

The Jovian Plutonian Gravitational Effect – Marina, Year 11, NSW

I don't wear shoes.

I was eight years old when I vowed never to wear shoes again. I was sitting in front of the radio, crying from embarrassment, rage, and disappointment at once, all because of some made-up term I couldn't even pronounce.

"At 9:47 AM today, dwarf planet Pluto will cross paths with Jupiter, causing an effect observable everywhere on Earth. At that exact moment, both planets will briefly have their gravitational forces combined, and that will cause the Earth's gravity to decrease drastically. If you jump into the air at exactly 9:47 AM, you will experience a floating sensation that only happens once a century, called the Jovian Plutonian Gravitational Effect!"

"Woah. Awesome," I recall saying, amazed at the complete lie Patrick Moore had just told the world. My brain of only eight years old fully believed anything a British astronomer on BBC News Radio said. I stood next to the radio on the morning of the first of April, 1976, and waited for Patrick Moore's cue to jump up. I fell back on my weak ankles and realised it was April Fool's Day. I was betrayed. After that, I spent the rest of my life going after something that would allow me to experience the weightlessness of the Jovian Plutonian Gravitational Effect. For some reason, I decided not wearing shoes would help. That was the wisest decision made by an eight-year-old child in all of humanity. With bare feet, I can feel the Earth's textures and temperatures. I become part of it. Taking my shoes off is more than a dumb act of teenage rebellion. It's an acknowledgement of my realness. It allows me to float, to let go of the magnetic fields and experience other realities far, far away from here.

I also run now.

As the word "run" blips into my empty mind, I accidentally focus too much on it and realise I'm doing it now.

Left-right-left-right-left-right.

I can run as long as I want; no one will even know I'm gone.

Left-right-left-right-left-right.

The freezing air enters my nostrils and makes me shiver. My spine pokes at my skin, and my little hairs act as if an electrical current has hit me.

Left-right-left-right-left-right.

The electrons and ions of my bare toes coalesce with the protons and neutrons of nanoscopic grains of sand, and I know something happened. Somewhere in the cosmos, somewhere far

away from Earth and Pluto and Jupiter, something happened, and that something is the reason I'm like this. I wish I were eight years old again. I remember when I was a child and used to believe everything would last forever. But of course, it doesn't. And, of course, no one understands why you're barefoot. And, of course, planets don't magically align and make little girls fly.

I freeze. I'm at the seashore. Cold and salty water drowns my toes. My legs aren't *lefting and righting and lefting and righting* anymore. I've stopped running because Jupiter is beautiful and right there, looking at me. She looks serene. Undisturbed. If Jupiter were a person, I bet she wouldn't wear shoes. Brown and white squiggly lines cover all 61.42 billion km² of her spheric surface. Jupiter's never been this close to me. She's brighter than Sirius and greater than the Moon. But that's not unusual. Seventeen-year-old girls who don't own a single pair of shoes and like to run in the middle of the night have weird things happen to them all the time. I'm sure if I'd never listened to BBC News that morning, never stopped wearing shoes and never decided to make my little legs suffer by not allowing them to stop, I would've been surprised by a gas giant at what seems like about 10km away from me. But that's not what happened. I'm not surprised at all.

"Hi, old friend," I whisper, "I've been avoiding you for the past nine years, but the truth is, I don't hate you. I wish you could've made me fly, though."

"I'm sorry I couldn't make you fly," Jupiter tells me. Two big white shapes reveal themselves between the crooked lines, then a sage green ball pops in the middle of each white area, and I realise Jupiter's opened her eyes. I think she expects me to freak out, but again, I'm used to talking to things that shouldn't be able to speak and seeing things that no one else can.

"Me too."

"You do know there are other ways to fly, don't you? Far more effective than a fictitious gravitational effect."

"Can you show me?" I ask Jupiter, and she winks at me, and I know I have to go in the water. The waves keep telling me they need a hug. So I embrace them. The brew of hydrogen, oxygen, sodium and chlorine is cold but tranquil. I get a weird sense that Jupiter has arranged it for me. She knows me so well.

"Close your eyes," she tells me, and I do because I trust her, "now hold my hand." It seems odd, but I know how to hold a planet's hand. I don't put my arms up or jump. I let my body loosen and float as I leave it and see myself from up high.

I'm an atom. I'm molecular, and I'm rising more and more every second. I see my body and watch it disappear into water and waves and city lights and trees. It's melodious. Suddenly I'm aware of things. Jupiter says nothing, but our minds have joined, and we are the same. I'm part of the galaxy, just like the galaxy is a part of me. I have all the knowledge, and I

understand now how little and insignificant I really am, but that doesn't make me sad. It makes me uncomplicated. I'm shielded.

Because I'm merely a tiny component of an infinite universe, I feel better. I'm a part of something greater, something important. Even though this means my existence is essential for many things to be the way they are, the amount of things that would've happened independently of my birth is a lot more significant. I find myself becoming a character of all these fantastic stories that occurred long before I was born and were simply meant to be.

I discover why the Sun leaves when the Moon wants to come out. A long time ago, Sun asked Moon to marry him. He told her he'd loved her since the Jurassic Era, but Moon thought that was weird. Moon told him, "Leave me alone!" but Sun kept trying. All other stars and planets were in love with the Sun, even Jupiter, she admits. But Sun fell in love with the one that hated him the most. His surface stayed warm, but his heart was frozen, and he never loved again. I understand him. My appearance has mostly stayed the same since the first of April 1976. I still look like a frail child, but my core is different. I'm no longer trusting and naive. I'm no longer a shoe wearer. The Sun and I are not so different, which is just as sad as it is beautiful.

But the Moon and I are also very similar. All the other stars and planets see Moon as selfish and ungrateful. She was offered Sun's love, something everyone wanted, but Moon turned it down because she better enjoyed her own company. Just like I was offered shoes and the comfort of a bed to sleep in at night, but let go of it to find my peace in running dusks and dawns away in my bare feet. In the sorrowful story of Moon and Sun, I play both parts.

I'm being hugged. Jupiter gets all harm out of my way, and in her, I find a best friend. She whispers in my ear, "It will be okay", and it sounds like a Bon Iver acoustic harmony. It's like resting your head on a warm lap. It's quiet. It's empty and complete all together. Jupiter tells me humans have been wrong for ages because we use Sky as a singular word, but the Sky *aren't* just one thing. It's like how you can have a part of yourself be in one place, and at the same time, your core is somewhere else. Right now, I'm floating in the sea, but *I'm* really in the Sky.

Jupiter tells me I need to keep running because something will kill me one day, and not even Moon or Sun can tell me when that will be. But knowing how peripheral the end of me would be, I feel invincible. I'm just a voice, a melody, a smell. I understand now that I'm simply a bundle of circumstances and coincidences. Jupiter kisses me on the forehead, and I'm back in the water, back in my body.

I turn around because it's time to go.

Left-right-left-right-left-right.