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Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

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## Chasing Constellations

I stood in the wet grass, scrunching my toes in and out, letting the cool dew drops fall on my bare feet. My thin, white sundress and my thin, almost-white hair fluttering around me in the wind.

I stood firmly, watching the glow of what felt like trillions of fireflies fade in and out. Each time the one I had my gaze set on flickered out, I would close my eyes and inhale deeply, breathing in the scent of summer air and what I can still only describe as “magic”. The cool air on my sticky, sweaty skin felt good. My stomach still churned with nausea from seconds ago when my cousin and her best friend twirled me around on the “swing” made from a single branch and piece of rope tied to a tree in their backyard...over, and over, and over. But I still giggled past the dizziness every time.

I smiled and laughed to myself. My heart fluttered and my veins surged with what I look back on as “child euphoria”.

My cousin, with long, steaming brown hair, ran up beside me followed by her friend. Still giggling, she grasped my shoulders and pointed to the sky. “You see that, Grace? That’s the pegasus constellation.” She pointed to an outline of stars that unmistakably made up the image of a chubby pegasus with a bridle and saddle and very two-dimensional wings. It wasn’t one of those constellations that you had to squint at, or one that you had to imagine most of the image yourself for. It was clear and wonderous (as wondrous as a constellation of a chubby pegasus can be for a six-year-old girl).

Her friend followed our gaze, then declared that the sky was divided into three kingdoms and that we were the princesses. The constellations were our armies, and we were at war with each other.

The next minute, we were skipping across the yard, squealing, and grasping at star formations thousands of miles away that were charted by the likes of Galileo, Ptolemy, and Lacaille hundreds of years ago.

“I’ve got the one that looks like a lightning bolt!” My cousin’s friend called, jumping up and reaching for the constellation *Cassiopeia*. She landed back on the ground, and of course, her hand was empty. But in our little, embryonic brains, it was understood that we could all see what she saw in the network of stars. In our eyes, she was now holding a crackling, electrifying, zapping weapon of mass destruction in her hand like Zeus at the top of Olympus.

“I call the one that looks like a snake!” My cousin shouted, racing to the constellation *Lynx*.

“I’ve got the one that looks like a ninja!” Her friend called back, swiping at the constellation *Taurus* and pulling it down to the Earth. The constellation-now-ninja did a roundhouse kick in front of us, then punched the air.

“Oh yeah?” My cousin teased, “Well, I have the one that looks like a wolf.” *Ursa Major*, or *the Great Bear*.

“I have the bra-KEY-O-SOAR-us!” *Ursa Minor*, or *the Little Bear*.

“I have the one that looks like a knife!” *Camelopardalis*, or *the Giraffe*.

“The one that looks like a stickman is in my army!” *Perseus*.

“I have the other one that looks like a lightning bolt!” *Lacerta*.

We grabbed about a dozen more constellations each, assembling them into our militaries before I declared mightily through my snaggle-toothed smile and with my high-pitched voice, “I have the pegasus!”

We took our positions on opposite sides of the yard, grinning at one another as the light of a dozen constellations showered over us and the light of a thousand stars shined above us. I was mounted on my chubby steed, reins in hand, his unrealistic wings flapping impatiently. My cousin had the astral snake draped around her shoulders and neck while a stellate wolf growled at her side.

My cousin’s friend smirked, raising the crackling lightning bolt of *Cassiopeia* over her head and striking the ground in front of her feet.

We ran towards each other, all of our celestial soldiers colliding. My cousin and her friend’s “lightning bolts” clashed together, and soon, they were fencing, electric light dancing across their faces.

The backyard became a magical battlefield. The ninja (Taurus) launched himself at the wolf (Ursa Major), and now the wolf was growling and swiping his claws at his face. Somehow, the knife (Camelopardalis) had been plunged into the stickman (Perseus)'s chest. The snake (Lynx) had wrapped itself around the brachiosaurus' (Ursa Minor) neck. The brachiosaurus thrashed around blindly, knocking the lightning bolt out of my cousin's hand and flattening it with a *hiss* in the process.

I watched the scene unfurl for a minute, then Pegasus snorted. I stroked his mane, which was filled with glittering and searingly-bright stars. Then I clicked his reins, and we were off. We were soaring. The cold night air turned into a rush around me. I tilted my head back and laughed blithely as we circled around the battlefield/backyard. Pegasus' mighty, two-dimensional wings flapped powerfully. I looked down and watched as Orion (who had turned into a samurai warrior) unsheathed his sword and thrust into the heart of *Pavo*, or *the peacock constellation* (who had turned into a twenty-foot-tall duck).

Pegasus swooped to the left. Andromeda, who had turned into a massive dragon was also on our side, flapped above us, showering the crowds of constellations with her bright, fiery breath.

