

“Looking up at the sky, what do you see?” my father asked me.

We were lying on the lawn near the back garden on a late summer evening, far enough from the apple tree so that it wasn't blocking our view of the stars. We had been talking about this and that and nothing in particular, when my father turned the conversation in this new direction.

“Well, I see Pegasus, of course, and the big and little bear,” I said pointing. “Draco and Hercules there. And then some of the zodiac constellations to the south, like Aquarius. And I can just barely see the one you taught me that isn't in my book: Vulpecula, the fox. Why, Daddy?”

“Because some people look out at the sky and see an empty space. For them, the stars have names, but not stories. They are simply distant points of light that are not bright enough to take away the darkness. When the nights are long and the sky is black, if they look up, the vast, deep darkness frightens them, and the little points of light look like the chaotic scattering of chaff in the wind.

“Imagine a world with no stories,” my father said to me. “No Pegasus, no Sinbad, no Athena, no Sherlock Holmes, no Jo March, no Frodo, no Anne Frank, no ‘Once upon a time.’”

“No stories means they feel alone and small and vulnerable. No stories means no history except a chronology of events: Market Day; Town Meeting Day; Harvest. No stories means no retelling of the odd thing that happened this morning or the funny thing that Willy said yesterday. No stories.”

“You're just being silly, Daddy,” I said. “There couldn't be a world without stories. Stories just are. They're everywhere.” I was only nine, and I thought we were playing a game. I was wrong.

“Sweetie, there is such a world, a secret world. Some years ago, a small group of people looked around at things happening on the planet Earth and weren't happy with them. And they thought, as many others have before, that they could plan a better society. They planned how to grow food and how to teach school and how to govern and how to heal people who became ill and how to build houses and furniture and provide for transportation. But with all their planning and all their thinking, they didn't think about stories. Or if they did, they thought that stories would take care of themselves.”

“But where did they go to make this society? Atlantis isn't real—is it?—and there aren't any other planets that support life.”

“They were expert scientists, and they found a way to make a new planet—a twin planet to Earth.”

“Where is it? Why don’t I see it?”

“It’s out there, orbiting the Earth. They found a way to make the planet redirect the light so that it couldn’t be seen. It’s there all right, but it’s invisible to us.

“But how could you make a planet and keep it secret—people would see you, wouldn’t they? And what about gravity—wouldn’t it change the tides or . . . or something that everyone would notice?”

My father laughed as I poured out wave after wave of questions. “It was made by some of the best astrophysicists in the world, and I’m just a storyteller: you’d have to ask them.”

“If they’re smart enough to make an invisible planet, they should be smart enough to make up a story. I’m only *nine*, and I can make up a story.”

“You know that not everyone is good at the same things. And the fact is that one of the main ways people become good at something is by seeing the process. Because I’m a storyteller, you get to see behind the scenes, not just the story when it’s completed, but how the story is made.

“Most people only see stories when they’re completed. And for some people, that and practice of telling riddles and jokes and what happened at the office last Wednesday and the funny thing that Hilary said when the fire truck came at two in the morning and how Leonard ended up sitting on the chimney are enough to make them storytellers.

“But some people don’t know how to tell a story. They can say things in order—first, next, and last—but there’s more to a story than that. There’s the excitement when you get interested in the story, and the tension when you don’t know what’s going to happen next, and the wonder when the combination of a pattern that has been used over and over and some new twist or spark or insight relights the old bent candle wick and makes the candle burn anew.

“Stories can teach, and comfort, and spur to action. Stories can render things immortal. If the loyal dog is buried at the end of the novel, you will still find it alive— frisking and scampering and well—if you only turn back to the beginning.

“You know I know that, Daddy. Why are you telling me this?”

“Sweetheart, they want me to go to them and help them learn how to make stories. But after I teach them, I’ll come back to you and Vere and Mom, just as fast as I can.”

“Wait. Just stop a minute. Go for how long? And how do you get to an invisible planet, anyway? You can’t aim to land on something you can’t see. And who would take you there if nobody knows about it?”

My father sighed. “If I tell you how to get there, will you promise not to follow me?”

“Okay: I promise. I don’t see how I could anyway. Spaceships cost millions of dollars.”

“You don’t get there with a spaceship, Sweetie. You get there through the apple tree right there.”

“Ohhhhhh! Now, I see, Daddy. It’s a story. You’re just trying out a story on me. Is it a story to explain why this apple tree of ours is so special?”

“No, Lauren, it’s not a story. It’s real.”

“But I can see the top of the tree. And I can see above the top. It’s just sky.”

“That’s true now. But there’s an apple tree in the other world as well. And when the rotation of the two worlds brings the trees into alignment, a connection is made, and it is possible to travel from one world to the other.”