Counting Black Stars

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CHAPTER 1: “An Introduction.”

Those few minutes before five in the May morning might just have been the best of the entire day. Keaton lay on his bed with the blankets pulled up about his waist and lying half on the floor. His large, blue jeans was already pulled up his legs, however the zipper hadn’t been closed and his leather belt was lying on the night stand. Keaton was wearing an old leftover T-shirt, that had once belonged to one of his older brothers. Keaton had two older brothers. He also had two older sisters and a younger one. His four older siblings had been able to go to college after graduating from high school, before the money ran out that was. Keaton was in his last year of high school and would most likely not have the privilege of going to college. Keaton’s parents didn’t care much however; now Keaton could help them around the house. There was always work to be done. The small digital clock on his shelf displayed five before five. In five minutes his father would enter his room and speak the notorious words: “Get up. Chicken don’t feed themselves ya’know.”, and then Keaton would be forced to wake up and do his duty. Keaton’s family lived in a big old farmhouse, but were almost unable to pay for it. And so be it that when it came to the point that also grandpa and grandma wanted to move in with them, when Keaton was about the age of four, his father decided that if they all wanted a roof above their head, everyone would have to do their duty. He got himself cows, chicken and sheep and went to the market every Saturday in a little town at the south side of the hill. They also grew crops in and around the greenhouse in their garden. In the beginning everyone had been working hard but as laziness seemed to be a contagious condition in the house as Keaton’s sisters and brothers started to care less and less about doing their shores. Keaton however, was being forced to keep on

going with doing his share of work in and around the house, and he thought that was pretty unfair. But Keaton got used to it and all was fine for many years and Keaton's parents were able to pay for college for their children. But right now, things were going bad again and they were running low on money. So, no college for Keaton. Keaton had always felt as if everyone in his family greatly disliked him, maybe even felt hatred towards him. Whenever something went broke, it was Keaton's fault and he had to fix it back. After his sisters and brothers stopped doing their share of work, Keaton got forced to do even more. Keaton had to feed the chicken every morning at five, while his school started at half past eight. His oldest sister was out of college and didn't even have a job, but she would still be sleeping when Keaton left for school. Last Christmas, Abbey, Keaton's little sister, had received the new Bratz-dolls she asked for, and both his youngest older brother and his youngest older sister had gotten an I-pod. Keaton didn't want anything specific, but he tried to come up with something he might actually get his parents to buy for him. In the end he asked his mother if he could get a book from 2005, which he saw in the local bookstore, downhill in the suburbs. The price was now nine dollars or something like that.

'Sure Keaton, I'll take a look at it.' His mother had said.

Keaton felt relieved at the point being. Maybe one time, just this once, he would get something he actually wanted. When Christmas arrived he got a pair of socks. He didn't complain though, since it had been one of the first pieces of clothing that he got, that were actually new, and not cast-offs of his older brothers. His grandpa from his mother side however had given him a notebook and a set of pencils. Grandpa had been the only person ever who actually liked Keaton, to his account. Keaton had given his grandpa a massive hug and had

spent the rest of the night thinking about what to write. A few weeks later Grandpa had died. It appeared that Grandpa had had a brain tumor and no one knew about it. So Keaton wondered; did his grandpa actually like him, or did he just get nuts because of the tumor a few weeks before his downfall when he gave Keaton the notebook?
The digital clock now displayed: three before five. Three precious minutes of absolute peace left. No-one had ever really liked him outside his family neither. Most of the kids in school always had been inhabitants of the suburbs. That's where the rich people lived. So Keaton was thereby considered 'filth', because he did not live in the suburbs, but a few kilometers higher up the hill. In fifth Keaton had however befriended a kid named Oliver and they had been the best friends. Oliver had not lived in the suburbs back then, but his father worked in the city and had a pretty decent name around the suburbs so Oliver was not considered to be anything less than the other kids. Keaton and Oliver used to share everything with each other, until a little more than a year back, when Oliver had moved to the suburbs. Now, Keaton was completely ignored by Oliver. It had been a horrible feeling. In September last year however, Keaton had decided to talk with Amber, a girl in his class who was always sitting alone. No one really liked her and Amber looked like she didn't enjoy being around people either. They probably disliked her because of the scars on her skin. Scars she'd given herself. Keaton had always thought that was a silly reason to dislike someone. They didn't know Amber's story, so who were they to judge? Or maybe those people didn't like Amber's music. Keaton didn't like it either. He didn't like music wherein it was a tough job to separate the guitar and the drums from the vocals because they all sounded like each other. But however, he'd succeeded in making Amber smile, and it didn't take too long for her to kiss him. Suddenly, Keaton had felt as if his life had purpose again. Amber wasn't

