

Stephanie Dickinson

Starflower, The Light-Giver

1968

The light is green and full of leaves. New light. Rony and her mother are eating breakfast outside the cottage on the deck, which is bigger than their entire Bronx apartment. She feels half asleep, still dreaming. The breeze scatters sun and leaves over her hand, not the one holding the fork but the clenched one. She's feeling the strength in her body. She could defend her mother if she had to. Her father has stayed behind in the city. It's just the two of them.

"More strawberries?" her mom asks.

Rony nods, nudging her plate with the egg pancakes across the table. Ripe. Dark red with juice. She bites into bursts of sweetness pelting her tongue with tiny seeds. "Let's leave him, Mom," she says, casually, her face bathed in green balminess. The green light walks on her arm, an insect.

"And go where?" her mother asks, frowning her brows.

"Anywhere. Montana or Maine," Rony answers, as the green light encircles her neck. "He'd never find us."

"What about my parents? Your grandma and grandpa. What about money?" The breeze catches her mother's loosely falling hair. Rony's father has forbidden her to wear it down in public. "He would be so lonely without us."

"Mom, come on. He'd really be lonely if he killed you," Rony blurts.

"Let's not spoil the day," her mother says, biting her lip. "Walk with me in the woods to look at the wildflowers."

Nah, Mom, she wants to say. *Not today*. She's anxious to get to the pool and see Marita. How long can it take to look at wildflowers? Rony's a Bronx girl, not into stems and petal stuff.

They hike past the bungalows, where the chaise lounges congregate on the lawn and the women drink coffee and eat blueberry blintzes and chatter. The women are enjoying a vacation from their husbands. They give Rony the once over, her dungarees rolled up, her t-shirt knotted at the waist. Short hair, duck tailed.

A wooded path leads to a cedar marsh where the birds congregate. Warblers, thrushes, white-throated sparrows. "Each bird has its own language," her mother says. She cocks her head trying to hear a birdcall, her hand cups her right ear. "So do the trees."

Her mother loves birds; her father throws hot water on the window ledges if he sees sparrows or pigeons there. Rony turns away, biting her lip. He ruptured her mother's right eardrum. How could you escape Hitler and Stalin only to marry a homegrown Nazi?

"Look," her mother kneels by a fallen log and shows Rony tiny mushrooms inching their way into life in the bark. Like ants marching along wearing helmets. "I was only this high when they deported us to Russia. Mother would give me a tin cup of hot water with a piece of mushroom and tiny bones in it."

Rony pictures tiny bones floating in steamy water like squiggles of fingernail clippings. Her mom rarely talks about childhood stuff. Her childhood, what she had of one, is a secret. Still Rony's not a fan of marching mushrooms, and she's getting antsy.

They move deeper into the glade. Wildflowers everywhere, her mother picks blue violets and tucks two in Rony's hair. "My friends were the birds, and then the trees went quiet. The birds were gone. Do you hear, Rony? The warbler is talking to me. You have to shut your eyes."

Rony closes her eyes and there's Marita, sunning herself on a towel, her shoulders and neck, tailbone, thighs, her body golden and glazed in oil. The trees aren't talking to Rony right now, although she prefers trees and their righteous solidity to birds or fly-by-night flowers.

"These are starflowers." Her mom crouches next to the tapering green leaves with tiny star-shaped white petals.

Rony looks at the starflowers and can see light shining through the petals. It's dim in the woods. The sun almost disappears in the steeples of long needles, and by the slow-moving blackly green water where woodpeckers hammer. The starflowers give off specks of starlight, millions of years old.

Rony feels as if she's seen this starflower before, the light-giver.

Her mother is talking about the black flies. "Like a thousand mosquitoes." Her parents from dawn to dusk cut brush to build a road. "It wasn't normal brush, Rony; the brush was like iron, and I was left by myself—crawling in the weeds and chewing on grass. I saw everything, but no one could see me. I made myself invisible. 'You must not be seen,' my mother said. That was my work, to stay hidden."

Stories from that other time and place—the time before the enemy. Last night Rony had a hard time staying asleep until morning. It felt as if Marita lay next to her. *Mom, Mom, I need to run. We only have a week left so every minute counts.*

Her mother touches the silver dust that coats the bushes. "I've

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forgotten most of it, but not the one-eared gray cat. He was my kin, two scrawny creatures, ribs showing. He slept on top of my head, and we could read each other's minds. Rony, I loved that cat as much as I loved my mother. Never tell her that I said that."

