

WATCHFUL STARS

When I was very little, I was scared of the night sky. I remember hurrying from my parents' car to the front door so that I wouldn't be out in the open too long. I felt like the stars were watching me.

But soon enough, the sky became a friendlier place. My dad taught me the names of the constellations and how to find the North Star pouring off the tip of the Big Dipper (a real feat in the light-polluted skies of Queens). And then, a few years later, the idea of a vast cosmos became a promise, not a threat, because it might be full of benevolent creatures. What happened was I started watching *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

Those are the first aliens I remember—well, the first I remember loving, because I was terrified of ET—but quickly my world became full of them. Kind Star fleet officers with minor prosthetics to differentiate them from their human colleagues; the sandworms of Arrakis; glowing deep-sea angels in *The Abyss*; Meg Murry's beloved Aunt Beast. There were bad guys and monsters, but there was so much hope, too. And while pop culture was populating my imaginary worlds, the science I learned in school and from PBS specials watched on playdates with equally nerdy friends was expanding my sense of what was possible. Rovers landed on Mars, SETI listened for signals, and, around when I was twelve years old, the first planets beyond our solar system were found.

Thinking about aliens was in some ways the same thing as thinking about science. Looking at a star and imagining planets around it was the same as imagining who might live there. Learning about space-time and the hard limit of light speed was the same as imagining ways to subvert these laws to traverse the galaxy, was the same as thinking about my friends on the *Enterprise* who already had. Thinking about aliens was thinking about whether life really needed water and carbon, or eyes and hands. Thinking about aliens who might be plants or bugs was thinking about the possible inner life of the plants and bugs in my backyard.

But it was more, of course. Thinking about who might be out there was thinking about the possibilities of existence, and how humans fit into all of it.