the heavens. The tree must have been especially kind to allow Artima and Celeste to climb her, considering that they had been tearing away her skin. Maybe, because they were alone, the sisters took the chance to talk to each other about their home. The pine tree listened and thought of her own lost pinecone children, who usually grew in pairs, and offered the lonely women a way back to their family.

When they reached their frozen home, the lost two surprised the others. And even though they seemed cold to humans, the five embraced Artima and Celeste. No one said anything about how low their lights had become, and they gave them their old places back. “We kept them for you,” the first-born of the septuplets told them. When she said it, Artima whispered to Celeste, “Why wouldn’t they have kept our places?” Celeste never answered, and due to their places, they weren’t able to talk privately anymore.

Now, in my shaded room, if I lie on my back and push away my pillow I can picture the night sky as clearly as I could see it years ago. I see the seven in their close cluster, and then before I realize I’m asleep, it’ll be morning. Time to open the shades, go to work, and forget the night before.

I open my eyes now and turn onto my side. In the mostly-dark room, the white-shaded window stands out almost as brazenly as what's behind it. Maybe I could mark the sisters on the shade with my sharpie. Bigger dots for the five, and smaller dots for the two who were so far away from home for so long.

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