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Starlight

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Starlight

Sometimes he felt that he was losing her to the sky.

Julia bought the telescope on a whim. They were driving through Oak Cliff on a Thursday morning. Curt, an unemployed immunologist, had just finished a job interview at one of the Oak Cliff health clinics. He held the steering wheel silently and pretended not to be depressed.

They passed a camera shop with a row of telescopes in the display window.

"Let's pull over," Julia said. "I want to have a look."

Inside the shop she inspected the telescopes. Curt hung back at the door, his hands in his pockets. He kept thinking of the interview. Kept seeing the clinic's chief supervisor, the bored expression on her face, the glaze in her eyes as he'd answered her questions. Humiliating.

After a few minutes he joined Julia at the display window. He was ready to sulk openly now, and was anxious to be alone with her so he could start telling her how bad he felt about the interview.

"Since when are you interested in stargazing?" he asked.

Her eyes were wide, mesmerized by one of the telescope's deep black lenses. With a dim pang of resentment Curt realized that this was the way her eyes had looked the first time he'd kissed her, four years ago.

"I don't know," she said. She hadn't noticed yet how depressed he was. "It just came to me."

Then she asked the owner how much the largest of the telescopes cost. He said four hundred.

"Fine," Julia said. "We'll take it."

Curt was shocked at the price but was in no position to argue. For the past few months, since he'd been laid off from

his post at the Las Colinas Health Center, Julia had been supporting both of them. All of the money in their savings account—three thousand dollars—was hers, from the bonus she'd received in March.

So they bought the telescope and the owner helped them load it in their car. He also gave them several star charts and a general brochure on tracking deep-sky objects in space.



They drove to Julia's office in downtown Dallas. She worked as a designer at a small greeting card company. Today she had asked for the morning off so she could take Curt to the interview: his morale was always better when he knew she was near.

After dropping her at the office, Curt went home. In the apartment he read through the want ads. There were no new immunology positions. Then the mail came. It brought him two polite rejections from clinics in Highland Park.



At seven o'clock he picked Julia up from work.

As soon as they entered the apartment she unpacked the telescope and assembled it. It hurt Curt's feelings that she continued to be oblivious to his gloom. Usually she was aware of the slightest shifts in his moods and did her best to comfort him.

Once she had finished putting the telescope together, she carried it to the patio. They lived on the top floor of the building, so the view to the sky was unobstructed.

The stars were out. They were big. Texas stars had a style all their own. Many of them showed up as sharp lights, steady and full and neatly rounded.

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Julia squinted through the finder and adjusted the telescope till she located Saturn. "I've got it," she said. "Look at this."

She took Curt's arm, pulled him from his chair. He looked through the telescope's eyepiece. The view, he thought, was cramped. It was like having your vision stuffed into a tiny hole. At first he couldn't see anything at all.

Then he shifted his angle slightly. He discovered a small fragile circle of darkness with a fuzzy glow at the center.

Leaning beside him, Julia turned the focuser knobs. The fuzzy light sharpened. It hardened into a ball, featureless, gray. A slender white line sliced the ball through the middle.

"There," Curt said. "It's in focus now."

"Can you make out the rings?" Julia asked.

"I think so."

He blinked. The contours of his eye were somehow silhouetted in the focuser, and he could see the blink as it happened. He could see the outline of his eyelids, the alien antennae of his lashes closing together and snapping shut on Saturn.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Julia said. "Let me look again."

He stepped aside. Julia looked at Saturn for five or six minutes. Curt was astonished. He had no idea how she could watch the same image for so long without a break.

Then she located Jupiter. And Mars. And Uranus. At around eleven, when Curt said he was going to bed, she had just started to search for the Horsehead Nebula.

It took Curt a long time to fall asleep. He wanted Julia to come to the bedroom and finally ask him if he was upset about something. But she never did.



Her sudden interest in astronomy made no sense to Curt.

