

there are no stars here

by A. G.

I am 9, walking alone back to our flat in the city. I am heading toward my home, sliding between tall buildings with windows that reach upwards into the dark sky. I am 9 now, and I am old enough to walk home alone. I am disobeying my parents, but I am 9, so I am old enough to make my own decisions. I keep walking, passing the dirty men on the streets. They are bruised and skinny, they do not have clothes like mine. I see a small boy reach his hand out toward a man walking by. The man moves by, glancing down at the boy, before turning away. I keep walking and I notice it is darker now, and every broken window I pass seems to look more and more violent. I am 9 now, but I am scared. I look up into the sky, looking for stars, but there are none, because there are never any in the city.

I walk walk walk and hide my face until I see a store ahead of me. In front of the building is a man with his head in his hands, crying. The man is weeping for someone, saying a name, a name, a name. The man is asking God for love and crying, crying, crying. I feel bad for the man, the man without a flat in the city, without a home to walk back to at night. So I walk into the store and pick up an apple, and standing on my tippy toes I slide the cashier 2 quarters from my pocket. I leave the store and give the apple to the crying man. He takes it from my hand carefully, and I feel all the bumps of his hand; they are not clean like mine. He looks at me, and I see him. He has a face, and hair, and a body. He holds the apple like a trophy and cries, but this time they are happy tears. He says to me I am blessed, and I deserve the love of God, far more than the people that claim to receive it. I don't know what he means, because I am 9 and I do not know what a God is, but I cry for him because he is sad, and I am glad I made him happy. And I hug him, wrapping my arms around his dirty shirt, feeling each hole and tear in the fabric, each hole and tear in his heart. And he thanks me, even though it is just an apple.

I leave, because I am 9 and I am scared now that it is dark. I look back at the man as I walk away, he is holding the apple to his chest and praying to the sky with no stars. But I have to leave him, and I am scared now that I am alone. I run to an alley, away from people, away from the world, where I am safe, where I can cry. I cry because there is nobody to give an apple to me here, I cry because there are no stars here and the alley is dark, dark, dark and it smells like garbage and smoke. Behind me, I hear a man, then I see a man. He has a warm smile, one that makes you feel safe. His eyes look like stars, they are bright and I no longer feel alone. The man asks me what's wrong, and I tell him I am scared and I don't know how to get home and I miss my Mama and Papa. He reaches for my hand and holds it tight. The man says he knows a way for me to feel happy, to feel free. The man says he can help me, he can make me feel good. I trust the man because he is a man and I am not, because he is a grown up and I am not. And he hugs me, but it doesn't feel like a hug. I ask him what he is doing, and he says he is hugging me. He pushes me against the bricks of a building, which hurts, and I begin to cry. He covers my mouth. His eyes no longer look like stars, and his smile no longer looks warm. He pushes against me and I kick at him and cry for help. He hits me across the face. I see stars, though not in his eyes. I

scream more, I scream and yell and punch him but it does nothing because he is a man and he is strong and I am not because I am 9 and I am not a man.

I fight and fight until I hear another man come into the alley and he screams at the man who doesn't hug. The bad man throws me against the wall and tries to run away, but the other man stops him. I run out of the alley and fall against a wall of a building. I hear the dark eyed man shout and I hear fighting and punches and hitting and words I've never heard before. The man who hits runs out of the alley, stumbling away with red liquid falling from his nose, hitting the pavement. I wonder if it will stain the pavement, if it will always be there.

I hear some noise and I watch as the crying man from outside the store runs out of the alley, holding an apple high above his head. He runs to me and falls onto his knees. He is crying, he is crying for me. He prays to the sky as his tears mix with the blood from the scary man's nose on the ground. And I thank him, even though it was just a man.