

# Bright and Beautiful and Burning

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It all started with a bang.

There was nothing, and then there was everything; particles collided, matter and antimatter no longer swirling around the black vastness in peaceful coexistence. It was hot. It was chaotic. It was the beginning.

Protons and electrons battled each other as they spread across the infinite expanse of space that now existed. Atoms formed from their dueling, neutrons rising from the ashes of their battles. These neutral entities brought about a stalemate that would keep the particles stable for millennia to come. The universe kept growing.

And then there were stars. Bright and beautiful and burning. They were spheres of all sizes growing and aging. These are the same stars seen in the black skies today, though they're long gone by now. The stars that once lit up the dark emptiness, the stars that grew and grew—from Nebulas to Red Giants to White Dwarves in a cycle that lived and thrived in violent disarray—until they exploded into millions of tiny glowing particles still shine in the night sky today. But they are just memories, whispers of a past that no longer exists and a daunting message of what is to come to all that grow too big too fast.

After the stars came the galaxies, planets and stars swirling around one another in a constant battle for power. Supernovas lit up in the endless darkness and black holes sucked away at the light fighting for survival. There was no peace; there was no safety. Even gravity couldn't hold the planets together for long.

Earth was new, so new compared to the universe it lived in. It was just an infant, the glaciers and the canyons and the death of the dinosaurs just a blip in the life of the stars and galaxies it was surrounded by. But it fought; it fought hard. It created life, created beauty so new and so wonderful; this was not a planet of harsh winds and radioactive heat. It was a planet with the potential for creation that emulated the particles that exploded into space and created the stars and the planets and this floating rock circling at just the right distance from the Yellow Giant its inhabitants called the sun.

But just like the universe, the creatures blinking and crawling on the cooling rock couldn't live in peace for long.

From the very beginning, there was fighting. Protons fought electrons, antimatter fought matter. And just like the microscopic particles that created them, the inhabitants of earth followed in their place.

There were always different reasons for fighting. The earliest inhabitants fought for survival. They had claws and teeth and primal instinct. Evolution continued. Humans

began crawling, then walking, then creating. They invented weapons; they discovered fire. But the fighting never ceased.

Now there was pride. There was fear. And they still had that primal instinct that pushed them to drive their spears into the flesh of their rivals.

But the human race kept growing, evolving, civilizing.

Now warriors hid behind the masks of religion, greed, and the stories of myth. War was heroic; death was admirable; killing was honorable. There was so much blood and gore and hate. Weaponry was revolutionized. Warfare became nothing more than a game. Now they had guns instead of spears; they hid in trees and stalked their prey instead of marching into battle with pride.

No one ever knew what war would become—not the Romans with their would-be king, nor the Greeks with their Gods and wooden horses. It used to be so simple. Armies would be assembled and they'd march their way across country lines never bothering to hide their intent. They wanted to conquer, to rule, to win.

But somewhere along the lines things changed. It stopped being so organized and so honorable. People broke promises, countries lied, and soldiers were left dead with bullets in their back.

This is what the history books taught him, though the contempt he learned all on his own. Somewhere along the lines, roughly around the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they say that the world changed. Technology boomed. Production exploded. Countries became machines and people became ants.

That's how he feels now, like an ant—stepped on and forgotten. He's just another lost worker, legs broken under the weight of his duty. He's just waiting for the inevitable crushing blow, a sneakered foot to press him into the ground and end his misery. But it won't be long now, the pain in his legs is almost gone.

There are yells and screams and cries all around—or maybe those are just echoes. He stopped shouting for help hours ago, but maybe it had only been minutes. There are still crashes and bangs and explosions—that he's sure of. His head is throbbing as he lays it against the puddled dirt beneath him. It's wet and soft and inexplicably comfortable. His eyes don't want to stay open, lids weighed down by invisible anchors. The irony doesn't escape him—the anchors holding him to the earth lifting with every shallow breath he takes.

His gaze turns to the sky above him, the once dingy clouds and smog covered skyline dissipating to reveal the deep purples and endless blacks of nightfall. With the clouds gone, the stars and the moon shine so incredibly bright, almost blindingly so. He can make out the man in the moon he spent nights drawing in his sketchbooks, a face he'd not seen in years. It seemed to have aged with time; the crevices in the

man's face deeper, darker, more defeated. His eyes, once so wide with hope now seemed dark and full of dread.