In all the years he'd known her, Julia had never taken up a private hobby. She had never collected stamps, never solved

crossword puzzles, never even played solitaire. Astronomy lacked the social element that had always seemed essential to holding her attention. If she'd met someone who had encouraged her to join an astronomy club or who looked at stars along with a group of her friends, her decision to buy the telescope would have been less surprising. As it was, though, the decision mystified Curt.

He expected her fixation on the telescope to be brief. He was sure she would tire of it after a week or two, put it away in the closet, leave it there for good.

But she used the telescope constantly and each week she was more devoted to it than she'd been the week before.

When she came home from the office she would immediately change into the old blouse that she liked to wear for stargazing. Sitting at the dinner table she would read the latest issue of *Sky & Telescope* or one of the half-dozen astronomy books she'd checked out from the library.

Then between eight-thirty and nine she would go out on the patio and start watching the sky. Curt would accompany her, at least for a little while, and she would find different deep-sky objects and urge him to admire them with her.

Taking out her sketchpad, she would draw the objects quickly and deftly. She used her protractor to form a circular frame and then sketched the image with her smudge stick and ebony pencil. Outside the circle she wrote the object's technical information: its magnitude, its size, its Messier or NGC designations, the general air stability and star clarity.

Her eyesight amazed Curt. He would look through the telescope and find only a vague smear where a galaxy or nebula was supposed to be. Then he would study Julia's sketch, and when he returned to the eyepiece he would now recognize the same details that she'd caught in her drawing.

Guided by the sketches, he would view the core of stars in a globular cluster and the complex patterning of those stars as

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they circled the cluster's rim. He discovered the elongated bars of spiral galaxies, the tails of comets, the moon's soft-rimmed craters on the crescent of the Jura Mountains. With Julia's help, he began to see things he would never have seen on his own.



When she showed him the Ring Nebula—a bite taken out of space, a disturbing flaw in the star field—he stepped back from the telescope and said:

“It bothers me.”

“Why?” Julia asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “It just does.”

The universe exasperated him. It was so obnoxiously huge, so pointlessly inhuman. Black holes and pulsars had nothing to do with him. Neither did Jupiter’s moons. Or the asteroid belt at the edge of the solar system. Or the white dwarfs and red giants and interstellar dust that had somehow taken hold of Julia’s imagination. Compared to his worries about finding a job and creating a satisfying future, compared to the feel of Julia’s face in his hands and the smell of the apartment building’s lawn after it had been mowed, the universe seemed to him infinitely abstract and irrelevant. It was, frankly, an inconvenience, pressing him for an attention that could never be more than a waste of his time.

Yet he kept most of these feelings to himself. He didn’t think that he had the right or the authority to criticize Julia as long as he was out of work. He was on new and disturbing ground with her. And since her preoccupation with astronomy was a side of her that he didn’t understand, it was also a side of her that unnerved him.



About a month after Julia had brought the telescope home Curt was offered a position at a private health clinic in Irving.

He was ecstatic. This, he felt, would change everything. He took Julia out to dinner, and she didn't touch the telescope all weekend.

On Monday night she said she wanted to sell the telescope back to the camera shop.

"Are you sure?" Curt asked.

"I'm positive," she said. "I'm sick of it."

"This is kind of sudden, isn't it?"

"Not really." They were at the dinner table, and Julia was sketching something on her napkin. "Actually, it's been frustrating me for a long time."

"You seemed so happy with it," Curt said. "It's hard to believe you want to get rid of it."

"You're not upset, are you?" she asked.

"Why?"

"Because even with a trade-in, the new telescope's going to be pretty expensive."

"You want a new one?"

She had finished the sketch on the napkin. It was a binary star system. "I *need* a new one," she said. "The one we've got now is totally inadequate for what I want to see. I have to move on to the next level."

Cautiously, Curt said, "I don't know if that's such a good idea."

"But right now is the perfect time for it. With both of us working, we wouldn't even need to use any of our savings to buy it."

Curt tapped into his fresh supply of confidence—he had recaptured his role as a doctor, protector of the sick—and said: "I'm not sure I want a telescope in the apartment anymore."

"It hasn't been so terrible, has it?" she asked. Her tone was cheerful. She wasn't looking for a fight.

