

Letters to the Oddity

You were named for your father.

You were already three years old when you met him for the first time, on a pale concrete airfield under the unforgiving New Mexico sun. You recognized him from the tiny, worn picture in your mother's wallet, but he looked older and more tired when he stepped off the military troop transport.

You were afraid to let go of your mother's hand to greet him, but his blue eyes were so kind and his smile so genuine that you felt yourself smiling back, even as your long white-blond curls blew across your face. After a moment, you reached for him and he swept you up into a tight hug, gently brushing your hair out of your eyes and kissing your temple. The silver wings pinned to his chest poked your cheek as he held you.

He had been a pilot for the three years that you were growing. He had been far away, fighting and barely surviving battles against an enemy that was technologically superior to the human race. Crossing the stars to the battlefield had taken too much time, and the enemy had seen the ships coming. Without the element of surprise, they never stood a chance. After unimaginable losses, humanity had withdrawn back to their own tiny blue and green planet.

The generals had called the defeat the Last Wars, but your father said that humanity would never be done fighting and so neither would he.

He immediately returned to work as a researcher and a test pilot. He explained to you that a new technology would open a hole in space, allowing the pilots and their machines to get to the fight in the blink of an eye.

That's when the problems started.

You see, when space is disturbed, time fights back.

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Remember this picture: Matthew Collins, the man who was your father, standing on a pale concrete runway in what was left of the New Mexico high deserts. These stark blue skies had for centuries been the proving grounds of the first rockets, the raceways where humanity pushed the edge of the envelope. It was only fitting that now your father would fight yet another battle with the physical laws of the universe in the same place his forebears sweated and sacrificed.

Your father stood cocooned in a pressure suit, bright silver in the never-ending sun. It had taken three years of work and testing to get to this point, the moment of sending a single pilot through a portal.

You watched as he climbed into the prototype, clasping tightly to your mom's hand. You had just turned six years old. You and your mom had been invited by the project leader to observe the first physical test. Your eyes were so wide they almost hurt in the cool darkness of the observation booth, so different from the heat outside. As your vision adjusted to the darkness, you took in the dials and screens and technical readouts around you, eager to learn everything you could about your father's work.

The power required to maintain the portal was godawful, more power than had ever been produced on the planet, contained in a single reactor that the engineers suspected would meltdown and self-destruct. The test went forward anyway; the engineers explained to your mom that sometimes things blew up and that was part of the test process as well.

They thought you didn't understand that part of the conversation, but you did. Just like you saw the fear in your mother's eyes that she tried so hard to keep hidden from you.

You, your mother, and the observing generals and government officials were kept far from the reactors and prototypes, just in case the self-destruction was more explosive than expected.

A second reactor sat in Matthew's prototype to power the return trip. The math was in the computer, the most powerful computer that could be constructed. All he had to do was survive the initial jump, then reverse the math to get home.

The test and the task were simple. It was going to be okay. Your father had told you that everything was going to be okay. Every precaution had been taken.

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Matthew Collins was the quiet, thinking type, with calm eyes that reminded you of a deep lake you saw in a picture book. But something in his eyes told you that like a deep lake, much lay below the surface, unspoken.

His commander said that he was the best test pilot anyone had ever seen. He studied endlessly, committing to a prodigious memory the schematic and function of every valve and line in the training prototypes. And when he climbed into the cockpit, he flew by instinct, managing maneuvers no one had ever even thought to try.

But, most importantly to you, he was a gentle and attentive dad. You learned your addition and subtraction sitting on his lap at the kitchen table. The smell of aircraft oil mixed with dust, sweat, and stale coffee consumed from disposable cups would forever be associated with first grade mathematics. Tired and still wearing his flame-resistant flight suit, he took time to make sure the numbers that swam before you on the paper made sense. He told you stories before bed, and on the rare day that he had off from work, he took you and your mother to the mountains to spend time away from the heat of the desert.

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Opening the portal didn't look like something from a movie. There was no spinning ring, there was no bright light. Matthew's prototype sat on the airfield. The reactor powering the prototype glowed white-hot (but didn't explode).

You saw what seemed to be a minor flicker.

The hatch of the prototype opened.