"Mom, come on," she says. "You know better."

Mom, how did you end up with him? That's the question burning on her tongue. Rony doesn't want to think about the boxy living room in the Bronx. The couch, where her mother and father slept, folded out into a bed. She had to cross that room to go to the bathroom or get a drink of water. Sometimes her mom slept against the enemy, on his right side, his arm around her. Other times she lay on the edge of the bed as far from him as she could without falling onto the nicked-up hardwood floor. The nights her father hit her mother Rony flew out of her room. *Stop! Stop!*

"Whatever I came upon to eat I shared with the gray cat. Rony, does that make your mother sound nutty? I heard through his ears the mice singing. Nights, summer and winter, the stars, the stars, I saw them rushing toward me, others running away. I understood how the stars need people, lowly people, to admire them."

Stop, Mom, I gotta go.

As if reading her mind, her mom finally says, "Go on, Rony, your friends are waiting." She turns away, her shoulders shaking.

Rony knows she should go to her and ask *Mom, Mom, what's wrong? Don't cry.*

The pool, edged in concrete, sits in the middle of a pasture's swaying grasses. Senior high girls lie on bath towels, listening to transistor radios. Bubblegum pop tunes. Hard to know if they are sleeping, only that their eyes are shut. She ducks into the changing room, a rehabbed barn, shakes the violets out of her hair, showers, a quick spritz before jumping into the pool. Her pals are executing cannonballs; they bounce off the diving board and, in the air, grab their knees, tuck, and squeeze. Nat and his chunky kid brother are vying for who makes the maximum splash; they barely miss her in the bombardment of their knobby knees and long shins. "Rony, hey, Rony, watch this. I'm going to do a six-footer." Nat gives himself a running jump. His cannonball tidal-waves the water and the older girls shriek when the splash gets them soaked: "Cut it out, you little creep!"

Rony climbs the ladder out, shakes off the droplets of water, and flattens her hair. Two tenth-grade girls awaken from their tanning slumber, their bodies cooled from a swim now cooking in the sun. They both smile and one of them waves.

"Rony." The girl's voice reaches her. Marita lies on her stomach in her two-piece pink bathing suit; Rony sits next to her, so

Marita has to squint up. “Would you rub tanning lotion on my back?” Marita is nearsighted and wears Fashion Mart butterfly glasses but has left them inside the changing room, and without them her large, quiet eyes resemble those of a calf. Her shape already draws stares, especially from the husbands who come up for an occasional weekend. Rony massages lotion over Marita’s wing blades, the feel of her shoulders, their hardness strangely soft. Her transistor playing R&B and funk. Rony’s kind of music. She tells Marita about the starflower.

Marita draws Rony’s hand close to her mouth and outlines Rony’s knuckles with her sticky tongue, then teasingly deposits her chewed Doublemint on Rony’s thumb. They both burst out laughing.

“Yuck,” Rony laughs, popping the gum into her mouth. Happy that it had been inside Marita’s mouth, between Marita’s teeth.

Sharing a towel with Marita, who smells pink and juicy, and whose chocolate hair is streaked with yellow, feels right. Rony likes the colors in her. The anthills they saw near the shuffleboard court, the granulated pyramids and the ants marching in single file, and Rony and Marita crouched and watched these beings from another world, and when an ant climbed on Marita’s little toe, she took great care to transport it safely back to its kinfolk. Rony likes how Marita slaps her knee when she laughs, and then all the shrieking and gasping for breath, and more knee-slapping. Her laughter makes Rony laugh, and afterwards it feels as if her insides have bathed, that a vacuum cleaner has sucked all the crazy-father dirt out. Marita’s laugh makes her *cute* beautiful.

“You have nice toes.” Marita tickles the bottoms of Rony’s feet. Her hands are trinkets, mischievous ones. “My mother’s monster feet look like shoeboxes.” Marita’s mother spends most of the day in the card rooms: mah-jongg, rummy, bingo, gambling for peanuts. “Your mom doesn’t play cards, does she? She seems nice. Is she?”

“She is nice,” Rony says.