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“No,” Curt said, “it hasn’t been so terrible, I guess.”

Julia rose from the table, took her plate to the kitchen sink, went out on the patio. Hunched over the telescope, she studied Mars with quiet satisfaction.



An hour later a phone call came from the president of the Olive Theater Company. Julia was one of the theater company’s board members: it was a small nonprofit organization that put on low-budget musicals.

Curt took the call. The president asked if Julia was coming to the meeting tonight.

“I’m sure she is,” Curt said.

“Good.” The president was abrupt, almost rude. “She’s missed the last two meetings, so I want to be certain she’s not going to miss this one too.”

Curt was surprised. It was unusual for Julia to miss a meeting for any but the best of reasons. He went to the patio and told her that the president wanted to talk to her.

“Could you tell her I’m not in?” she asked, adjusting the telescope’s angle.

“There’s a meeting tonight,” Curt said. “Aren’t you going?”

She kept her face bent to the lens. “No,” she said. “I’m really not in the mood for it.”



The next evening, Curt had to stay late at the clinic for a special staff dinner. It was past ten before he made his way back to the apartment.

Julia was on the patio. She was looking through a new telescope, a bulky thick cylinder on a complicated multi-tiered tripod.

Curt decided to stay calm. “You went ahead and bought it,” he said.

She grinned at him as if she were a naughty child. “Couldn’t resist.”

“How much was it?” he asked.

Her grin shifted—turned detached, bemused. “Twenty-eight-ninety-five.”

“You paid three thousand for this?”

She slid her palm along the smooth metal cylinder. “I know it’s a lot,” she said, “but it’s worth it. It’s an LX200 Schmidt-Cassegrain. It has Meade three-point-three software with high precision pointing. Plus it has more than sixty-four thousand deep-sky objects stored in its memory. And I only had to put five hundred down to buy it. Our payments are less than seventy-five a month. Pretty good deal, don’t you think?”

He touched the back of her neck. This was his favorite way of touching her, his fingers stroking the nape and working down towards her shoulders. But this time it felt strange to brush her hair back, to reach in and handle her cool skin. Even her familiarity felt strange: he couldn’t possibly know this woman as well as he thought he did.

“Will you go someplace with me for a couple of hours?” she asked.

“Where?”

“Away from the city.”

“Why?”

“The farther we are from the city lights,” she said, “the better the telescope can pick up the stars.”



So they got in her car and took the telescope with them out on the freeway. They drove towards the airport, across the long flat fields near Las Colinas.

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In one of the fields they pulled over and parked. Then they walked across the dry grass and parched dirt. Crickets made layer after layer of noise in the night.

Curt carried the telescope on his shoulder. They went over a small hill and Julia paused at its crest and said this would be a good place to stop.

The sky was cloudless and huge. The moon was nearly full. Its dark rings and blotches tempered its brightness.

“Be honest with me,” Julia said. “You aren’t too happy about my stargazing, are you?”

Confronted this way, Curt backed off. “It’s not that I’m unhappy. It’s more that I don’t understand it. I don’t see why all of a sudden you care about it so much.”

Julia had brought a pair of folding lawn-chairs with her. She opened them and placed them beside the telescope. “You don’t think the sky is fascinating?” she asked.

“Not so fascinating that I’d enjoy staring at it for hours every night.”

Julia took a seat in one of the chairs. Curt lowered himself into the other one.

“Do me a favor,” she said. “Put your head back and look at the stars.”

Curt moved around in the chair, settled his neck against the headrest.

“Okay,” Julia said. “Now pretend there’s nothing but stars all around you.”

He looked up. As long as he stared straight ahead he couldn’t see Julia or the atmospheric haze or the horizon line.

The stars didn’t twinkle. Their light was even and calm. Some of them were red, some blue, some green. But the particular tint of each star was delicate, weak. Its color might disappear the moment he squinted or blinked, and he would be left with nothing but the basic pinpoint of light.

