Connections - 5 - Constellations

By jesse hawke

CAST:

Ley (pronounced "Lee"). Nonbinary, they/she. 20-30.
Played by Bonnie Calderwood Aspinwall

Grandmother. Female, she/her.
Played by Angela Ness

Stella. Female, she/her. 20-30.
Played by Helen Gould

CONTENT WARNINGS:

- Character introspection on their personal experience with nonbinary, including anxieties about conformity, being outed, past mentions of birth name pre-name change

- Family death

- Sfx of water, diving, high pitched tone

***

scene i.

[SOUNDS OF A BEACH - DISTANT WAVES AND A GENTLY CRACKLING FIRE]

LEY (NARRATION)

The air that fills my lungs sings of summer sun, even though the night has long since put the day to bed. Even over the char of the fire and the salt of the sea, I can still taste the sunset with every breath I take. I am anchored by the sand that brushes my fingertips, the pads of my feet; coaxes me to stay where I am, seated and content. Although I can feel the world around me beginning to cool, there is warmth enough to tide me over as my gaze drifts first to sea, then to the horizon, and to all that lies beyond. To an even greater sea, a sea of stars and stories and songs.

It's one of my favourite things about humanity. That for as long as we have lived, we have shared our stories with the stars. We have looked up into the sky at night and said, 'you, there. You will have meaning.' Time and time again, we have traced our greatest achievements and fondest legends from star to star, building constellations between them out of the very stuff that makes us, *us*. Even though every crystalline point of light in the night sky is incomprehensibly far away, even though every star and every planet and every comet that captures our attention in beautiful little clusters is, in reality, so very isolated – we draw lines between them to draw them together. To give them stories close to our hearts. So they can *belong*.

All at once, I am struck by how impossibly insignificant yet infinitely huge they are. All at once, as I tip my head back further and further in the most futile attempt to drink them all in, I feel the comforting embrace of sand all along my spine. I sigh, feeling peace in every limb and fibre of my body with the exhale, and then –

[INTAKE OF BREATH]

scene ii.

LEY (NARRATION CONT.)

– with a breath, the air inside my lungs is *cold.* I am upright, and beneath my feet are coarse, heavy floorboards. I am waiting to see if they creak, waiting to be betrayed either by the bones of the old house, or –

[AN OLD WINDOW COMPLAINS AS IT IS PUSHED OPEN]

– or by my own actions. My hands ache from the effort of forcing the unwieldy handles of the window upwards. It was long ago painted in an attempt to seal it shut permanently, and more recently eased back into use with a slightly bent screwdriver my grandfather once discarded and never came looking for. For a moment I just stand there, listening. There are distant rattles and

creaks; wind sweeps around the corners, pipes complain and then settle once more. I slip my hands back into my sleeves, think better of it, then pad back to the bed to retrieve my duvet. I sling it around my shoulders like a cape.

I know where I am, now. I remember this night.

[WIND SFX]

I am barely a teenager when I climb out onto the roof of my grandmother's kitchen for the first time. I brace myself against the windowsill, easing myself out as lightly and silently as I can manage, but gasping as the cold really begins to hit me. The clouds above may be thick, but they are also few and far between. My grandmother's house is so far out in the countryside that even on nights like this, there are more stars than I know what to do with.

It is worth enduring the encroaching cold to simply sit there and *watch*.

I do not know how much time passes me by before I hear it; a very definite *creak*. Out here I should not hear the house, all the noise that reaches me is the gentle

breeze rustling through the surrounding trees. I frown, and glance back over my shoulder to see her.

A spike of apprehension jolts through my veins as I twist to face my grandmother, with what must be fear plastered across my face. I try to say something, but though my mouth moves no words will come. I expect her to cry bloody murder, to drag me inside by my collar and berate me for being reckless.

Or worse. To wake up my parents.

I cannot predict, in that moment, that her stern expression will dissolve into giggles as she whispers, 'make way for an old lady!' and bundles herself out of the window to join me, losing one of her slippers in the process. She immediately commandeers my duvet to wrap around us both, and joins me in gazing upwards.

We say nothing to each other for the longest time. It is simply a moment encased in the warmth of someone I love, with snatches of glittering skies overhead.

After a while she begins to speak. It isn't the story of the stars; she has no interest in mythology, or science, not even in religion. No, my grandmother only knows one story about space, and it is a story about *me*. And although I have heard her tell it again and again, I know I will never stop wanting to hear it.

GRANDMOTHER

"Your father had been excited for weeks, you know. Not because of you, mind."

[SHE NUDGES LEY IN THE RIBS. LEY GIGGLES.]

GRANDMOTHER (CONT.)

"But because they – whoever it is that makes predictions about all *that*, out there – had said we might finally get to see the comet without any of that fancy equipment.

Regular old people like me and your mother and father might catch a glimpse of it for ourselves. Your dad wanted to be an astronaut when he was younger. It never did work out, as you may have guessed. Which might be for the best; I've never met a young man more down to earth."

LEY (NARRATION)

I don't interrupt her. When my grandmother tells stories, the journey is every bit as important as the destination. Besides, I know I could listen to her talk forever. On days where I miss her, now, I will always be glad that I let her talk as much as I did.