A pint-sized woman in pedal pushers and sunglasses marches toward the pool, swinging her arms. “Marita, round up your sibling. Get supper on,” she yells, turning on her heel and marching off.

“Meet me at seven, Rony,” Marita says. “We’re going to Grossinger’s tonight, right? I’ve saved all my quarters so we can play bunches of songs on the jukebox.” She gets to her feet, muttering. “My mother walks like she’s battery-operated.”

Take a starry-night walk.

Marita’s lucky; she can handle her parents; there are few shockers. Rony’s father comes from a primitive galaxy, a dark star of surprises, so why can’t they leave him? Rony dives into the aqua water, swims more laps, then back-floats. The blue sky shows off its animal-cracker clouds.

Her mom, wearing her polka-dotted turquoise dress that bares her shoulders, busies herself in the kitchen. “Wash up, my love, and bring your appetite.” Rony’s favorite watermelon salad with olives and Feta cheese is waiting on the counter. They’ll eat outside on the deck and watch the sun set.

Rony lets her mom know she’s meeting Marita later.

She nods, keeps chopping mushrooms and garlic to stuff the ground meat with. “She’s a pretty girl. I’m glad you’ve made a new friend.”

It’s Rony’s job to fire the coals on the grill. She stacks the charcoal briquettes into a pyramid, douses them in lighter fluid, and then strikes a match. A whoosh of blue flame and now for the coals to ignite and turn ashy gray. She wants to tell her mom that she likes Marita as more than a friend.

Rony’s mother brings out the raw burgers for her to spatula onto the grill. Soon the patties sweat and the fat sputters onto the coals. The neighbors have company, and they drag more chairs out on their deck, two couples and two handfuls of kids. The women bring out food and wine. They shout. “Come on over, Ava and Rony!”

Rony’s mother has a name: *Ava*. She picked it out herself, never told her daughter the one she was born with, and why she chose *Ava* also a mystery.

“I’m sorry,” her mother says and shakes her head. “We’re about to eat.”

“Eat and then join us, Ava girl,” the neighbor husband calls.

Ava girl, her mom does look like a girl, pretty, more feminine than her daughter. Her mom never pushes Rony to wear more girl clothes or stop acting like a boy, and that makes her one in a million.

They shout again. “Come on, Ava!”

“Noam wouldn’t like it,” she answers.

A chill goes down Rony’s back. *I hate that man*.

Her father sometimes leaves the bathroom door open when he shaves, and once, Rony, passing by, saw him in his boxer shorts flexing his muscles, then punching the air. He was cursing his foreman. “Wait, just you wait, bastard. I am going to hit you so hard you’ll vomit blood.” This was her *daddy*, her inheritance.

They’re still eating, savoring the grilled meat and watermelon, enjoying the laughter from the bungalow next door, and watching the sun go down, staining the sky magenta, grape, and a deep bruise. Rony likes having Mom all to herself. Next week they return to the Bronx, but she refuses to dwell on the graffiti-riddled streets where everyone has a chip on their shoulder, where the fires in Mott Haven burn day

and night, not when they're sitting here with the crickets chirping as if all's right with the world. She hates for the summer to end; it's been a perfect one and she'll miss Marita.

"And now my surprise. Banana pudding cake with Nilla wafers."

Rony's heaven on earth.

They hear tires on the narrow road that leads to the cottage. The car's headlights are on and, as it slowly approaches, the driver flicks on the high beams. Her mother drops her fork, a plate rattles. The hairs on Rony's neck bristle. Maybe it's someone lost, someone needing directions. The vehicle pulls up, a used car, an AMC Rambler, light blue, dusty. Rony goes cold, stiffens; she blinks, hoping her eyelids will wipe the car away. Her father opens the driver's side, gets out, and slams the door. How long, how loud does the slam reverberate? He's wearing a tight white T-shirt, his cigarettes rolled in his sleeve. His black hair is oiled into the ringlets of a nightclub singer. In fact, he is handsome. People mistake him for Eddie Fisher.

"This looks pretty cozy," he says, his eyebrows lifted. "What's this, Rony? Where's your mother going, all dolled up? Hair down. Maybe she's got a date."

Rony is holding her breath. *How should I greet him? Call him "Dad"?*

Her mother rises. "Are you hungry, Noam?" Her voice gentle, loving.

"Sure. Make me a plate if it's not too much trouble. That is, if I'm not interrupting your luau."