“Space,” Julia said, “is a time machine. When you look at

the stars, you're literally looking into the past." She pointed towards the low southern end of the sky. "You see Scorpius?"

The only constellation that Curt could ever recognize was the Big Dipper, but he was embarrassed to admit this. "Sure," he said.

"Each one of the stars in Scorpius burns at its own point in time. Some of the stars are maybe ten thousand light-years away. So we're seeing ten thousand years into the past when we look at them. And right next to them, another star might be showing us images from two or three million years ago. Every star is a different message from a different part of history."

Curt swatted a mosquito on his arm. Julia stared up into space. Her long angular cheeks were starkly shadowed, lovely. She always seemed to be most attractive when he felt least secure about their relationship.

But he resisted the practiced sincerity of her voice, the gentle insistence that he agree with her. "I know what you mean," he said, "but it's not really something I can help. I don't like the way space feels." He shrugged. "Space is sort of dead, isn't it? It's all these moons and comets and collapsing galaxies, and they're impossibly big and far away, and I don't see how I'm supposed to care about them."

He fidgeted uncomfortably in the chair. With every minute, without any effort on his part, he saw more of the stars in the sky, greater depths in the star field. A mild dizziness came over him, a hint of nausea.

"You're looking at it all wrong," Julia said.

"There's a right way to look at it?"

"There's a less negative way to look at it."

"I'm not being negative," Curt said.

"You're not being very constructive."

"You can't really be constructive about something like an

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interstellar dust cloud.”

“Have you ever tried?” Julia asked.

“It’s *dust*. It’s not even alive. And it’s creepy.”

“What’s creepy about it?”

“Everything in space is creepy,” Curt said.

“Why?”

“It just is,” he said. “There’s nothing personal in space. All the important things happen down here. Between people. Between us, for instance.”

“But that’s the point,” she said. “We’re the ones who make space personal.”

Curt continued to look up at the stars, continued to feel the queasiness unwinding inside of him.

“The universe can’t see itself,” Julia said. “A pulsar doesn’t know it’s a pulsar. It doesn’t know why it is what it is. And it doesn’t know how it relates to the stars around it or to dark matter or galactic cores or anything else.”

Another mosquito hovered into Curt’s view. Its tiny threatening hum instantly brought him back down from the sky, back down from the unsettling sensation of starting to drift through the stars.

The mosquito zigzagged away from him and landed on Julia’s neck. She killed it with a quick reflexive slap. “Don’t you see, Curt? Most of the universe doesn’t even notice itself. That might be why all of us are so important. It might be our duty—it might be the duty of all life in the universe—to create the universe’s sense of itself. Without us, the universe has no mind, no personality, no spirit. We’re here to give the universe its soul.”

Curt laughed. “Julia, *please*.”

Too late he saw how deeply he had offended her. She frowned, looked away from him. “Should we go back to the car?” she asked.

“We haven’t even tried out the new telescope,” Curt said.

“That’s okay. I’m ready to go.”

They picked up the telescope and the chairs. Then they trudged across the field, stepped into the car, drove to the apartment. They barely spoke to each other on the way home.



That was the last time Julia tried to involve him in her stargazing.

She wasn’t cold to him, and they didn’t fight. She still massaged his feet in the mornings. She still followed the daily ups and downs of his work. She still said that she loved him.

But she devoted most of her time to the telescope. The pattern turned rigid, obsessive. She stayed outside sketching and gazing until midnight or later almost every night. If the weather was bad, she read her astronomy magazines, flipped through her sketchbook, plotted graphs of celestial movements.

Then Curt’s own problems began to distract him. At the clinic the head of the immunology department, Terence Mulligan, took a dangerous dislike to him. Mulligan was a petty bureaucrat, and Curt angered him at a staff meeting by suggesting that the patient registration system was needlessly strict. The rumor spread that Mulligan was furious with Curt and planned to punish him somehow.

In bed, when Julia was trying to fall asleep, Curt said that it was only a matter of time before he made a mistake that Mulligan could exploit.

Julia yawned. “Don’t worry,” she said. “It’ll be fine.”

