

Amy Beth Augustin Barlow

"Am I a Stranger to You?"

THE QUESTION WE ALL WANT TO ASK GOD

We easily filled the basement of our old stone church. The laughter and whispers of sixty kids and tutors papered the walls where Sunday school has been held for over 100 years. Some kids were reading, others were eating dinner, and a few were doing anything they could to avoid their homework folders.

I was milling around, helping kids get motivated and trying to offer an encouraging word or touch to each child that had come that night. Marcus was working on times tables. Eddie was reading to his tutor. Christina was struggling with her cursive. Maria was doing addition on her fingers.

And then I came to Ruben.

Ruben. Where do I begin? He's like a bottle rocket flying through the church with limitless spare fuses. He defines cute with his shaved head and huge smile. And his ability to not stay clean is a bit of a marvel. He's a tiny little fellow who looks like he could barely manage half a sandwich, but in truth, he can polish off at least three plates of dinner.

But for all the light and energy that emanates from him, it's hard to believe the life he has lived. His father abandoned him, his mother abandoned him, and after his mother finally reclaimed him she died a little more than a year later. Now he's with his aunt

who holds down two minimum wage jobs and an uncle who has a severe drinking problem. His life is chaotic at best, abusive at worst.

I love Ruben. He's the Dennis the Menace of our neighborhood. I stopped near his table and eavesdropped on the conversation he was having with his tutor.

"Miss, miss," he said, his mouth was full of food, "Am I a stranger to you?"

His tutor hesitated for a minute and then calmly replied, "No, Ruben. You're not a stranger to me. I've known you for two months."

"But miss, am I a stranger to you?" he asked as if he hadn't heard a word she said.

"No, Ruben." Her voice was even and kind, "You're not a stranger to me. I consider you to be my friend."

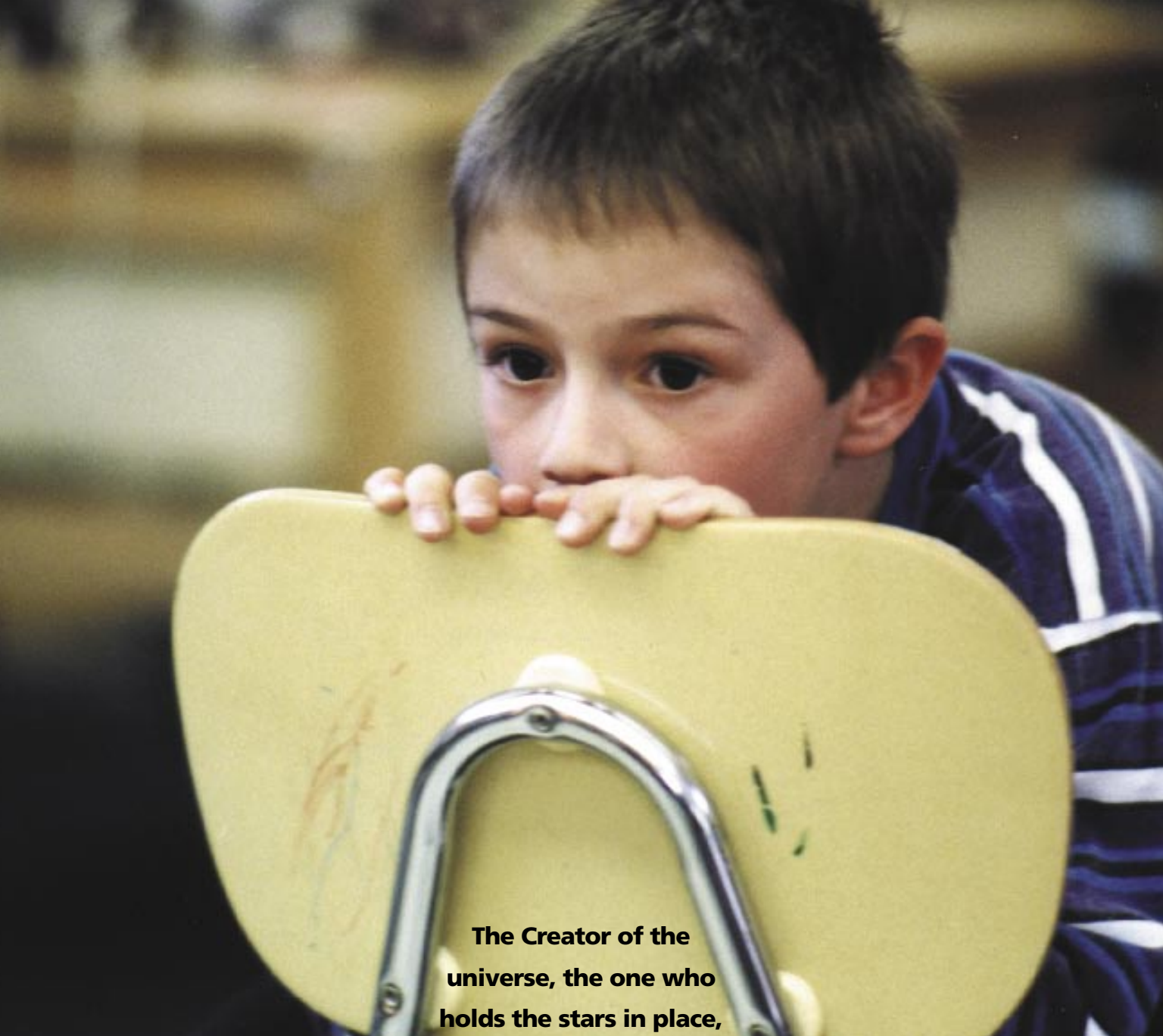
Ruben smiled and stuffed another bite of sandwich into his mouth. For the moment, in the heart of a little boy, the world was an O.K. place to be.