She rushes into the cottage and Rony can see through the screen, her mother hurriedly pinning her thick mane up into a bun and jabbing combs to hold it.

The neighbors wave: there are only two of them now, Harold and Betty; they've never met Ava's husband and seem to be waiting for them to wave back. Rony raises her hand, glad to see them. Harold's carrying a jug of wine.

"Rondell, forgetting something?" her father asks in his Bronx tough-guy voice. Rony rarely meets her father's eyes. She hates being called *Rondell*. "Can you get my duffel bag from the car, and if it's not too much to ask, take a rag and wipe it down in there."

Although Rony hates *if it's not too much trouble*, she hops to the car, heaves her father's duffel bag out of the passenger's seat, and taking a deep breath carries it up the cottage steps. Supposedly Rony's father never speaks of his childhood because he'd spent most of it in the delicatessen that his father owned, a big loud man. He kept Noam, his only son, in the kitchen, arms up to his elbows in greasy

water scouring pots and pans. He had to use his fingernails. Maybe her father dreams about those mountains of corned beef sandwiches and slow-moving rivers of mayonnaise and Russian dressing, a jungle of slithering grilled onions and kraut. You can smell *it* on people—the harm they mean to do you. Pastrami slices, chocolate soda, and all the greatest hits. His old man pushed him around, used his fists.

The neighbors wearing Bermuda shorts and flowered Hawaiian shirts are trotting over, curious to meet Ava's husband. Perhaps they've heard how he can't hold a job, not even a factory job; he keeps getting fired. In their early forties, the couple older than Rony's parents; Harold, tall with black glasses and thinning hair, making his forehead look elongated, and Betty, his wife, has a similar one. Like it runs in her family too. Big-foreheaded folk.

The Catskills night assembles around the bungalow cottage. Rony seats herself as far from her father as possible, the legs of his chair near the edge of the deck. On the grill the coals glow orange and sinister, like eyes plucked out of a monster's head. She watches the enemy drink a jelly-jar glass of the red wine. Both Harold and Betty call him *Noam* a name like normal people have, but *Noam* doesn't suit him, as no other name would either. *Dad* doesn't suit him either. Especially not *Dad*.

Her father doesn't sip; instead, he knocks back the wine. "Too sweet, pretty cheap hock," he says, just as Harold pours him another glass. He must have showered before the Friday night drive from the Bronx to the Catskills, his hair clean and styled, his jeans pressed, shirt pressed, cuffed, and tucked. Boots polished. *You never know when you'll need to defend yourself*. Rony glimpses Harold through her father's eyes; pudgy, weak-chinned, the bottom button of his shirt missing. The makings of a slob.

Rony can hear children playing Wiffle ball on the grass under the yard light that in the darkening air attracts a flurry of moths.

Betty, too, wants to know where her father works, how long, how close to Harold's business. Bookkeeping? Textiles? Two-chinned Harold leans in, the palm trees on his Hawaiian shirt brushing her father's arm. Her father stiffens as he takes small bites of his omelet, all melted cheese, and sautéed onions, and then unrolls the cigarette pack from his sleeve, offering them all around. Betty accepts one and waits for her father to strike his match. After cleaning half his plate, he stops to light up, the blue flame sparking from his fingernails. Like a flaring temper.

"I work in the Garment District. Seventh Avenue and 37th," Harold offers. "Are you anywhere near there?"

Her father ignores inquiries about his job. Period. "So,

Ava, what have you and Rony been up to without me around?" His mother recites a list that includes walking in the woods, baking, Rony swimming every day like a fish. "Who did you go walking in the woods with, Ava? Harold here?"

"Harold doesn't do walks," Betty hiccups, then laughs as she reaches across Noam's lap to flick her ashes in the ashtray. "The two of you make a handsome couple. How did you meet?"

Her father gulps his wine and lets the silence grow, a quiet that dares anyone to speak. "We both worked summer jobs at Grossinger's. She saw me in the dirt. I was clipping rosebushes. Eddie Fisher and Debbie Reynolds married that same day in the hotel lobby. A publicity stunt. Right, Ava?"

"They were very beautiful," her mother says. "Noam was beautiful like that too. Not like everyday people."

Mom, Mom, don't lower yourself, Rony thinks. He was a sicko then too.

