

The Legacy

by Susmita Bhattacharya

After everything was over, after the mourners had left, after the dust cloth was spread over the furniture, after the cupboards were cleared, after the equipment was packed, her daughters paused to take a breath and let the reality sink in.

The house was not a home anymore. Their footsteps clattered on the cold kitchen flagstones, an empty sound without the echo of the dog's patter, following their mother everywhere – even to her grave. For he lay down beside her and never woke up.

Her daughters wept but tried to remain composed. They had promised her they would not cry. She was returning to the earth. She would become stardust. Quite fitting for an astronomer, who in her day, had made exciting cosmic discoveries. Her attic did not contain old trunks of their childhood paraphernalia but housed a proud Skywatcher Explorer.

They had spent many nights up in that attic, or out in their garden, following the blazing tails of comets or witnessing spectacular meteor showers.

Their mother's passing made it to national news. 'A strong woman determined to carve out a career beyond the ordinary'. Funny, her daughters thought, that there was mention of putting career before family, when their father was the one who had disappeared, putting himself before anything or anybody. They had watched her race around the world, chasing adventures in space, discovering that comet which she named – after her own mother. A woman who had died giving birth to her tenth child. A woman who knew nothing beyond keeping a clean house and her family fed. A woman who would never have understood her daughter's life decisions.

Her daughters mourned the lost opportunities to follow their mother's footsteps. They chose not to be like her. More down to earth. More connected with their families. No big dreams for them.

In the morning, the following day they secured the windows, the garden gate, the back door. The estate agency had already bashed the 'For Sale' sign on the front lawn. As they were about to leave, a parcel van stopped outside the house. The sisters were handed a box; it had both their names on it. They noticed it was from America. Even more mysterious. Wasting no time, they opened the box. Inside were two saplings and a letter for each in their mother's spidery longhand. They read, eyes moving from the words to the young trees to each other and then back to the words.

I was one of those fortunate people to plant the first Moon Tree. Do you remember my trip to the Kennedy Space Centre? I planted a sycamore that had orbited round the moon on the Apollo 14. And here are two of its progeny – the legacy of the Moon Tree lives on. I want you to have it, and plant it in an open space. Where others can enjoy the magic of science. And young girls be inspired to become scientists. I'm sorry I could not inspire you. But now, I want you to have a piece of me. All my life, that's what I wanted most. When I'm with the stars, I want to orbit around you.

Love,

Mum