the ideal girlfriend, for most of their conversations existed out of long silences, but she did teach Keaton how to play guitar and after all, she was the only person who liked him. Somewhere around November, Amber had started to talk more. They talked, for example, about escaping reality. Her escape was death, but Keaton thought that there were better ways to escape the everyday routine. But to that, Amber had remained unhearing. Keaton thought himself to be a medicine in Amber's life. He felt proud and tried to tell his parents but they didn't care much. Keaton's sisters looked disgusted at their brother as if he was mentally ill for dating a person like Amber. Maybe he was, though. But she was his purpose and how could he ever abandon that? Every evening, if he had enough money left on his mobile phone, Keaton would text Amber:

"Sleep Well. Kiss. X"

And she would then give him a shirt reply such as:

"G'night."

Two weeks after Keaton's grandpa died however, Amber had replied with:

"Goodbye"

Keaton didn't take notice, but the next day Amber could not be sighted at school. It was only after school that he received a short call from Amber's father, his voice shaking. Keaton learned more from the newspaper next morning. Apparently Amber had slit her wrists and placed herself in the bathtub, playing her music through an old radio on the side of her bath. Keaton figured she might have needed that to guide her to her death, for he could not imagine Amber would ever

want to die in pure absolute silence. She didn't die of blood-loss however. According to the coroner and the police Amber had gotten a spasm in her leg and therewithal, she had accidently kicked the old radio into the water. The coroner had concluded that Amber had died through electrification. Keaton's English teacher, Miss Deschanel, had advised him to go to a support group after school so he could talk about his sadness. Keaton firstly refused due to the shores waiting for him at home but when his teacher had sent a letter addressed to his parents he was forced to go. So, intoxicated with madness, he fell in love with his sadness, and learned to talk about it.

The digital clock on the shelf pointed one minute before five now. In less than a minute, Keaton's father would wake him up. Yesterday morning, Keaton had been bitten by a fox, when going over to the chickens and noticing a bunch of feathers and blood lying on the ground. Keaton had been too slow to react and the stupid predator had closed his cheeks around Keaton's leg and driven his razor-sharp teeth into his flesh. He had kicked the fox back into the woods and listened how it ran off, whining. Whole day long, he had been walking around with blood on his pants, which had attracted strange attention at school. He'd been afraid he'd get the rabies. He didn't. *Unfortunately so,* he thought.

Above him, Keaton's ceiling started screeching and then footsteps were to be heard on the hallway. Five o'clock, the digital clock said. Light filled his room when his father opened the door.

-'Get up.' He said.

'The chicken won't feed themselves.' Keaton mumbled as he closed his zipper.

CHAPTER 2: “Once upon a time in a seemingly lost world.”

When, at the end of that day, the bell rang that indicated the end of that day’s last lesson, Keaton felt enormously relieved. The day had been almost the same as every other day but with three deviations. He had returned from the chicken with three eggs that morning, and he had given them to his father. Keaton knew he couldn’t eat them, they were meant for sale, not for self-consumption. Keaton just had some slices of bread with cheese, without butter of course, because that was a luxury they could not afford. He left early for school, by foot, walking, until his sneakers got all dusted and dirty and wet from the morning dew on the grass. He was not the first one to arrive at school, and he’d spend the remaining time before the start of his first lesson on a bench where he used to sit with Amber. He had sat there, with his notebook lying in his lap, thinking about what to write. At that point of the day he did the first different thing from other days. Instead of just endlessly looking at his notebook, he now took a pen and wrote something down, for the first time since he got the notebook.

“Once upon a time,” He wrote.