Later, as I was sweeping up cookie crumbs and cleaning counters, I realized that Ruben and I are much the same. Ruben's tutor has lavished him with kindness, commitment, structure, and encouragement. She has been a miracle in our eyes. But still Ruben has to ask, "Am I a stranger to you?" Ruben has a hard time believing that anyone

could love him "just because."

God has kept every promise he has ever made. He has filled my life with the kind of miracles that turn skeptics into saints. But still I have to ask, "Am I a stranger to you?" because it's almost unbelievable that someone could love me so much—despite who I am. And then comes that celestial shocker: yes, God knows me and he considers me his friend.

This is Advent. This is why we celebrate. God came to us so that we might come to him. The Creator of the universe, the one who holds the stars in place, the hand that lit the sun with a divine spark—he stops the world to say that we are not alone.



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Now as I sit here, staring at this tiny pine tree that lights up my living room, I realize that Christmas doesn't take place *under* a tree. It took place *on* a tree. God became human, he lived a common life and struggled in ordinary ways, but his heart beat wildly different than the world around him. Christ's perfection made him a stranger here. He began to speak of things that made women weep and religious leaders nervous. The world around him became restless with his presence. And so we fell into the age-old habit of destroying what we don't understand.

It was on that cross that Jesus looked death, fear, abandonment, and sin square in the eye and put a boundary

on the evil kingdom and a ticking expiration date on its terror-filled reign. For it was on the tree that God cried out for those willing to hear, "We are no longer strangers."

Christ has come. He came to us because there was no way that we could come to him. Without Christmas the King of the universe would always be a stranger to us. Our minds are just too finite. But the Son of God opened a

remarkable door between the glorious heavens and a fallen earth. Our Creator no longer has to be a stranger to us.

Ruben asked the question that brought a little stillness to the storm. The reeling lessened. And if you're feeling shaken, don't be afraid to let the same question slip from your heart. Look up, find the Savior's eyes and ask him, "Am I a stranger to you?"

We all need to be healed by his simple reply, "No. I consider you my friend." □

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