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ATLANTIS SHORT STORY CONTEST

WINNING STORY

Pursuer of the Universe

By Gabriela Theodora Bantaş

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Pursuer of the Universe

Lightning spots, thousands of them. That's how it all started. And I was one of those microscopic particles that originated after the death of the star. "I open at the close", one might say, quoting a world-renowned British novelist, J.K. Rowling, author of the best-selling book series in history. That is a poetic way to come into being, if you ask me. I guess I am a poetic particle. But what is even more artistic is the phenomenon that created me, and hundreds of thousands of other atoms like me: the death of a star. What I can say is this: a star surely knows how to make a powerful, dramatic exit. During their lifetime, these celestial luminaries use hydrogen as fuel and transform it into other chemical elements, such as helium, which then is built into carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, iron, sulphur and so on. After having exhausted its supply of hydrogen, it causes a violent explosion, known as "Nova", or if the star is large enough, a "Supernova". You see, it is such a complex process that people went as far as giving it a name and studying it closely. The resulting stardust is then dispersed throughout the universe, being left to float across the interstellar space until it finds its place in the structure of subsequent elements, stars or planets.

So that's how I set off on my epic journey through the universe. It is treacherous to float around like that, seemingly aimlessly. You don't know when you might come too close to a black hole. But it is also mesmerizing, getting a glimpse of how the universe works. It gives you quite a frightening feeling as well, realizing the immensity and complexity of it all and how incredibly tiny you are. Oh well, I guess my poetic side is making an appearance again. But let's not digress from the subject of the many breath-taking sights I passed by on my journey.

I was slowly floating, completely at ease, when I realized I had just gone past the two most conspicuous of the stars that make up the Orion constellation. I was taken aback by how large, mighty and bright they were. From people's viewpoint on Earth, it looks like these celestial bodies are located close to each other, in the same area of space, thus outlining the shape of the mythical hunter. However, their actual distance from the Blue Planet varies from one star to the next. This goes for all of the other constellations as well. As I was slowly leaving behind Orion, which was beginning to set, I saw another constellation gradually rising right before my eyes. It was the Scorpius. What struck me as fascinating is how remarkably creative people are, observing these stars, connecting the "dots" and coming up with stories about them. The Greek mythology provides the basis for their names and the legends associated with them. The Scorpius, for instance, stands for the scorpion that brought about Orion's death. People believe the hunter is still on the run from the scorpion, that being the reason why the two constellations are never in the sky at the same time. No sooner had Scorpion risen than Orion set. I find people's perspective of the stars very captivating.

"Oh, people...", I thought as I looked down at the Earth, noticing a pile of stardust slowly floating towards the planet, on which its inhabitants are going about their daily routines, unaware that soon enough they would come in contact with particles that were once part of a star. Without them even noticing, the stardust eventually finds its way into their bodies. Most of them are clueless to the fact that a good percentage of the atoms in their bodies come from a dead star. Isn't people's interconnectedness with the universe intriguing? And isn't it paradoxical how far they have come in their understanding of space, planets, technology, and yet how susceptible to wrongdoings or vices they are? Many of them become corrupt with time, yearn for power and money and come to disregard honourable behaviour and even human rights. They would stop at

nothing to get what they desire, regardless of the consequences their actions might have on others. They waste so much potential on petty ideals and lose sight of what actually matters. In the humble opinion of an atom, that is what tragedy looks like. But what do I know?

My thoughts on this matter were interrupted when I got the first glimpse of the sun. Until then I had been in the undesirable position of being overshadowed by a huge asteroid, which had the audacity to be floating to my right. But now it had a change of heart, decided to be thoughtful and got out of the way so I could admire the view. What can I say, I am very thankful indeed.

The sun burns so bright, even an atom like me can barely take a look at it. This burning fire ball is so huge that I am reminded again of how small I am compared to it- and to the universe. I start to worry that I will keep floating around like this forever, that I won't find my place.

But my fears are chased away when I see some other atoms on Mars calling to me: "Hello, there! Come join us!" I guess I found where I belong. In the end, no one is useless, no matter how small and insignificant they might feel.

I wake up in a swift transition from dreamland to full consciousness and see the sunrays coming in through the window. I take a deep breath, trying to take in the odd and mind-blowing dream I just had. I don't know what to make of it. There are so many thoughts running through my head. The atom was right, about everything. The elements which make up the foundation of the world as we know it, the elements we take for granted, come from the furnace of long-gone stars. Many atoms in our bodies also come from the heart of a star. And that determines our interconnectedness, both with the universe and with each other, here on Earth.

This reminds me of my favourite poem, "Song of Myself" by Walt Whitman, which highlights the fact that we all share the same root system, just like the leaves of grass ("For every atom

belonging to me as good belongs to you.”). Because of this universal link, we are able to help and understand one another, learn from each other’s mistakes in our attempt to perfect our understanding of the world and progress. We must aid and rely on each other, instead of looking down on each other and being judgmental. We live in a world where the explosions are caused not by stars, but by wars waged by people who think the world is theirs and who disregard the others. We have to change that. Like the atom showed us, every one of us is a little piece of the puzzle, contributing in our own way to the universe. This idea is also present in “Song of Myself”. W. Whitman is convinced that everything is significant in this world, no matter how small ("a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars" and "the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all machinery,")

“We are a way for the universe to know itself“, astronomer Carl Sagan once said. I try to imagine what the world would look like if everyone realized that and focused on it. We have to be fully aware of that in order to use our full potential to grow, develop, progress. The atom is waiting for us to do so. As W. Whitman says in his poem, "Missing me one place search another, /I stop somewhere waiting for you." The universe is waiting.