

## *The Stars Beyond our Grasp*

The hallways of North-Central Middle School echoes with the occasional screech of shoes against the tiles. A slammed door is heard throughout the entire school. A young boy, Kyle, sluggishly walks into the counselor's office, with an irritated look on his face.

"Well if it isn't Kyle." The counselor said

"Hey Uncle Art." Kyle sighed. He didn't know his uncle all that well as they lived apart for most of his life. When his father passed away his mother decided to take Kyle and move to the small town in Delaware, where his uncle lived. He loathed the thought of having to go to a school where his family worked, but his mother gave him no choice.

"Why don't you take a seat," Art said. "We have much to discuss, it seems."

"Listen Uncle Art, I don't need this whole talk, I'm fine. I didn't even do anything wrong, I just..."

"I said take a seat!" Art interrupted, his voice booming. It felt as if that one sentence rattled the whole school. Shocked, Kyle set down his bag and sat in the chair.

A brief and awkward silence ensued, until Art broke it. "Now I heard you got into a fight. Mind giving me the reason why?"

Kyle kept his head low. "Listen, some kid was giving me sh.." He stopped himself mid sentence, glancing up to see his uncle's cold gaze.

"Go on."

"Some kid was giving me trouble about my dad..."

Art's face lost the stern look, a soft and empathic one taking over in its place. "Let me tell you a story," he said. "A story about your Grandpa Murray."

A surprised look took over Kyle's face. "Mom said we're not supposed to talk about Grandpa Murray." He shyly peeped.

"Well your mother isn't here right now. Besides, you're 12 now. You're old enough to hear this." Art replied. "I was about 3 when your mother was born. My little baby sister. My little Selene. She would always put a smile on everyone's faces. Those were the good days..." He trailed off in thought, bringing about an awkward silence.

"Uncle Art?"

"Ah sorry, I got lost in thought. Anyways, where was I?"

"You were talking about my mom when she was younger"

"Ah yes, Selene. Always brightening the room with her smile. Even when our mother became ill, she still managed to put a smile on our faces. That all changed however when she passed, my mother that is. Selene was about 7 at the time, not that old, but old enough to understand that our mother was never coming back. That's when our father started to excessively drink. All day and all night, there wasn't a split second of time where you could see him without a bottle in his hand..." Art's face slowly lost his soft emotion, returning back to his stern look. In one quick motion, he turned his gaze to meet with Kyle's. "Kyle," He said in a monotone voice.

“What I’m about to say will be very hard to digest. I just want to make sure you’re prepared for that.”

Kyle’s face filled with worry. “Yeah,” He stumbled. “I’m ready.”

“Very well. You might have not known this, but your mother’s name has a meaning behind it. She was named after the Greek goddess of the moon. A name given by our mother, as she loved the stars and the sky more than anything else in the world. Besides us of course. My full name is Artemis, the Greek goddess of the hunt and was often tied to the moon. My parents expected me to be a girl, so they came up with the name Artemis. But when I was born a boy, they thought I could just undertake the nickname Art. And so I did.”

“That’s cool and all, but what does this have to do with anything?” Kyle interrupted

“Well this is it. We had another sister.”

“What? I have an aunt? How come I never heard about her?”

“Let me finish Kyle. Your Aunt was my older sister, Celeste. A name to represent the sky and stars itself. She was the perfect older sister. Warm-hearted, intelligent, she would always give the best advice. She was about 2 years older than me, so 5 years older than your mom.” Art began to slow down. He let out a sigh, filling the room with his grief, followed by a large breath. He swallowed up all the pain, returning the room to its regular state, and continued on with his story. “Your Grandpa Murray would hit us a lot. If we didn’t listen to him, or even if we did, we would get hit. At first Celeste would try to stop him from hitting us, but she shortly learned her lesson. Every now and then she would take the blame for something that Selene or I did, her screams from the other room still ring in my head as if it just happened yesterday. I’d have never thought the night would come where I wish I had heard those screams.”

“Why didn’t you guys just go to the police?” Kyle sheepishly butted in.

“Because we were family. He was our dad. There were years of our lives where our family lived in peace with each other. Each day was a blessing, because we had each other by our side.”

“I guess, I sort of get that...” Kyle said. “Sorry for interrupting, please go on.”