"No kidding," Betty says, breathing in a last drag off her cigarette, her eyes unable to pull themselves away from Rony's father. "Isn't that something. Noam here looks a little like Eddie himself. Can you sing, Noam?" Harold laughs.

"Sing for us, please." Betty claps her hands.

"Why don't you sing, Harold? Better yet, a duet, Harold and Betty."

The trees gather close, wanting to listen, the night trees with feathered fruit all waiting.

Rony can see her father visibly bristling. Once he threw her mother against the kitchen wall for saying a smiling hello to the building super. Once he held Rony's hand under the scalding faucet water for drinking the last cold soda in the house. Never mind that there were plenty of warm ones.

Her mother with all her promise, landing her first summer job at Grossinger's, in Housekeeping—stripping old towels and sheets, lifting the mattresses to make the beds, shaking out the sheets until they made a snapping sound like a flag unfurling, and pushing the loaded cart that weighed a thousand pounds to the laundry shed. There she talked to Eleanor, the 300-pound laundress, over the churning washers and dryers. *Rony, Eleanor loved cake and peanut brittle. She always made a sweet plate for me. Is it silly I looked forward to Eleanor squishing me with big hugs and telling me I needed to fatten up?*

"Rony, help me serve the banana cake," her mother says. She insists that Harold and Betty stay for dessert and coffee.

Rony jumps to her feet; she'll get the plates out and then split. Noam taps his plate with his fork. "Sit down, Ava. Sit, Rony,

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I'm telling our story."

I'm getting out of here; don't fork-tap me, Rony mutters to herself.

It was a big day at Grossinger's Resort Hotel, even for the shy girl bringing in the towels. Eddie Fisher, the singer, marrying Debbie Reynolds, America's Sweetheart. The trees shining as if each leaf had been polished, as if Housekeeping had effortlessly wiped each one.

A low voice uncoils from the enemy's mouth.

"Ten rooms on her work log and all reserved, so make them spotless for the idiot film stars, singers, and comics to spend the night. Keep your eye out for the kid bringing you flowers for those ten rooms. I saw a girl pushing her cart on the second-floor balcony, just as the parking lot went crazy with honking. She leaned over the railing. What did she see, this greenhorn?"

"So many beautiful cars," her mother says, wistfully.

The celebrity cars of 1955 pulling up—Cadillacs, Chevy Bel Airs, Oldsmobiles. Letting out women shimmering in silks and pointy-toed high heels, men in tailored suits with wide maroon and emerald ties.

"Ava, you were examining all the rich men and wondering which one might be for you. But I was the stooge who showed up with the wild red and white roses. You wouldn't even look at me."

His mother touches Noam's shoulder. "I was shy."

After all the times he beat you, Mom, you can't still love him.

If Rony could do anything she would stop the rest from happening. She would dirty this guy up, those shirt sleeves cuffed over tanned forearms. She would stop her mother from taking the bouquets. Both sets of eyes dark and huge and solemn as synagogues. The moment should have passed like an errant bee or wasp, drawn to the flowers and their wild sweetness, buzzing by.

"That's a beautiful story," Harold says.

"Cake anyone?" Rony blurts out.

Her father stands and ambles over to Rony, planting a kiss on her head. "I love you, *son*."

The kiss makes her queasy.

His mother busies herself cutting slices of cake, a worry line etched between her brows. Rony carries out coffee and cake, forks, plates. Soon she'll escape; Marita will be waiting. The crickets chirrup, the male rubbing his forewings, calling a mate. The chirruping invites her to join them in the big dark. Ferns grow behind the cottage in ropes of trumpet vines. The hummingbirds love their flowers. The red nectar. The orange. She wrestled with Marita there, ferns sticking to their skin.

They'll laugh and wrestle again.

"Rony, stay here with me tonight," her mother says, softly. Her dark eyes meet Rony's, and then down. Her cotton dress with polka dots should be a happy dress.

Her father's sharp voice carries across the deck and through the screen door. "Sing for you, Harold? Is that what *you* asked? *Again?*"

"I won't be gone long. I promised Marita." Rony lifts another jelly-jar and dries it.

"Just stay, Rony, until he falls asleep," she says, a break in her voice. She squeezes the dishrag and pink and blue soap bubbles trickle down her wrist. "Marita will wait."