Ha sat down for five minutes straight and looked around him at all the people living their lives so close to him. He saw the thirteen and fourteen year olds smoking and looked at all the people swearing at each other and telling gossip and whispering secrets. He looked at Oliver, his former best friend, who was now standing with the biggest bullies of the school, without glancing at Keaton even once. Keaton put his pen on the paper again and wrote:

"…in a seemingly lost world,"

Shortly after, he closed his notebook and made his way into the school building when the bell rang. The second deviation from an average day was his English teacher, Miss Deschanel, who started class with talking about the prom, which would take place in exactly one and a half month from now. Everyone would have to help a bit with getting the prom ready, so Miss Deschanel had divided the class in groups. There were three groups of four people. Oliver, who was also in Keaton's class, was in a group together with Todd and Justen, two elite-bullies that had also picked on Keaton since Keaton's youngest older sister had graduated from high school. They probably expected his sister to take it up for Keaton, or tell them to stop or something. What a joke. Also in their group was Harry, who was two years older and already redone a few years. He was always gazing in front of him, at the blackboard, without really seeing anything. They were responsible for the drinks; alcoholic, and non-alcoholic. Another joke. Two smoking hot girls from the suburbs teamed up in a group of two to stand at the entrance at the prom, and to announce the prom king and queen. And with those groups being made, the only remaining pupils without a job for the prom were Keaton and Chloë. Chloë was a new student since Christmas. She had almost never talked, except for the first time she walked into their classroom, accompanied by the school principal, right after their Christmas break. She then introduced herself shortly by telling everyone she used to live in Paris (which explained her French accent.), and now lived in the suburbs with her Aunt. And that she would appreciate it if none of the boys would ask her if she could French kiss them, because by the look of everyone, there was no one even getting close to getting one. Other rare moments when Chloë would speak

were when no one knew the answer to a question, then she would raise her hand and give the correct rejoinder. And thus, she appeared very intelligent. Chloë was also in the support group after school, for some reason, but she had never spoken a word there either. After school she drove home in a pale red pickup truck. That's about everything Keaton knew about her for a fact. And now he also knew that they would both be responsible for the lights at the prom night. When Keaton turned around to ask Chloë if she was okay with that, she looked at him, sighed one time and then nodded, but she had not spoken a word. The third deviation from a normal day had been Keaton's toilet visit at the end of the afternoon break. He had been enclosed by Todd, Oliver and Justen. Oliver and Justen had grabbed his arms and pushed him against the wall. Todd had threatened Keaton not to try anything with Chloë. Todd had punched him in the stomach. He wanted to make a move on Chloë on the prom night. She was, as he stated: 'his pussy to bang'. Todd wanted to seduce her at the prom, give her some alcohol and get himself laid. When Keaton had replied that he already had a girlfriend, they all laughed at him.

-'Your girlfriend is dead, pal.' Todd had said, before taking a pee on Keaton's pants.

Keaton didn't know what was worse; the humiliation he would have the face, once the bullies left the toilet, when he had to go back to his classroom or feeling someone else's pee on his dick, or maybe the slightly shameful but still greatly amused face of Oliver, who had once been his best friend. Oliver had refused to make eye contact with Keaton and it sickened him. They let Keaton fall to the ground on his hands and knees and then left. Determined not to live the rest of his school year in shame, he made up his mind what to do. Ten minutes later, Keaton had entered his science class.

‘You’re quite a bit late, Mr. Jordans.’ His science teacher, a man in his fifties, had said.

-‘I think he had a little accident in the bathroom sir.’ Todd said with his cocky voice.

Everyone laughed out loud and looked at Keaton’s pants. One second passed, as did a second one, and then when the laughing had stopped Keaton replied:

‘It’s… harder aiming with a bigger one.’

There had been a short silence but then no one less than Chloë had chuckled. A few others started to laugh as well and Keaton went to find his seat. Right after school he had taken a massive beating from Todd because he made Chloë laugh. Now, Keaton sat down with his back against the wall, spitting out a little blood and breathing heavily, but nonetheless relieved that the day was over, almost at least. A few pupils walked past him, entering the school building. They were heading for the support group, which was being held in the gymnastic hall. Keaton considered not going today, but as he’d learned before, listening to other people’s worries often made him forget about his own. And right now, that was most welcome.