The stars in the sky make shapes different than the ones he drew as a boy, sitting on the roof of his one-story house with the wide Nevada sky stretched out as far as he could see. Pointed peaks touched the clouds in the distance. They were the final curtains hiding the mystical specs of light as the sun shrank away from the seeping darkness. The stars shined bright in triumph. Bright. Burning. Dead.

He remembers those nights with such striking clarity. He can hear his parents yelling at each other in the kitchen. He can hear the banging of pots on counter tops and the slamming of his parent's bedroom door. He can hear the barking of the young German Shepherd they rescued weeks earlier. His name was lucky. It's a high pitched sound, squeaky and piercing and humorous all at once. His brothers are running around the yard, tossing a ball and taunting the young pup. His heart warms as he lays his head back against the cold roughness of the roof.

A blast across the trees shakes the ground beneath him, his legs sinking deeper into the bloody muck he's been trapped in. This blast knocks back into his head a memory from months before, like the shattering of a planet bombarded with passing meteors. Destroyed.

He remembers when he got the letter, the words on the page his own personal executioner. It was crisp and clean and whiter than any envelope he had ever seen. The mailman smiled as he delivered it. Personally. There was awe and fascination in his eyes as though this were a gift—like this was something he should be proud of, like he was a single man—barely man really, more boy in features and demeanor than he would have liked to admit—handpicked for a prestigious award as opposed to being one nameless face of thousands being rounded up like pigs for slaughter.

Because no one went to Vietnam and came back, not really. You could always see it in their eyes: the lifelessness, the dread, the seeping emptiness that threatened to suck you up if you looked into them too long. And that's if they even came back at all.

“I'm honored to be handing this to you, sir. You will serve this country well.” The strong hand of the mailman grabbed his tightly, gave it two strong shakes before he turned on his heel. He had served years earlier, his father had told him. He had fought the Japanese during World War II. And it showed in his demeanor, his stance, his stride. He had always kept to himself; he delivered the mail and acknowledged everyone with a curt nod and a ghost of a smile. He was a man of discipline, pride, and honor.

His hand lingered, still strong, still steady. But when the boy—yes boy, not yet a man—looked into his eyes he saw a flicker of the hopelessness that was seen in the

eyes of the boys who came back from war with broken limbs and broken futures. And then his hand was gone.

He did not turn back as he continued on his route filling mailboxes, with just a bit more haste than usual, until he reached the end of the street and turned left out of sight.

Everyone looked at him differently after that, after he got the letter that sealed his fate and left him a dead man in the jungles of Vietnam. The news spread fast; he was the first boy from the neighborhood to have been drafted. Nobody really knew how to approach him; nobody knew what to say. Some who'd usually say hello as they passed the house would divert their eyes, keeping their heads down and walking faster down the street. Others came to the door with casseroles and pies. They always smiled and wished him luck. They'd say he should be proud.

But behind the toothy grins and the façades of jubilation the truth swam deep in their eyes; they were scared. They knew what this meant, what this would mean for this boy's future, his hopes and dreams. He'd never make it to college. He'd never score the winning touchdown. He'd never be the same.

The mud was seeping through his uniform now, not that the thin cloth offered much protection as it were. The army green fabric was now splashed in an array dirty browns—mud from the jungle floor and blood that was not his own. The standard issue hard hat they had all been given had fallen off hours ago, a gravestone now for others who would not make it back to camp.

And now he'd be one of those hopeless souls, lost and never found. He'd become nothing more than a statistic, another tally to the ever-growing list of soldiers deceased. Maybe his family would receive his tags—a reminder of the son they once had, a son they lost to a war that would never end because there was no reason for it to begin in the first place.

But that's what has become of war. The fighting and the screaming and the death; it's the only constant this world can hold onto. It gives purpose in an otherwise purposeless world. Why else would this planet's history be full of it?

In the sky, light-years away, stars fall and atoms explode.

