

The Art of Star Travelling

By Ed Coonce

Arthur realized the incredibly simple truth behind star travelling when he walked home down the railroad tracks one clean and clear night in August.

A weariness dragged his feet and his arms hung at his sides, weak and out of swing. His bungalow was another half mile down the double railway, sitting right at the intersection of Where You've Been and Where You're Going.

He'd built another fence, a couple miles crosstown in Furthest Corner, a project that had kept him from the poorhouse for another month or so. He was proud of this one, his best fence yet, he thought. It was straight and tall, constructed from honest pine and in his signature artful way, he painted it to rhyme with the grass and wildflowers that grew along its length.

He felt a prickle on his neck and looked up. At first he didn't see anything, then, almost imperceptibly, one bright star winked out somewhere near Sagittarius, just as another blazed into a nova directly overhead. The light from the reborn star flashed through his retinas and out the back of his head, stopping to illuminate an uncoiling fern that grew along the rim of the woods nearby. Arthur shut his eyes for a minute. His neck hurt, the workday had its way of making him ache and suffer. This was tough times.

War raged in the Eastern Republics, and what sustained Arthur was his craft. He held on.

He looked back down the tracks. Children's voices echoed from a few yards ahead.

Kids? Playing on the tracks at this hour? Sounds pretty dangerous if you ask me, he thought. He heard the ball first, bouncing through the gravel bed toward him. He reached out and caught it just as a pimply faced cracking voice spoke out from the shadowed bower.

"Sir? Can you toss us our ball?"

"Sure."

He spit on the ball, like his idol Ed Walsh, wound up, and tossed it straight back into the dark circle under the trees. It landed with a soft thump and the voice spoke up again. "Thanks, mister," then "Fire it in there, Humpy!"

Arthur turned and walked and thought about the very small and close comforts of home. He remained lost in this reverie until a new flash in the jeweled universe overhead pulled his eyes upward.

The nova sent its cosmic force pulsing toward Arthur once more. The blinding light reached him at the same moment he heard the train coming. At precisely that instant, Humpy missed another easy catch

and followed the ball as it rolled onto the tracks near where Arthur stood.

The starlight cleaved Arthur's body and everything that he was. He became, for a second, two Arthurs. Bathed in blue neon, Arthur A snatched Humpy and the ball and carried them carefully into the unfolding ferns. Arthur B stood still on the tracks, saying his good-byes. The train took Arthur B two blinks later, the sound and light fading as he and the smoking steel leviathan disappeared.

Arthur A, now just Arthur, scolded Humpy, who was trembling and not accepting what he had witnessed. He broke away from Arthur and sped back into the dark circle, then ran his legs tried to catch up with his fleeing companions.

"You boys git on home now!" Arthur called out. There was only silence. The firmament's newest and brightest dimmed, Arthur's ruddy color returned. He shed tears the remainder of his walk.

He sat on the porch till dawn, unable to go in, and wondered about Arthur B. When the first sparrow tweeted, he shuffled in and lay down, knowing now that it was the star all along that did it, and he had nothing to be afraid of.

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