



# Interstellar Fingerprints

Annie Marhefka

Life was: family of five, water balloon battles in the backyard, family dinners answering mother's daily questions (*What made you happy today? What made you sad*). My father was Captain and we were his mates, bare feet steadying us against the churn of the Chesapeake Bay, intertwined limbs tangled together as we napped away sunburn in the boat's cabin below deck.

Then one brother left (car accident) and mother left (cancer) and we could have called ourselves *the three amigos* except that it was too depressing, a reminder that we used to be five, that we were the survivors. And we weren't *amigos*; we weren't mates; we were three sailboats whipping over the water, each navigating a separate course, vying for the wind to inflate our sails, trying not to crash into each other's hulls.

I would sneak out of the house and lie in the sand and dream of the intersection of sea and sky. I dreamt hard and fast, worried my father would find my empty bed and storm onto the beach looking for me. Although storming for him would have been a gentle swishing of bare feet on the sand, arms crossed, a soft exhalation of relief upon finding his daughter safe, alone. He would have slid an arm under my knees, another under the nape of my neck, and he would have carried me, my gauzy skirt dancing behind in the ocean breeze.

He was a teenager once, too. He didn't know what life was about. He didn't have anything to live for, not the way he lives for us, now. Not the way he lived for our mother. When he speaks of her, it is like he's looking into the night sky: his eyes are both chaotic and calm; they say, *I want to show you, and, You'll never understand.*

I watch him spin the steering wheel portside, lasso the dock post with rope, drop the anchor, let it sink. I see shooting trails of gold dust in his wake, water churning on the Bay as he dips and weaves the boat over and across waves, avoiding buoys that mark where the crab pots hang below the surface like land mines of grief. My mother and brother, they left us, and he's still here, burning bright as Sirius, hands like points in a constellation: Big Dipper, Little Dipper, Orion - guiding our boat on his own.

Once, as a young apprentice in his family's machine shop, my father was tasked with a project that the more seasoned technicians scoffed at: crafting a set of steel brackets. One day, the scientist who commissioned the brackets came to visit, tucking his tie between the top two buttons of his shirt as he toured the shop. He inspected my father's craftsmanship, running his fingers along the bracket's sharp edges, flipping them over, studying my shy father, who had one hand in his pocket, his gaze toward the shop floor.

"This your work?" the scientist asked. My father shrugged.

"It's just a bracket," said my father. The scientist nodded, smiled.

"See this here fingerprint of yours?" asked the scientist. He lifted the shiny metal bracket, held it gleam under the hanging shop lights so that my father could see the ridged oil stain of a fingerprint along its side. My father nodded.

"This bracket is for Voyager I," said the scientist. Another shrug from my father. He leaned against the edge of the Bridgeport milling machine he had used to form the brackets, its rotary cutters now still.

"Your fingerprints will orbit the earth," the scientist said. My father's head tilted to one side; he finally met the scientist's gaze.

My father's fingerprints decorated Voyager I as it grazed the edge of our galaxy, discovered new moons and sent us proof of life reflected in photos that would adorn textbooks in the classrooms of my father's own grandchildren. His fingerprints zipped by magnetic fields and gas giants at 37,932 miles per hour; they were a stamp upon the farthest human-built object from earth. His touch reached past the outer boundary of the heliosphere into interstellar space. My father's fingerprint is now 14.5 billion miles from earth.

Sometimes, I wonder if that's what keeps him going, what propels his boat when his first mate and his firstborn child have been ripped from his life with the precision of his Bridgeport mill slicing through steel. When he's out there on that boat alone, bobbing on the water, does he find that seam where the sea meets the sky and know that he's brushed its edges with his fingertips? Does he know that he is what welds us together, the bracket between his surviving children? That without him, we are just orbiting aimlessly, anchored to nothing.

**Annie Marhefka** is a writer in Baltimore, Maryland. Her creative nonfiction and poetry have been published in *Hobart Pulp*, *Literary Mama*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Anti-Heroine Chic*, and *Corporeal*, among others. Annie is the Executive Director at Yellow Arrow Publishing, a Baltimore-based nonprofit supporting and empowering women writers, and is working on a memoir about mother/daughter relationships. You can find Annie's writing on Instagram @anniemarhefka, Twitter @charmcityannie, and at anniemarhefka.com.