CHAPTER 3: “Support Shit.”

The support group took place in the gymnastic hall. Keaton was late. Everyone was already sitting in a circle on old, wooden chairs. Keaton spotted the dirty blonde hair of Chloë in the little crowd. She was sitting with her back towards him. Keaton looked at Miss Deschanel, who was leading the sessions and apologized.

-‘Is everything okay, Keaton?’ She asked, with her spring blossom voice, looking at his disheveled clothes and injured face.

‘I’m fine for a full seventy five percent, Miss.’ He said.

Keaton wiped away the blood from his ruptured lip and took a chair.

-‘Do you want to talk about it Keaton?’

Keaton shook his head.

‘All’s fine.’ He said. ‘Thanks.’

Miss Deschanel smiled.

-‘It’s good to hear a little joke from you, Keaton. Are you feeling better lately? Have you been doing things to set of your mind of your worries like I advised you to?’

‘It wasn’t really a joke, I just reckon my ‘being okay’-status right now is no more than seventy five percent.’ Keaton said, while he sat on his chair. He looked at Miss Deschanel as she gave him a particular look. ‘Okay.’ He then said. ‘I might be

feeling a little better, but maybe it's just the weather. I don't know. But I've been writing.'

Miss Deschanel nodded approvingly and made a little 'o' with her lips.

-'You've been writing? Wonderful Keaton!' she said, and she looked at the others as if she expected them to give Keaton a round of applause.

'I didn't write much though.' Keaton added, but Miss Deschanel kept nodding.

-'Very well,' she said. 'Nice, we can start today's session on a positive note, then.' She smiled. 'I see a lot of new faces. Did anybody come voluntarily today?'

Nobody moved a muscle until a girl raised her hand. She looked like a freshman.

-'Excellent,' said Miss Deschanel. 'What's your name?'

'Katie.' The freshman answered with a little voice.

-'Well Katie, why don't you tell us why you're here?'

Katie hesitated for a few seconds before speaking.

'I… um… I, my… my cat died a few days ago. She was still so young and, I don't know, I just keep thinking about her…'

Miss Deschanel looked a little dumbstruck, and so did some other people. Normally stories about serious deaths were being told in support group. Deaths of people. Or people would talk about a family member that had a serious disease,

but not about pets that had died while crossing a busy road or something like that. Miss Deschanel quickly recovered. But right when she opened her mouth to speak, someone else spoke instead.

-'You must have really loved your cat.'

Chloë, who had been examining her feet for the first few minutes of the session, now looked at Katie, who gave the impression she would never talk again.

-'It speaks.' said Miss Deschanel. She looked at Chloë with an expression that greatly disapproved what she had said but at the same time spoke out of excitement. 'Why don't you finally tell us your story Chloë? I think we'd all be glad to hear it.'

Chloë let out a sarcastic little laugh.

-'And are you going to pretend like you are interested?' she asked, with a thick French accent.

Miss Deschanel vacillated for a few seconds.

-'You did not come here of mere motion, did you?' she then asked.

Chloë shook her head.

-'So someone else sent you here?'

-'My Aunt.' Chloë replied.

-'I understand you are living with your Aunt?'

Again, Chloë just nodded. She then looked at Keaton, and looked him straight in the eyes. It gave him a weird feeling in his stomach. It felt as if she deliberately wanted to oversee him

-'I used to live in Paris though,' she said. 'With my Parents.'

-'Did you lose your parents, Chloë?' Miss Deschanel asked.

-'My Aunt says I will never lose them, and that they are simply waiting for me in heaven.'

-'And what do you think about that Chloë?'

-'I think it's bullshit.' She looked straight at Miss Deschanel and everyone looked at Chloë. 'I didn't lose them because they're still in my heart and memories, but frankly said; they both flew through the windshield of their car after they hit a tree. I had to identify their bodies and I hope faces like that are waiting nowhere for me.'

-'I notice you maybe feel a bit embittered, Chloë, is that right?' Miss Deschanel asked. 'Might it be because you are mad at your parents for leaving you?'