Around you in the observation booth, the generals and admirals in their stiff blue uniforms groaned in frustration. The test had failed. The prototype went nowhere. Clearly, the math had been wrong.

But the scientists standing next to them scribbled furiously in their notes, conferring in words too fast and too technical for anyone else to catch.

When the prototype opened, your father practically fell from the cockpit, pale as the white concrete and vomiting onto the scorching ground.

The displacement had been momentary at best, but it had happened. Matthew had leapt from a standstill on the airfield to the target location on the distant edge of the solar system and back again. The data recorders in the prototype showed that he had traveled across spacetime in a fraction of a second, returning almost simultaneously to the exact place he had left. The scientists all agreed that the data was consistent with the predictions.

Your father was physically unharmed, just really tired. After the required debrief, he went home and slept for fourteen hours, into the next day, practically without moving, even when you crawled onto the bed next to him to wake him up for dinner. Your mother suggested he should go to the doctor, but he refused. The test was stressful. Anyone would have slept for a day after that kind of ordeal.

Having reviewed all the data and the debriefing records, the generals and admirals called the experiment an unqualified success.

The public held Matthew Collins up as a hero.

The losses of the Last Wars would not be in vain. Humanity finally had a way to avenge their fallen parents, siblings, and children.

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Time is a curiosity. It moves fast and slow seemingly at will, running forever downhill into the future, leaving behind only images, feelings, sounds, smells that will forever haunt your dreams.

During your seventh summer, time seemed to stretch around you like the unending plains of New Mexico. The hot afternoons lasted interminable hours, punctuated only by the chirping of grasshoppers and crickets as you waited for your father to come home, sitting on the front porch of your brown stucco house, identical to the line of brown stucco houses lining the narrow dirt street on the civilian part of the test base.

The girl you were in those days fades away a little bit with each passing moment, eroded by the unending and unrelenting current of time.

You turned eight a week after school started. As a birthday gift, your mother let you keep the stray kitten you found in the commissary parking lot. No one could determine where the small beast had come from; wildlife in the area stayed sparse and small, almost invisible. Cats were not known to roam the base, and kittens don't just flicker into existence at the whim of the universe.

The days shortened, contracting the world around you. You used a blanket to wait on the porch for your father; desert nights are often chilly. You and the kitten caught the bugs attracted to the porch lights and fed them to the family of many-lined skinks that hunted on the porch windows.

Mountains to the south and west gave the horizon a black jagged edge, framed against the pink and gold of the autumn sunset. Some nights, you saw lights on the mountains, the glitter of a distant city. Other nights, the mountains were completely black.

You asked your father about it, and he stared into the sunset, squinting. He told you that it must just be a mirage, a trick of the light and atmosphere making it look like a city might be near

the mountains. The city in those mountains had been abandoned centuries ago, he said, and no one lived there anymore.

But you heard a moment of hesitation in his voice, a note of curiosity, that told you that he wasn't convinced of his own answer.

Sometimes, time seemed to eddy, to swirl about itself. Some days felt like they repeated themselves with only small changes. You practiced your multiplication over and over again, filling out grid after grid with the messy handwriting of a third grader, willing the facts to stick in your brain as your father sat on one side of you, reviewing technical specs and your mother sat on the other side, drinking tea and knitting yet another scratchy scarf from recycled plastics that you would only wear until you were out of sight of the house and then stuff into your backpack for the remainder of the day.

Sometimes, during the long winter evenings, the cat slept in a basket by the stove.

Sometimes, the cat couldn't be found for days on end.

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The next step was to move even larger, more complex machines through the portal. The researchers built another reactor, even more powerful this time, and attached to an even larger prototype. The military asked for another volunteer, and Matthew again stepped up to serve his people.

He would be gone longer this time, to see if he could fly from the entry point to another location and still return safely.

With every new test the scientists performed, there was always the possibility Matthew would not return. Mountains of paperwork accompanied this risk, to ensure the military and research team would not be held liable in the event of Matthew's disappearance or death.

You, of course, as his child, would have been well cared for by his life insurance policy. He made sure of that.