He never thought he'd find himself on the battlefield, even as both his father and grandfather had found themselves in army greens with guns in hand. They fought in the old wars, the wars he read about in textbooks with a level of distance and detachment he'd hoped to always retain. They were just words, events from a time he would never know, a world he'd pushed into the darkest deepest parts of his mind and locked there. But lying where he was, sprawled beneath a canopy of dark greens and ghastly browns, he should have known the truth all along; he'd always end up here.

His heart races as though his legs are still pushing him forward. The dew of his sweat wells up on his forehead, trickling down over his brow and to his lips. The taste lingers on his tongue and it tastes like Sunday mornings at the beach—when the sun was too big and too bright in the sky, the sand too rough and too hot. When he closes his eyes he can see the striped beach towel beneath his feet. He can see his sister singing between the crashing of waves and his baby brother crying over broken sandcastles. He can see his soft, unbroken feet as he runs down the hill towards them.

But then he blinks and he's back where he started, looking up at the shapes in the stars as they dance across the sky. It's a dance with an ending of such finality that most people shy away from. Because these stars are dancing. They twist and turn and sashay until, one day, their galaxies collide. Boom. Bang. Broken.

Tears well up in his eyes, a wetness that burns and stings and blurs. But the pain is almost gone by now. He only has so much time left. There's a lightness filling his body, a weightlessness that picks him up and takes him across time and space. But he's crying, he's crying like a baby and he doesn't want to go.

It's his first day of middle school again. He's waiting for the bus and his mother is watching him from the front door. He looks from her to the kids waiting with him, so much bigger and so much stronger and with all the knowledge he knows he doesn't yet have. His younger brothers are still asleep. They don't have school until much later. And how he wishes he was with them, asleep in his bed dreaming of pirates and giants and big scaly monsters that destroy cities. But he's not. He's standing like the awkward 6<sup>th</sup> grader he know he is, the kid that will trip stepping onto the bus. The same awkward kid who will eat his lunch in the farthest corner of the cafeteria. The kid who sits in the front row of his English and History classes, and doodles instead of taking down math notes. He's riding the bus home, eyes burning from the embarrassment of his first day of middle school, burning with the knowledge that it only gets harder from here. All he wants is a warm hug and a glass of milk and maybe a ham sandwich, the kind his mom make best—in the only way *his* mother can.

And then his glass of milk falls and everything gets thrown back into perspective.

Up above, asteroids zoom through space—broken bits of rock and debris that are smashed and packed together before they break and burn and descend into atmospheres that turn them to nothing more than dust.

The war he never thought he'd be a part of was a war no one understood, not even those who came here of their own volition. There had never been fighting like this before, there couldn't have. They would have told them that, wouldn't they? The historians in his textbooks, the officials who had written the letters sent out to kids

like himself, his father and grandfather—they would have told him, right? If they knew of the sweat and the fear and the endless running; if they knew of the tears they'd cry at night and the bodies they'd watch fall; if they knew of the guilt and the shame and the hopelessness, how could they say this was right?

But it doesn't matter anymore, he knows that. He doesn't even know why he's trying to make sense of it. Shouldn't his life be flashing before his eyes?

The diamonds sparkling above him capture his attention once more. He's lost. His head spins and his chest barely moves. Is he even breathing anymore? The jungle with its darkness and deceit fades from view. All becomes black, empty, a world of typed words printed on starch white paper. The biting flies and the foreign growls of animals unknown disappear. Is he still in Vietnam?

He sees his mother's face. She's smiling. She's always smiling. She's standing in the kitchen, her hair in tight curls and her crème colored apron stain free. Her lips are moving. She laughs. He hears nothing.

There are planes overhead, loud and deafening and so very close. Are they coming for him? Is this his rescue? The air is cut and warped and the wind races around his ears. It grows and grows until it's all he hears. It presses on him like the weight of his uniform after rainfall. Suffocating. It's everywhere and everything and he smiles into the whirlwind around him.

But his eyes won't open to see the means of his escape.

Instead, his mind wanders. It wanders away from the chaos and the violence and the purposeless massacres. Gone goes the shame and the anger and the confusion that comes with his mission. Because he's not in Vietnam anymore. He's bigger than the war. He's moved on.