Chloë spoke no more and Keaton noticed she probably regretted even starting her story. And now she gave Miss Deschanel a look of disgust. Chloë looked at Katie.

-'Katie?' she asked politely. 'Are you angry at your cat for dying?'

Katie shook her head immediately.

-‘And if your cat were drunk, and it ran up the road and got hit by a car. Would you be angry at it for dying?’

Again, Katie shook her head. Chloë looked back at Miss Deschanel.

-‘I am merely angry because I wasn’t in the same car as them.’

The rest of the session Chloë didn’t speak a word anymore. She glanced a few times at Keaton and as a response he presented her an uplifting smile, but Chloë didn’t move a muscle. They listened to the other pupil’s stories and a few of them cried. Keaton couldn’t remember he ever cried while talking about Amber. But it didn’t really matter. Miss Deschanel comforted the weepers with her sweet, blossom voice. At a quarter before four the session ended. Keaton walked out the gymnastic hall with his backpack hanging over his right shoulder. One of the girls that had been telling her story came out of the gymnastic hall after him, crying. Another girl had swung her arm around her and tried to comfort her by gently patting her on the shoulder. Keaton looked back at her, right when Chloë came out. He hesitated shortly and then turned back around.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked her.

If she had been surprised that someone talked to her, she didn’t show it. She only looked at Keaton with a clear disgust about what he was wearing. Keaton always got looks from people like that about his leftover clothes, but Chloë made her disgust extra clear. She herself was wearing black jeans with a brown leather belt, a dark grey top and a light grey open vest, with underneath that all black sneakers. She nodded.

-‘Why wouldn’t I be?’ She asked, lifting up her tote bag a little higher on her left shoulder.

Her nails were painted fury red, but the nail polish was coming off as she scratched her thumb with her ring finger.

‘I don’t know. You just never talked about your parents before.’

Chloë bit her lip and narrowed her eyes.

-‘If we have to do this light thing for the prom together,’ she said,’ I don’t want to have you asking questions about my shit every five minutes. So I figured that if I’d tell you now, that wouldn’t happen.’

Keaton forced a little ‘o’ with his lips.

‘Oh, okay. Maybe then, we should go hiking one time?’

Chloë blinked.

-‘No.’ she said, without showing the slightest form of emotion.

She then walked past Keaton in the direction of the parking lot. A little awestruck, Keaton remained standing in the hallway. What the fuck did he do wrong? He only meant to be friendly. He didn’t ask her out or something now did he? He had a girlfriend after all, sort of.

-‘Keaton.’ Miss Deschanel’s voice echoed through the gymnastic hall. He turned his head towards her. She looked at him through the door opening, still holding a pair of chairs which she was cleaning. ‘She could use a friend, or some human contact at least.’

Keaton looked at her.

‘You heard her.’ he said.

And then he left.

Keaton walked home on the large concrete road that ran over the hill. The school was located one and a half kilometer east of the suburbs. Keaton lived southwest of the suburbs. The concrete road ran up and down the hill. Somewhere there was a junction that, if you took the right turn, led to the suburbs. The left turn led to Keaton’s home. It was a walk of almost four kilometers and rain had started to drip out of the sky. He imagined that in a few years he would drive away from this place and never come back. He would turn eighteen on the fourth of August and he imagined getting a job and saving enough money to afford him a car. Thunder roared above the suburbs and he woke up from his daydream. As the sound of the thunder trailed off, a new roaring sounded from behind him. He looked behind his shoulder as a faded red pickup truck reduced speed and stopped next to him. He stopped walking and the car window went down. It was Chloë.

-‘I was being rude.’ She said, sitting behind the steering wheel. ‘I’m sorry. You want a lift?’ her eyes were all red, and Keaton could see that she’d cried. He nodded and Chloë watched and waited as he got in the car.

‘Thanks.’ said Keaton.

They both forced a smile.

-‘I’ll drive you to the split roads.’ She said while hitting the accelerator. ‘You’re not from the suburbs are you?’

‘How’d you know?’

-‘I figured.’ She glanced at his secondhand clothes. There was a tear in his shirt in his armpit and the sole of his worn out sneakers began to come loose. ‘That pants still smell like pee?’ she asked.