Art nodded his head and proceeded with the story. “One night, Selene accidentally broke a plate. She was 9 at the time. Our dad hadn’t come home yet, so we tried to clean it up as fast as we could. Just then, the doors burst open. He was furious about something. We didn’t know it at the time, but he was fired from his job that day. When he saw us cleaning up the broken plate, something clicked in him. I still remember his booming voice echoing throughout the entire complex. ‘Who did this!?’ he shouted. Before anyone could say anything, Celeste stepped forward. ‘I did,’ her voice whispered. Our dad walked furiously towards her, picked her up, and flung her around his shoulders like she was a backpack. He grabbed his keys, and walked out the door with her in tow. As the door was about to shut, Celeste’s eyes locked with mine. She put on a warm sisterly smile, as the door slammed shut, as if it were to never be open again. That was the last time I ever saw Celeste...” Art paused.

“Did she?...” Kyle asked

“Yes.” Art replied, briefly. “When our dad came home it was 3 hours later, and Celeste wasn’t with him. Grief covered his face, and he covered that with drinking. I stood there, shocked, and made direct eye contact with him. He simply turned over to me and said ‘Did you finish your homework?’ His face became blank, void of all emotion. Selene came in and asked ‘Where is Celeste?’ He suddenly became enraged. He stood up, and slapped Selene so hard she fell to the floor. ‘DON’T EVER ASK ME THAT AGAIN! NOW GO TO YOUR ROOM!’ He shouted. Selene broke into tears and ran down the hallway. I quickly chased after her, in an attempt to comfort her. As I consoled my younger sister, I came to accept two things. One, that Celeste was gone, and now it was my job to take care of Selene. And two, that the man in the living room was no longer my father.”

“Oh my god...” Kyle murmured. “Now I get why mom never told me any of this.”

Art continued on as if he didn’t hear what he said. “The next day, right after school, I went to the police station. Selene and I watched as they took away the man who we used to call dad, and we never saw him again. Our loving family of five suddenly becomes just us two. I was only 12, she was 9. We moved into an orphanage, but 5 months later our Aunt Lisa, our mother’s sister, came to take us in. She raised us well, gave us the love and affection we needed.”

“That’s sad to hear and all Uncle Art, but why did you tell me this? What does this have to do with me getting into a fight?” Kyle blurted

Art locked eyes with him, staring deep into his soul. “It wasn’t about the fight boy. It was about your dad. I grew up at 12 without a father. So can you. You have to learn to be the man of the house. You are just like me Kyle, you have to learn to take care of your mother the way I took care of her all those years ago. She’s such a strong woman, but she still carries that pain with her everywhere she goes. Be the person she needs.”

“But how am I supposed to do that? I’m nothing like you!”

“Yes you are. The only reason I sit in this chair today is because of my father. I know there are kids out there who are in need of a father figure in their life. That’s why I became a counselor, at this school, the very one I attended while I was still with my father. I want to be able to help those kids, to look them in the eye and tell them they can do it.” He leaned closer, his face just inches away from Kyle’s. “You can do it Kyle. Don’t listen to what those kids say about your dad. Only you have the power to own the truth, and only you have the power to let that truth define you. I want you to be like me. I want you to go out there, and help those in need. Make a difference in their lives. I know your dad would have wanted to.” He pulled his face away from Kyle’s.

Kyle’s face became soft, a single tear gently rolling down his left cheek. Art handed him a tissue, but Kyle declined it. He looked up towards his Uncle, putting on the strongest facade he could. “I can’t promise anything, but I will try my best to give my mother the love she needs.”

Art flashed a brief smile. “Well, I believe we are done here,” He said. “I’m glad I was able to help you work out your struggles Kyle.”

“Thank you, Uncle Art. For taking care of my mother, and for helping me out.”

“Of course. That’s my job.” Art said, putting on a smug look. “Now get back to class, those books aren’t going to read themselves.”

Kyle nodded, picked up his bag, and walked out the room. Art swiveled his chair around, facing towards the window. “Celeste,” He whispered. “I wonder how you’re doing up there. I did it again. I helped someone out with your story. It was your nephew this time. I wish you could meet him, he’s such a good kid.”

Footsteps echoed throughout the hall, alerting Art that someone was coming. Suddenly a kid appeared at the door. “Mr Warner,” the kid said. “Could I talk to you about something?”

“Of course, of course. Have a seat.” Art said. The kid slowly walked towards the chair, pulling it back and sitting down. “Now what brings you in here today, Mark?”

“Well, it’s hard to say this, but my mom’s been pretty ill recently. I’ve just been feeling so down because of it.” The kid replied.

Art put a stern look on his face. He turned around and looked out the window, and then up at the sky. He turned his chair back around, took a deep breath, and said, “Let me tell you a story.”