



## *The Magic Hour*

Albry Montalbano

In the summer, when I was about five years old, my father used to pull me away from my role as the Dandelion Queen of the backyard at Albry Amber Acres. We'd sit on the hill behind the pool and he'd tell me how the sun revolved around our galaxy. He'd make a tight fist with his right hand, arm rigid and perpendicular to the ground. Then with his left hand, formed as if cupping a baseball, my father demonstrated Earth's rotation around his tight right fist—the sun. Depending

on which season my father was explaining, he angled his left hand toward the sun or away. He talked in revolutions.

My father was a salesman who sold wall covering by day. And during the weekends, he showed me the sun, stars, and rainbows. I believed my father. On the hill behind the pool at Albry Amber Acres, I would compare my father's model of the galaxy to the sky. I liked my father's better. With two fists, he replicated the spinning, the angles, and approximate distance a planet could be from the sun and still support life. My father told me that our galaxy was the only one with humans, that it was either too hot or too cold on all the other planets.

But I couldn't see the galaxy through the clouds. My eyes wandered as clouds morphed into dolphins and trees and slugs. The universe was just out there. "Black," my father said, "infinite." My father could not show me infinite so I wanted to hear about the clouds. "What shape do you think that one is, Daddy? What about

that one?" I'd be upset when a puffy unicorn cloud disintegrated into an alligator. My father pointed to the alligator cloud and told me about wind—how when the wind blows it pushes a cloud and changes its form. His reasoned explanation of the changeling clouds sucked the mystery out of my alligator in the sky. My father would then return to the sun and its role in the galaxy, and I'd pay attention until I thought I saw a castle.

As a child, I struggled between science and the magic I was sure composed it. I thought of science as a way of explaining the technical aspects of that world, the use of analytical reasoning to characterize our surroundings. My father explained the science behind hours and days, gravity, requirements of sustaining life, and cloud shapes. With one sentence he explained why the sky is blue. But I also had a childhood belief that something held science together, and as a child, I wondered what created the causes that gave birth to effects.

For instance, if I peel back enough causes and effects of the sky's blueness, I'm left with blue light.

Why is blue light scattered most, since it has a short wavelength? Why, if violet is *the* shortest wavelength, is the sky not purple? Why don't we see violet light? One cannot go further with rational investigation; this is where magic starts. While my father explained the scientific workings of the world, I infused what he said with what was not cold or precise enough to be science. This is what I called magic; it may also be what adults have named spirituality, karma, divinity. Similarly, my construction of scientific magic was a way for me explain the world to myself.

It did not occur to me until my father explained fog that the world worked in layers. I had believed clouds were attached to the sky, but now, for the first time, I realized the world was not as it appeared.

I cried when I learned that the stars in the constellations were not close to one another as they looked in the sky. On a heavy cold night in the country there was no sound, not even wind. My father and

I stood in the driveway while a chill lingered in the air. Weighed down by flannel pajamas, a jacket, and boots, I jumped in circles to keep warm. He wore a sweatshirt and sneakers with the laces untied, and grabbing my shoulder, directed my vision to a place above the evergreen trees. Three stars for the belt, three diagonally for Orion's sword, he said, as he had so many times before. We inclined our heads upwards, each with one eye closed so we could see as we traced with our forefingers the invisible thread constructing the outline of Orion and his dog. He told me that Orion was a great warrior, long ago immortalized in stars with his dog beside him, and I imagined a black Labrador with a droopy tongue like my dog Tara. But that night became different from all the other nights spent looking for Orion, my warrior of the sky—because my father broke Orion apart. He said all the stars are really varying distances from one another and that only from Earth, and in our imaginations, do they take any form. In that moment I understood I could lose Orion, that what I tied

myself to was actually unhinged. What would happen to Orion if I traveled in a plane? At that height I could see the varying distances of Orion's stars—not making his shape but just as regular stars, as randomly placed as all the others that exist outside a constellation.

We stood outside looking at the stars until I could not bear any more frosty breath. Afterwards, my father tucked my younger sister, Noelle, into bed and then me. When he left, I continued to gaze through the window opposite my bed. Before this night, I would imagine Orion's light infiltrating my room and protecting me while I slept. I did not have monsters under my bed because I believed Orion watched over me with his sword drawn. But my father had just proved there was no Orion. What had I believed in? I had been so sure that any light remaining outside my bedroom window was in some way from Orion—I didn't imagine a relationship between us, just a belief that he knew I existed, that somewhere in places other than my home on Bear Creek Road my presence could be felt. From

then on, some nights I believed Orion's light covered me. Other nights I didn't. I believed as insurance that I would be protected, but I also wanted to be educated about what really existed in the world. That night I learned that I had misplaced my faith, and I've spent the years since then trying to find where it belongs.