GRANDMOTHER

"But then, you couldn't have anyone stealing the spotlight, eh? You were two weeks early, and as your mum and dad rushed to the hospital and brought you into the world, all the while across the planet people caught flimsy glances of a great bloody fireball passing by. They were disappointed, far and wide; apparently the conditions were all wrong to see it, even if you *were*

one of those scientists with access to a big old telescope. But even if that weren't the case – even if the comet had come down to earth in person to shake every onlooker by the hand – I think we still would have got a much better deal that night. It truly was a once in a lifetime event, and not because some lousy rock deigned to saunter across our skies; but because it brought *you* to us. Our own wee comet."

[PAUSE. CONTINUES, PROUD]

"I was the one who suggested your name, you know. It was a joke, until it wasn't, and we all got very attached to our own little Halley. The only thing in all of the earth and the stars above that truly mattered that night."

LEY (NARRATION)

I never stopped being her little comet, no matter what. Even when I dropped the first half of my birth-name, started going by ‘Ley’. I wish I could tell that to the teenage version of me, sitting on that rooftop. That even through my parents struggling, through losing friends, through finding myself, my grandmother will always be there for me. Forever and always. Even when... even after…

GRANDMOTHER

“...even after I’m gone, you just look up there. I’ll pick the brightest star to watch over you, and save you a space in the constellation.”

GRANDMOTHER AND LEY, TOGETHER:

“As long as there are stars in the sky, you will be loved.”

[ANOTHER PAUSE, THIS ONE LONGER.

THE SOUND OF A GENTLE BREEZE FADES BACK TO CRASHING WAVES.]

LEY (NARRATION)

The day we buried my grandmother was freezing, but that didn’t stop me from climbing out onto her roof one last time. I landed heavily on the tiles, grimacing as one got dislodged, skittering to the edge of the roof then disappearing from sight. But she wouldn’t have minded. She probably would have laughed, like she did the very first time she found me out there.

That night, I looked for the brightest point of light in the sky. Instead, I saw a falling star. It must have been part of a shower, but I only saw the one.

And she made me *smile.*

scene iii.

[WITH THE WAVES, THE DISTANT SOUND OF VOICES RETURNS. THEY ARE MUFFLED AND INCOMPREHENSIBLE, YET JOYOUS.]

LEY (NARRATION)

I am eased back into the present as the wind begins to pick up around me. Sand buffets my face, and the voices that dance at the very edge of my hearing grow louder with the breeze. I know the sound comes from just a ways further down the beach; any closer and I could give a name to every laugh and every joyous cry. Yet as I lie there, my vision still filled from end to end by glittering sky, the voices remain so distant that it is as though the stars themselves are trying to reach out to me.

Maybe, in a way, they are. There is, I think, something to be said about the isolation of stars without their constellations. Without a port to hitch to, a hand to reach for, there would be nothing but emptiness as far as the eye could see. A truly lonely existence. They are not so different from people, in this way.

For a long while, that was not so far from the life I lived. For a long while, the only lights in the darkness were my family; lights that wavered at times, yet always eventually returned. For a long, long while I thought that was my lot, that this small handful of stars in the vast ocean of night was all I had ever deserved. The few other glimmers I had picked up along the way, through school or through simply being a kid, all eventually snuffed out. It happened slowly at first, but then all at once not long after Halley became Ley.

It... it was almost enough for me to quietly retreat back into the false shell, to bring back the safe pain of being who I was not, was never. To dampen my own light just to return those dulled sparks into my life.

But despite everything, I did not surrender myself for the comfort of others. Although there was nothing but the bleak darkness of a night full of clouds for a long, long while, I remained the version of myself that matters most. I think... I think it's the version my grandmother was proudest of, too.

scene iv.

[BACKGROUND NOISE BECOMES MUTED. THERE ARE QUIET MUMBLES OF CONVERSATION – A LECTURE HALL BEFORE CLASS.]

LEY (NARRATION, CONT.)

I would like to say I'm not one to believe in coincidences. I think that everything is important in its own way, and when the universe hands you something that catches your eye, you pay attention.

I sit in a half-empty lecture hall. I am far too early, and my heart is thrumming like the wings of a bird, threatening to escape the cage of my ribs. It is probably a combination of the usual first day nerves, and an all-too-familiar sense of dread creeping through my veins at the thought of what people will see when they look at me. What they'll assume.

I sit alone. When I am not with my family, I am always sitting alone. I do not, at this moment, know that this is the day that will change that for me. I do not, when I by chance make eye

contact with one girl as she walks through the door, expect her to smile at me and come to take a seat at my side.

STELLA

"Stella."

LEY (NARRATION)

She says, offering me her hand to shake, which is so clumsily formal and sweet that I instantly know she is every bit as nervous as I am. Or, I suppose, almost as nervous. I barely hear her name, and, panicking as I grasp her hand and release it almost immediately, blurt out the name I no longer use. A slight frown crosses her face, and I wonder what vision my own face must be contorting into to cause it. I take a deep breath, steadying myself. Readying myself to... *be* myself.