Pegasus and I landed softly on the grass. Andromeda (once goddess of dreams, now fire-breathing dragon)'s breath had vanquished most of the stelliform forces. In the center of the yard, my cousin and her friend had resorted to using sticks as swords. As soon as they saw me still mounted on Pegasus with dragon Andromeda circling above us, they dropped their trivial weapons and started running. They acted like they were scared, and they let out soprano squeals, but I could still hear them laughing with each step. I snapped Pegasus' starry reigns. He whined, raising himself up on his hind legs, then galloped after them.

The girls both released a scream that dissolved into more giggles as they dodged behind a broken swing set. I laughed and pulled on Pegasus' reigns, drawing him to a halt. I jumped off his back, my feet landing in the wet grass once again. I prowled closer to the swing set, which was lopsided and had six cheap, plastic swings of varying sizes, three of which were broken despite my cousin's friend's dad promising to fix them countless times. I could hear the girls snickering as I drew closer. As soon as I grasped one of the swings that was hanging by only one chain in my chubby, little hand and shook it in their faces, they screamed and bolted away, their screams becoming more and more like laughs the further they ran. And off we went...

We chased each other around, the porch light casting dull, yellow light across the lawn. We slipped on the slick grass more than once, transforming our knees into blotched blue and purple galaxies. We snapped twigs off of nearby trees as we went, bending them into swords and crowns with reckless abandon. We were valorous royalty, fencing each other, stabbing each other's chest with trimmings from the laurel bush. Leaves and white flowers broke off our crowns and fluttered in the wind. Pieces of wet grass were snatched out of the ground as we ran, sticking to the soles of our bare feet. Mosquitos, moths, and fireflies hummed around us, gathering around to witness the epic battle. We regarded them as fairies.

The TV inside the house blared through the screen door, but we were oblivious to the rest of the world. The adults chatted in the kitchen, dishes clinking, but the pine trees in the yard swayed, casting long shadows that pulled us back into our fantasy. The beer bottles under the shed were monsters with gleaming eyes and claws threatening to bite our toes; we still didn't leave any part of the yard unexplored. Like true kings.

As we parried across the yard, the only thing I was vaguely aware of was our celestial armies fading. Andromeda let out a mighty roar and flew back into the heavens. Perseus and Pavo both lay on the ground, fading and dwindling into trails of stars that lead back up to the sky. Orion faded right before attacking Taurus with his sword. Lynx, who was still strangling Ursa Minor, disappeared from the dinosaur's neck. The brachiosaurus had a few moments of peace before disappearing with the other constellations. Out of my peripheral, I could still see Pegasus. He was fading, but he still stood at the other end of the yard, flapping his wings and watching us intently like he wanted to see how the battle ended.

Finally, in one valiant move, I managed to back my cousin and her friend towards the tree with the "swing". They tripped over the tree root, and I stood over them, pointing my laurel bush twig at them, wearing Band-Aids as armor. One on each elbow acting as coueters, one on each knee acting as poleyns, one right above my eyebrow acting as a sallet, and a dozen more wrapped around my fingers acting as a gauntlet.

Right as I was about to strike the final blow, my aunt called out through the screen door, "KIDS! DINNER!" We laughed as we ran to the metal picnic table underneath the carport and feasted on hotdogs, and chips, and coleslaw. We raised our plastic cups and toasted to our victories, blue Kool-aid made with a \$1.00 pack of flavored powder acting as our wine. As I brought my red Solo cup to my lips, I glanced at the yard. In the glow of the porch light, I could see Pegasus standing there, his wings spread wide. He stared at me with his glowing teal eyes for a moment, then bowed his head before fading away.

It's been several years now since the night we chased the constellations. The nausea from spinning on the "swing" disappeared from my stomach. The taste of Kool-aid left my lips, and the feeling of magic-filled air left my skin. Deep, rattling tremors of grief would come to separate my cousin and I. Something catastrophic would happen,

creating a void between us. And yet, I choose to believe that there are thousands of constellations knitting the distance between us, shrinking the expansive darkness.

A part of me wants to believe that we never stopped running that night. A part of that night transcended into my being today. When I was younger, I chased brilliant, burning lights that were millions of lightyears away. They were impossible to reach, but I dared to throw my hands out and chase them. If nothing else, I hope to continue doing that — reaching out to the heavens, to the near-impossible, and believing I can touch them; believing I cannot only touch, but *grab* them: the light in the darkness.

Until I grab that light, I will tie Orion's belt around my waist, I will unshackle Andromeda and release her from the sky. I will continue to believe that thousands of constellations create an empyrean bond linking every person on Earth, and I will continue to believe that there is always light in the all-embracing darkness and that it is *not* beyond our reach.

Perhaps the constellations will look down from the heavens and remember me, and perhaps they will assemble and fight in my honor once again.