His eyes flutter open and he's looking down. He's looking down because there's nowhere else to look. He's surrounded by darkness and sparkling lights and blue—*so much blue*. As the pieces fit themselves together in his dying mind he's reminded of the textbooks he read in school. Geography class. Astronomy. The sketches his teachers would catch him drawing when he should have been reading *Jane Eyre*. One day they'd put a man on the moon but in this moment, he was already there.

The blue globe beneath him swirls with wispy white clouds and dark green landmasses. The deep ridges of mountain ranges long for his touch. If he closes his eyes and wishes hard enough his fingers can dance along the rough edges. The earth in his hands becomes a canvas. The smooth oceans allow his fingers effortless access, the resistance coming from the canyons and the peaks where the paintbrush presses too hard and the paint builds up along the parchment. He is God and these are his children. He is the Big Bang and with a clap the universe is born.

And in his world, this small blue planet with animals and humans and amoeba that crawl and blink and live, hidden in every crevice and lurking under every rock, he is sure there would be no war. There would be no soldiers. There would be no slaughter. No man would kill a fellow man. No wolf would have the need to hunt down a sheep. No lion would prey on the gazelle grazing in the grasslands. Peace. Love. Red Giants. Shooting Stars.

It all started with a bang. Fire. Chaos. Nothing. Everything. Boom, there was life. Boom, there it goes. Bang. Crash. Pop. Thump. The Universe expands and another body falls. And his body is falling. It's falling so hard so fast and he watches as his zebras graze and his dolphins swim. He watches the butterflies pollinating flowers with a serene grace. He watches bear cubs race each other to climb up the smooth bark of trees. He watches things live without the fear of death. And then he watches it all fall apart.

Time collapses. Atoms collide. Stars explode.

A fly falls victim to a swatting newspaper. Ants kill each other over a small crumb of bread. Owls stalk mice in the dead of night. Humans kill each other on the fields of war.

In this chaos, there is reason. In these wrongs, there is right. It's all a circle, life, death, some say it's vicious but it's true. Fighting. War. Gravity. Everything that begins must end. Dinosaurs. Demi-Gods. Black Holes. There is no right and there is no wrong; there is only constance. Planets circle the sun for years and years. The sun grants light. The sun grants warmth. The sun grants life until the day it takes it all away, the day that this aging sun becomes a Red Giant and gobbles worlds up whole. Senseless. Necessary. Inevitable.

And this is the question this boy—yes boy, always and forever—only just begins to see as he watches the world he holds in his hands eat itself. Lost to a war of needless aims, legs blown off and a smile on his dying face, he struggles to make sense of his end.

He's so mad, so angry and full of rage. Because he's just a boy, and he doesn't want to be anything more. But the world is full of broken boys that never become men. And hiding behind the façade of innocence and baby blues and a nasty middle school haircut wont save him like it does in the films he'd spend Saturdays watching with his young brothers at the cinema.

Like the microscopic particles thrust into the great unknown after the Big Bang, like the rays of energy emitted from the sun and sent across the universe, his mind scatters. Thoughts and memories race across time and space, and they light up the night sky like passing comets and the stars that shine over the wide open planes of the Nevada sky.

His life burns and explodes as he thinks of his mother, smiling into the oven as she pulls out his favorite pecan pie. It burns and explodes like the stars he spent hours making pictures out of all those years ago, back when war and death were just themes in stories, back when he thought peace was pure and happiness constant.

He still holds on. Maybe this isn't it. Maybe it's all a really bad dream and he'll wake up back at camp, comrades laughing and telling stories and doing anything they can to forget where they are and what they're doing and what comes next. And that's the beauty of it all, his hope, even when he knows it's over. Knows it. Sees it. Feels it. Like the atom bombs dropped on Japan, he can feel himself splitting apart. He's bright and beautiful and burning. He'll burn until there's nothing left but particles, like the aftermath of a decimated planet or the last stages of a blinding star. Gone. Lifeless. Dead. But still full of unrelenting hope and beauty and ham sandwiches.

He may not have peace; he may not accept it. No one really can. But he lets the inevitable overtake him as he goes back to those Sunday mornings when he still lived blissfully ignorant, pixie dust clouding his eyes, the sun leaving a burn that turns his skin a deep, painful red.

Because, like the stars, he may be long gone, but his light will shine on making shapes in the night sky for years to come.