No going back.

LEY

[HEART IN THEIR THROAT] "No, I'm sorry, that isn't – I'm not –"

LEY (NARRATION)

Stella's gaze softens, and her smile is warm. She offers her hand again.

STELLA

[PATIENT. UNDERSTANDING.] "Rewind. Hi, my name's Stella. What can I call you?"

LEY

[CAUTIOUS, BUT SMILING.] “Ley.”

LEY (NARRATION)

She never once brings it up. Not when I respond to the wrong name on the roll call, not when we compare our awful ID photos on a night out and she glimpses the details on the card. Not when classmates refer to me with the name I was enrolled with, and she corrects them, breezy but firm.

I think she has said my name more than anyone else in the world.

At one point, I try to give her credit for the other friends that join us; that drift in our direction by chance only to find themself snagged, happily, in our orbit.

A seemingly quiet boy who joins us for a group project, then finds his voice and never looks back. Week in, week out, we study together, and he brings with him a plate of homemade baking – cookies, cupcakes, brownies, anything he can throw together quickly enough to still be warm as it reaches our table, and sweet enough to make our studies feel worthwhile. As our group grows, so too do his talents, as does the beaming smile he flashes when he greets us. It is ludicrous just how much pride you can experience through witnessing somebody else’s growth.

A girl from Stella’s old school who dances in the kitchen and dresses like she has set her wardrobe to ‘shuffle’. Every year on her birthday I present her with a basketful of yarn, mismatched and discounted and in need of a loving home. Every year on my birthday, in return, she presents me with something she has spun from that very same outcast yarn. A hat, a scarf, something that might be a cat. There is love in every stitch.

Two guys who lived opposite me in first year, who began a game of Monopoly together on the day they both moved in and would rather move mountains than call a ceasefire. Never have I seen a moment so subtle yet heartfelt as when the older of the two realised, a year into their conflict, that he was on the cusp of winning the game and palmed his roll, lying about the result to let the game continue. And continue it does – even to this very day, so many years later.

A cousin of the younger Monopoly contestant, a woman a handful of years older than me, who works as a bartender and has more stories than I have hours in the day to listen to her. Less than a

week after we met, she offered to drive me home for my grandmother's funeral. Halfway across the country, the windows cranked low and the music cranked high – just so I wouldn't be alone. I will never be able to express to her what that kindness did for me; and she would never ask to hear it.

Words cannot begin to describe the effect these people, *my* people have had on my life. Every laugh and tear and embrace woven across my memories, across my heart. All notes in a song that my life would be so very quiet without.

I have learned that there do not need to be many stars in the sky, so long as they are bright enough to find your way; as bright as those that I have found myself in the company of.

I try to explain to Stella how grateful I am to her for all of this. I tell her that I never would have had the courage to reach out like she did on that very first day. That if she had never approached me, I would never have found these people. She will not have it. She says that our friends are here because I am who I am, just as much as they're here because she is who she is.

And she is right. I tell myself time and time and time again, that she is right. That these wonderful, intricate connections made me who I am today, but I never could have been who I *am* without being who I *was*.

scene v.

[THE CLASSROOM SOUNDS FADE. THE FIRE HAS GONE OUT. STILL THERE ARE DISTANT CRASHING WAVES AND VOICES.]

LEY (NARRATION, CONT.)

Every person I've ever met is a star in this turbulent galaxy I call home. Some of them may have burnt out, fallen to earth, but they will never be forgotten. And I'm going to cherish every moment I have with those that are still here.

Tonight, unnoticed, the fire has burned itself out, resting now as glowing embers soon to be extinguished by the sand. It is safe to pay it no heed as I am called to by the voices at the water's edge.

Slowly, unsteadily at first, I push myself to my feet, stumble forwards, and begin to run. The sands shift around me – whether they seek to help or hinder me does not matter, for I blaze a trail all of my own. The wind, still warm, whips my laugh from my lungs and catches the sand I kick up around me, filling my wake with storm clouds of millions of years of nature. Of life.

I have lowered my gaze from the sky, and do not, for now, look back; as all that is beyond will always be there, and I have stars of my own to seek out.

Even as I run, as the waves and my own heartbeat battle to drown out all else, the voices that could well have come from the stars become clearer. Just like those that paint the sky above, they are impossibly insignificant but *infinitely huge,* with stories that span galaxies and lifetimes and everything in between. The bravery of a smile. The power of a name. The oh-so-human urge to make connections between us all.

My grandmother has saved me a spot in her constellation, but until then I have one all of my own. The voices of each and every star that has been gracious enough to welcome me into their lives embrace me as I scatter them from the ocean's edge and throw myself to the waves, laughter blossoming from my breathless lungs as I plunge into the cold. My friends, oh my beautiful friends, they reach for me and I squeal at their hands, their soaking hair, freezing as they collide into contact.

And yet I still feel *warmth.*

Above me, one star in particular is brilliant, a silent roar of light that dims the others around it. I know its voice, and I know exactly what it is telling me, in that moment and every moment besides.

As long as there are stars in the sky, You will be loved.