

Making a universe



Coffee-break read

by Celia Bryce

We were just kids then and didn't know the importance of factories. Dad's worked in them was what we knew. Above school, church and our own lives, what else was there? But that day, when Mam rushed out showing her arm into a coat and throwing herself into next door's car, we knew something was wrong — and that something was at Dad's factory. We were left alone, our small world suddenly in pieces.

Which is why Billy and I decided to make a universe. An easy task, we supposed. Something to fill our time until Mam came home and things were right again.

"It'll be straight back." Her words had been buried under the town hall clock chiming three. Now it was chiming five. She wasn't straight back and we were arguing about constellations and galaxies and how many there were in a universe. Black paper and coloured shapes lay in confusion on the kitchen table.

Billy was boasting that, since he had a telescope, he knew all about universes. I was boasting that, at ten, he could hardly know anything. "Besides," I told him, "the telescope's broken."

Billy sulked.

It was getting colder and although we could have turned on the fire to warm us, we didn't. The kitchen fire was Dad's. It was his answer to Mam complaining about carting coal around on bitter mornings. But it was his face that glowed as he presented her with the gas showroom chitty. The fire that came was his pride and joy, all wood surround and three buttons: low, medium and high. Dad's gift to Mam.

We didn't turn it on. Somehow it wouldn't be right, pressing those buttons, watching the flames turn the three white oblongs orange. It was as if turning it on might make the thing at the factory worse.

"Let's get the planets right first," I said, making up to Billy. We got out Dad's book about stars and our chalks and started on the Milky Way.

Louise from next door came in with a bowl of pease pudding and some savoyes. "You're to eat this for your tea," she said. "And Mam says if you want to come round, you can. If it gets dark. She says to ask have you got bread?"

"We've got bread," I told her, looking at the steam coming from the pease pudding, then looking straight at Louise. "What's happened at the factory?"

She stood quite still and said nothing.

"What?" Billy asked, sounding older than ten suddenly.

"An accident, that's what." It was as if she'd said too much, because her face flushed. "But it's all right," she said quickly. "Mam says it's all right."

We buttered our bread with pease pudding and wrapped it round the savoyes. We didn't talk about Louise or the factory or the accident. Just sat eating in front of Dad's fire, which we didn't dare turn on.

"Let's just do the galaxy," Billy said later, his voice small and tired. "A universe is too big."

Even the galaxy seemed too big. We settled for constellations. Practising them, testing each other.

"What's this one?"

The gas fire was Dad's gift to Mam, and his pride and joy. But, even though it was getting colder, we didn't turn it on. Somehow, in the circumstances, it just didn't seem right...

"The Plough."

"Wrong. What's this one?"

"The Little Bear."

"Wrong again."

I didn't get one constellation right. Billy got them all. He gleamed in the glory of it and I was glad to know nothing much about stars.

The clock was chiming seven when we heard the car pulling up. Billy got to the door first and let Mam in. She shuffled past us like a grandma would and we followed her into the kitchen, watched her sit down in Dad's chair and smooth her hands slowly over the armrests. Billy and I looked at each other, not knowing what to say or do.

"Let's get this on." Mam nodded towards the fire but didn't move.

Billy sprang up and pressed one of the buttons. "Put it on high, love." She sat and watched the small explosion as the fire ignited.

"Where's Dad?" I asked eventually.

Mam looked at me as if surprised by the question, but she didn't answer straight away. Instead, she took us both on her knees like small children. My heart banged.

"There's been an accident, but he's all right, thank God. He's still there, helping out."

She offered no more. We didn't ask. The rest didn't concern us but passed us by like shooting stars through the eye of a broken telescope. Our fears had been for Dad and Dad alone.

"We were making a universe," Billy said, but it was too big. We didn't know what to put in it. He pointed at the kitchen table and Mam smiled for the first time since she arrived. Everything loosened up inside me, became water, and I rested my head on hers, listening to her voice as it rose and fell.

"Stars. Suns. Moons," she was saying. "Anything you can think of, like the world and the sky a thousand times over."

We sat until it was past Billy's bedtime and mine. It was as if Mam had forgotten about the time, and we were in no hurry to remind her. Instead, we savoured the warm kitchen and talked together as if none of what had gone before had really happened. The black paper that was the sky and all the sticky colours that were stars and galaxies lay on the table, ignored.

When the talk stopped, we sat staring into the orange light of Dad's fire. It was like looking at all the stars, moons and suns there ever were, surrounded by wood. With three buttons. Low, medium and high.

At last came the sound of Dad's key in the lock, the front door closing and his footsteps coming towards the kitchen. We stopped thinking about universes. Our world was big enough for us. It was what we knew best and loved best, and Dad coming home safely had made it whole again.

THE END

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