By the time you were eight and a half years old, you were already fascinated with the experiments your father participated in. You begged him to take you to the military base so you could see the new prototypes being built. You made cardboard and aluminum mock-ups that you brought with you to base on the days he picked you up from school. You cradled them carefully as you jogged alongside Matthew, struggling to keep up with his longer strides, your pale blonde pigtails swaying down your back.

There was an undefinable sense that something was strange when you followed him into the command headquarters to sign the last stack of paperwork before the second test. You sat straight and tall in the chair next to the desk, trying to patiently wait for this part of the day to end so you could see the completed portal prototype up close one final time.

The waiting was the worst part. The boredom of waiting for the papers made time seem to swirl in one spot, looping on itself and mixing past, present and future in a haze of beige and gray carpeting that smelled of cheap, industrial cleaners and over-heated coffee in an unseen office coffee maker.

Matthew placed the pen to the paper to sign on the dotted line and scratched his signature. You looked up from your cardboard model when he made a small sound of confusion. Craning, you could see that his signature was not on the line, but lower and to the left of where it should have been.

He pinched the bridge of his nose, squeezing his eyes shut like he had a headache. A moment later, he shook himself and wrote his name again, this time in the right place.

Time felt linear again as he passed the paperwork across the desk. The woman who accepted the papers asked if he was okay, and he simply nodded. He offered her no explanation and she didn't ask any follow up questions. No one questioned the hero, Matthew Collins.

He took your hand and led you to the hangar.

That night, the cat fell asleep curled up in his basket, smaller and younger than the day before.

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The second test went off without any noticeable hitches. Matthew was more prepared for the flight and it didn't affect him as negatively. He stepped from the cockpit, confident and well. He smiled at the observation booth and gave a thumbs up. You waved back, though he probably couldn't see you through the darkly tinted windows.

No one mentioned that he came back with a scar on his left cheek. It was barely visible, just a thin white line, clearly healed for many years. No one else noticed the flash of surprise in his eyes as he saw you exiting the observation booth.

That night, you cried as he held you on his lap, telling you stories. Your tears were reflected in the swimming blue depths of his eyes, so familiar and yet somehow strange. He held

you tightly, as if he had never hugged you before, pressing gentle kisses to your head as you sniffled. When you asked for the story about his old dog Pepper, your favorite of all his slightly tall tales, he said he didn't know the story.

Your young developing brain couldn't have comprehended what your gut sense knew was the truth: the man who had returned through the portal was not the father you had known.

In an attempt to understand why he came back different, you asked him what he saw when he went through the portal, and he smiled sadly down at you.

"It's like high noon on a summer day," he said, "but there are a thousand suns and they burn every cell in your body."

"Is that why you're crying? Because it hurts?" you asked him.

He smiled even as a tear slipped over his cheek. "Part of why," he said. When he smiled, the small white scar on his cheek disappeared and for a minute he looked like the father you'd seen that morning.

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Mattie, my dear, our family is both blessed and cursed. They are blessed with the most incredible courage in the face of unyielding difficulty, but this blessing curses them to be on the front lines of history. This strength lives deep inside you, as it did for your father. It prepared you for what comes next. When you are the most scared, and most alone, you use that strength and use it to find your way forward. Never forget this, no matter what happens, no matter who you are.

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After the last successful test, it was time to open a portal big enough to move the fleet. Multiple pilots were placed in their fighters, each equipped with a reactor, each carefully briefed by Matthew Collins himself, each steely-eyed and ready to face whatever the universe could throw at them.

Invisible to the naked eye, the portal stretched wide and swallowed the fighters and the pilots within them. You, clasped tight in your mother's arms, waved goodbye to your father as he flickered from existence. You were going to turn nine years old in three days.

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Imagine this: You throw a stone into a puddle, and there will be a splash. Water is displaced from the stone. There's a tear in the fabric of the surface as the water separates to allow the stone to pass through. As the water rushes back to fill the void, there's a blip.

Any child knows, even ones raised in deserts, that the bigger the stone, the bigger the splash, the bigger the ripples, the bigger the blip.

Now, throw a boulder into a small stream, some of the water will be displaced completely in the splash. It will land in other parts of the river and will become a part of the water there, merging into a new surface, absorbed into a new fabric. Some of the splash may go upstream, may go earlier in the river's path. Some may go downstream, skipping a section of the river completely.