Rony pictures Marita. Flawless tanned skin and the trumpet vines coiled around her. She won't wait long. "Mom," she says, worriedly, "he's going to make us pack up and leave tonight. I just know it."

Again, the enemy's voice rises from the deck. "Harold, do I look like a singer? Maybe you're the singer. Let's hear you sing. Maybe you can whistle like a bird."

Rony shivers, pictures her father's cheeks flushing, the vein at his temple swelling. The fingers of his right hand, those long fingers that are the same on Rony's hands, tensing, closing into a fist. The night is deepening and Rony can smell the soil releasing the afternoon's sun, the pine needles scattered on the ground giving up their spice, their resin. Everything is calling her to come, to hurry, to get out of the craziness she was born into.

Harold's voice interrupts. "Noam, I was kidding. We're just relaxing on a summer night."

The sound of a chair scraping. A tree frog croaking.

"How about 'God Bless America,' Harold?" her father says, pushing it. "If you want to sing, sing that or whistle it."

"Noam, I said I was joking," Harold says, cowering. "We're all friends here. More wine? Betty, fill Noam's glass."

Rony has to get out, she can't breathe, can't tiptoe around psycho dad.

"Betty and Harold are here. It'll be okay. He won't do anything in front of them. I love you, Mom." Rony gives her mother a hug, as she always does, grabs her jacket, and then flies out the back door. She lets out a deep breath as her father's image levitates and she pushes it away into the fir-scented chill.

Freedom.

The moon is full. The silver orb never disappoints as a thing of beauty or as a friend, full, quarter, or crescent. The stars and their cold light often frighten her but not the moon. Earth, part of the interstellar

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nebula; minuscule, miraculous, and, looking up, she stops, shivers at the immensity, the hazy bands of white—the Milky Way. The roar of it all. How in this vastness could people and animals exist with their infinite variety? She hears an owl hooting, and in the brush, mice skittering.

Rony runs on, reaching the pool. The turquoise water is lit by the moon and a yard light that Luna moths swarm, mistaking it for a celestial object. There she is—lying on her side on the diving board, Marita, the lilac girl in a sundress and butterfly glasses. Her transistor radio playing.

“Let’s fly,” Rony shouts, beckoning.

Marita is laughing, little bubbles popping between her rose lips. She climbs down from the diving board and squeezes Rony’s hand. *Hello*, her fingers say, and Rony’s palm says *hello* back.

Arm in arm, they hurry away from the bungalows. Their feet seem to decide that instead of Grossinger’s, they’d rather sit on the moonlit grass near the silver maples. Soon, they’re lying against each other and staring up into the night sky. The Big Dipper. The Big Bear. Rony breathes in the ripe cantaloupe scent of Marita’s hair; she wants to touch Marita’s lips.

She is not *again* thirteen, she *is* thirteen, and none of the future exists yet. She and Marita are stargazing between giddy kisses. “Rony! Rony!” A not far-off shrieking. Her chest tightens; she starts to panic. “My mother is in trouble.”

They jump to their feet, Rony running and Marita following behind. Racing, they crash through the brush, the moon blazing, lighting their way to the cottage. *Mom, Mom*. Rony sees through the window her father’s hand at her mother’s throat, her head at a strange angle against the refrigerator, his fist punching her face. A knife turning the air red. Rony and Marita burst through the screen door, shouting and forcing their way into the kitchen. Her father pushes the table over, banana cake, coffee cups, silverware crashing. He rushes past them. Outside. The car gunning, gone.

Her mother, giving off her warm smell of almonds and honey now mixed with blood, slumps into Rony’s sobbing arms. *Mom! Mom! It’s okay, everything will be fine. Every broken thing fixed. We’re safe now.*

It will be as if she had never met her husband. Rony has stopped the limousine from arriving at Grossinger’s. No America’s Sweetheart, blond and pink, floating into the cavernous dining room where the shy housekeeper looks on. No Jewish groom beaming as he takes the Gentile bride into his arms. No Noam, who looks so much

like the groom, approaching Ava with a plate of white cake.

Earth a testing ground for the shortcomings of flesh, earth formed from a spinning cloud of dust, billions of years in the making, Rony, her mother, her father billions of years in the making, now unmade.

Rony smiles, but her face feels distant, as if it too is light from a star ebbing away.