She was chewing gum although her car smelled like cigarettes.

‘Yeah, they do actually.’ He sounded ashamed while he said it.

-‘Nice.’ She said sarcastically.

‘Yeah.’

-‘Who’s pee is it anyway?’

‘It’s Todd’s.’ Keaton felt more and more ashamed every second. ‘I should blame you for that though.’

-‘Me? Why me?’ she raised her eyebrows and pointed with a flaking nail polish finger at herself.

‘Yeah. And so should I for the beating I got right before support meeting. Todd’s threatening me not to try anything with you. You’re ‘his’ he says.’

-‘Am I now? How sweet.’ She said, again with a sarcastic undertone in her voice. ‘So someone has a crush on me?’

‘I personally don’t really think it’s a crush, though.’ Keaton said. ‘He’s constantly talking about banging you on prom night.’

-‘Banging? Excuse my French tongue, but I’m not familiar with that word.’ She said.

‘It means having sex.’ Keaton said with a curled up mouth corner. ‘But the kind of sex where he will be the dominant alpha male.’

-‘Oh, it’s that kind of crush.’ She laughed. ‘Unfortunately for Todd, I normally aim for bigger.’

Keaton laughed. He felt strangely surprised, for it was the first time in weeks he laughed. And now he did. He laughed about something Chloë said, the girl, who had almost not spoken a word herself since he first saw her.

-‘Maybe I should do it though, getting laid on the evening of the prom. Then I’ve got a memory worth laughing about in college.’

‘So you’re going?’

-‘To college? Yeah. Aren’t you?’

Keaton shook his head.

‘No.’

-‘Why not, you seem intelligent enough. You weren’t just whining like a little bitch whenever you were telling your sob story at support shit, you were kind of philosophizing about what it meant for you. I was listening though.’

‘Doesn’t matter.’ said Keaton, not wanting to admit that his parents didn’t have the money to send him off to college.

-‘Oh I see.’ She said, looking at his clothes again, realizing that he was probably not wearing them for fun. She looked at Keaton who was looking out of the window, trying to hide his ashamed face. ‘I don’t really want to go though.’ she continued, indulgently. ‘I’d rather drive off into an undetermined future with my car, not looking back even one little second.’

‘That’s a beautiful lie you’re telling there.’ said Keaton.

-‘To me it’s more of a dream.’ Chloë said with a vague smile playing around the corners of her mouth.

‘Most dreams are said to be lies.’

Chloë looked at Keaton.

-‘Whooo. Welcome in my car, Mr. Brightside!’ she sneered sarcastically with her accent.

‘Look who’s talking.’

She chuckled.

-‘We’d make a great couple you and I.’ she said.

An awkward silence filled the car. Little drips of rain appeared on the car windshield.

-‘I’m kidding, Keaton.’ she said. ‘I stopped believing in love a while ago.’

‘And that for someone who’s from the city of love and romance.’ Keaton indicated.

-‘That’s what makes it all the more depressing, Keaton.’ she said. ‘If I, born and bred in the city of love and romance wasn’t able to find true love over there, how in hell’s name will I ever find some in this godforsaken place?’

Keaton had to admit Chloë had a point right there.

‘Well,’ said Keaton. ‘I’ve got a girlfriend anyway, so, don’t worry.’

-‘Keaton.’ Chloë sighed, rolling her eyes. ‘I’ve been listening to your story already a few times during support shit and I’m sorry to tell you but you don’t have a girlfriend anymore. She died.’

Keaton looked at Chloë, stunned by the words she’d just said to him.

‘Who do you think you are to say something like that?’

-‘A person with a realistic mind,’ Chloë said. ‘She’s buried, Keaton, you’re not kissing her coffin now are you? I’m very sorry to say it like that but she’s dead. And you really got to ask yourself if she really loved you.’

‘Of course she really loved me!’ Keaton shouted. He couldn’t believe her.

-‘She damn well killed herself Keaton. She clearly didn’t love you enough to stay alive. If you really love someone, that’s your reason to stay.’ Keaton didn’t know what to say. ‘She