As I've gotten older, I feel this construction of the world with varying degrees of skepticism in occasional bursts of absolute certainty. This speaks to the halves of my self. I am divided—at one moment an intellectual woman understanding and differentiating between existentialism, realism, astrology, and fantasy, at others reveling in the fairy dust that makes the world go 'round. I've grown up and failed to shed childish notions, instead layering intellect and reasoning between convictions of magic. I still go on believing both sides of my self, alternating asking and answering the question of science. The younger me knows the world functions in an interplay between science and magic that keep Earth from derailing its orbit, gravity from decaying,

stars from ungluing. Magic and science move in unison, zapping and crackling, invisible like electricity, yet part of the gears that drive our world. Currents of magic and science cruise through the composition of every object, intertwining in a series of alternating peaks and dips, like sine and cosine curves undulating on a flat graph of the earth. But intellect says science is the discipline of separating fact from fiction by observation and testing theory to explain actuality. When I was younger, because I could not accept that my construction of the world was wrong, I grafted learnt hardcore facts onto my thoughts. Now, I'd like to sew this divide in myself shut so not even light can enter.

I imagine my father believed it to be his fatherly duty to tell me the science of how the world worked. He could make the sun's orbit along the outer edge of the Milky Way sound fascinating. Using his stern explanatory voice, he drew me in with the idea that I was spinning around the sun and not getting dizzy. But he talked about things I couldn't see and contradicted

what appeared in the sky. I believed my father and his construction of the world, and at the same time I believed mine.

I know now that the ancients lived by a magical rendering of our universe. Orion was a great hunter who inhabited the islands of Greece, along with his two dogs Canis Major and Canis Minor. He hunted Lepus, the rabbit, and Taurus, the bull. As an adolescent, he had a first love, Merope, but his love was not returned. Merope barely recognized his existence. Orion felt young love, the pain of lust, until he met his true love, Aurora, Greek goddess of dawn. She and Orion loved each other until he died, stung by a scorpion. Aurora honored Orion by placing him in the sky with his faithful companions, Canis Major and Minor. As Orion rises in the east, Scorpion, his enemy, sets in the west. Ancient Greeks used Orion to predict the seasons. A midnight rising of Orion meant a harvesting of the grapes. A morning rise meant the beginning of summer. Orion's appearance in the evening signaled winter. They did not

know that Orion's existence was based on the perception that stars were in the same plane. Orion was man, man elevated to light.

In Genesis, laws of physics did not rule the world; Science was not created, but was invented by man and used as a tool like a plow or arrowhead. God himself created rainbows, however, as his first covenant, a pledge of his love for mankind, after the destruction of man by flood. My second-grade Catholic Sunday school teacher taught the creation-of-the-world lesson. She used rainbows as reassurance that God loves all living things, but again, my father had a different story to tell.

As the sun descended, the horizontal slants of light burst into the house. My father opened the front door and placed a chair in the doorway. He then arranged two water-filled octagonal shaped drinking glasses on the chair. As mid-afternoon sun poured into the house and through the drinking glasses, tiny rainbows flooded the living room. I clicked the glasses with my

fingerprints. The rainbows wavered and dangled on the walls, moving in time with the small currents of water in the glasses. Excited, I jumped up and almost knocked the water glasses off the chair. Mom stood in the kitchen and yelled for me to be careful. Noelle wanted to put the entire set of eight octagonal glasses on the chair. Dad explained the effects of light refraction through a prism. I touched the rainbows on the walls and they leached onto my hand. As I got closer, the rainbows crept up my arm and spread across my face. For the first time, the sun wasn't a burning star close to Earth as seen by my dad's right tight fist, but rather magical like the clouds. It could divide itself into colors. The prism helped me see this. God wasn't in the drinking glasses. There was just water and sun, and my sister and I trying to scoop the rainbows off the walls.

Now there is a rainbow maker hanging from the top of my bedroom window. I've progressed from octagonal drinking glasses to a hard plastic three-dimensional arc strung with fishing line thumbtacked from the top

of the window frame. I've circumvented God; I can get rainbows when I want. On lazy days, I follow them around the room in accordance with the position of the sun. I do this until dusk when the rainbows fade away. Since I cannot mend the rift between my selves, I try to bridge it with fractured light. I don't need to mark my territory with a flag that signals "here I am." While I stare at the rainbows cascading over my walls, I playfully debate the existence of magic and the nature of science. Fractured light embodies what both selves believe, and so I'm no longer angry at not being certain of my place in the inner world I've created, and at not feeling whole.