In the same way, disturbed spacetime snapped back to fill the void that had been opened to allow the pilots and their machines to pass through.

Containment failed on the portal field, and the splash of displaced time reached the onlookers who had come to say farewell to the pilots. In a split second, you saw the same thousand burning suns your father had mentioned in his stories to you. You felt the arms of your mother desperately tighten around you before she vanished, leaving you alone in a cold void. The last sound you remembered hearing was her desperate scream as you were ripped away by the tidal forces of time.

Because when space is disturbed, time fights back.

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By some miracle, you survived to wake up in a cold, sterilized hospital room. The woman staring down at you was wearing glasses, something humanity hadn't needed for many decades before you were born. She was kindly, gentle as she spoke to you, asking where your family was and how you had ended up alone in the middle of a New Mexico desert. You were practically nine, so you didn't know how to answer perfectly but you put on a brave face and told the nice nurse all you could. Her smile turned brittle as you told her about the Last War, the machine your father piloted to fight the enemy, and your mom who was probably out in the desert looking for you right now. She made several notes on an old brown clipboard and then left the room quickly.

There were pilots here in this hospital, too. It was easy to tell; pilots for generations had refused to give up the comfort of their flame-resistant flight suits and the metallic wings on their chests. You studied the faces, trying to find someone you knew from visits to the hangars. You

didn't recognize any of them, but one looked a little bit like your father, with honey-colored hair and rich blue eyes. He had the same kind smile, but unlike your father, he sneaked you bits of hard candy when the nurses weren't looking.

They never found your mother or father. After the uncertain reaction from the nurse, you decided to never tell them about the burning suns you saw.

The nice pilot and his wife took you in and raised you in their home in nearby Albuquerque. Living in a city that was destroyed so long ago was weird at first, but by the time you started middle school it felt like home. By high school, the brown stucco house on the military base, the cat by the stove, your mother's scratchy scarves and your cardboard models of your father's prototypes seemed more like a dream than reality.

By college, explanations of the event began to become clear.

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Jim and Mary, the kind pilot and his loving wife, are waiting downstairs. They've been there for every milestone, every lost tooth, every school event, to the point that I think of them as Dad and Mom. My father and mother are faded memories now, eroded by the ever-moving flow of time around me.

After nearly six years of graduate school research, I am finally beginning to understand what happened, what freak accident landed me here. My theories are still in the process of being proven, but it's obvious that spacetime is a fabric, a cohesive unit. Disturbing a patch of this fabric doesn't happen just in the single location of the occurrence, but echoes across all of spacetime.

I can't help but wonder if the city I saw in the mountains as a child—the same city I would eventually grow up in—was a refracted image visible through a ripple in spacetime.

Around large bodies of water, engineers can build seawalls, locks, dams to control ripples and waves. I can only assume that the scientists working on my father's project tried to do the same thing, but spacetime would be more difficult to control.

The larger the disruption to the fabric of the universe, the larger the ripples. Containment fields only worked to a certain point. And when they failed as my father left for war, I was carried back through time in the ensuing wave.

How I survived, God only knows.

I see myself in the mirror, understanding my very existence to be an oddity in this time, coming of age three hundred years before I was ever born. There is no way to generate enough power to get back to my father and mother, to the time of my birth. The technology of this era is still so analog, the men circling the moon are using push buttons to change programs in their computers. There would be no way to create a reactor powerful enough to open another portal, even if I could recreate the math.

The only way to fix this would be not to go to the launch at all. I glance at the notebook on the small table in my bedroom, filled with a letter to myself—to the girl that I was so many years in the future. Perhaps, if the letter can make it to my parents, it can serve as a warning about the accident.

But as I'm here, dressed in my finest for my graduation ceremony this afternoon, I think it won't work. I never saw the notebook as a child, and I have to assume that it must get lost in the centuries to come.

I close the notebook and slide it into a drawer on my vanity, determination making me straighten with squared shoulders.

It was my father's courage and determination that landed me here. Being from the future doesn't mean I know what's going to happen next, but...

What I do know is that I was named for my father. And I hope I can make him proud.