“I can’t help it,” he said. “I’m nervous about him.”

Drowsily, Julia turned on her side, away from him. “It’ll be fine,” she repeated. “You’ll see.”

Then she hugged her pillow and breathed slowly and evenly as if she’d fallen asleep.



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As the months went on, she mastered celestial photography and mapped most of the visible surface of the moon with her telescope's CCD imaging system.

She completely stopped attending the Olive Theater meetings—stopped attending the meetings of any groups or organizations at all. She lost touch with her friends, never wanted to go out for dinner, never wanted to go dancing, never wanted to invite anyone to the apartment.

It might be just a phase for her, Curt thought. If so, possibly the smartest way to handle it was to let it run its course and not make a big deal out of it.



In the spring she built a new folded-refractor telescope on the patio. It was bizarrely angular: a wide plywood support frame holding a trapezoid scope with a multi-faceted prism box.

The night she finished building it, Curt said they should go somewhere to celebrate.

"It's a sweet idea," Julia said, "but I'd rather stay home."

Curt touched the rectangular opening of the telescope's lens, rubbed the smooth grain of the wood. The telescope was taller than he was, and its broad base took up twice as much room as the LX200.

He looked at Julia, and suddenly it struck him as senseless and intolerable that she could be more interested in this weird combination of plywood and glass than she was in him.

"Listen," he said, "can you explain something to me?" He stepped along the edge of the patio. The night was warm and clear overhead. "I really don't get why these telescopes are so important to you."

Julia lifted her head from the prism box. She looked at him with the first sign of curiosity that she had shown in weeks.

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"I've always wanted something of my own," she said. "Something that's mine and no one else's. Now I've found it."

She gathered up her hair from both sides of her hollowed cheeks. Nimble she twisted the hair into a ponytail. In the dry summer breeze a few small beads of sweat stood out on her temples.

"And it's more than that." For a moment she couldn't find the words, as if it were one of those thoughts so obvious and so private that she had never considered how to describe it to anyone. "I want to be out there. In space. I want to be out there with nothing closing me off or shutting me in. I want to take it in, all of it—all of it everywhere at the same time. Do you understand?"

She kept looking at him with a mixture of wariness and expectation, waiting for him to take the next step and encourage her to go on. It was, he saw, up to him now. All she needed was for him to ask her to keep talking.

But he couldn't do it. He didn't see why it was his responsibility to understand her when she wasn't taking any responsibility to understand him—when she didn't even care about Mulligan's plans to ruin his career.

With a small tight smile Julia turned away and peered through the prism box again.



A week later, when Curt came home from work, he noticed that the plywood telescope and the LX200 were no longer on the patio. Julia's Chevy wasn't in the parking lot and he assumed that she must have taken the telescopes with her to a field somewhere.

Then he checked her closet in the bedroom. It was empty. The wire hangers were bare and clicked together when he ran his hands across them.

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He went through the dresser drawers, the cabinets, the other rooms in the apartment. All of her clothes were missing, along with her two best suitcases, her camera, most of her prints and sketches.

He walked down the hall. On either side of him he passed pictures of constellations and comets and various phases of the moon.

In the living room he stepped over a stack of *Sky & Telescope* magazines and brushed them with his heel. The stack fell to the carpet and spilled out a roughly staggered row of eclipses and asteroids, novas and galaxies, gas clouds and stars.



He went down to the parking lot, started his car, pulled away from the building. Driving slowly and calmly, he took Belt Line out towards the fields where Julia liked to do her stargazing. If there was any chance she wanted to be found—if she hadn't left him for good—this was where she would be waiting for him.

There was no moon tonight. Long stretches of empty land rolled off into the darkness. Each field merged gently into the next.

At a small frontage road he turned left. The road split away from Belt Line and wound through a series of small hills.

Eventually the road became gravelly, rough. His car shuddered across rocks and potholes.

He parked on a stretch of gravel shoulder that looked familiar to him. Then he walked out into the field.

Most of the grass had died. The landscape was a sweep of dirt and crumbled cement blocks and the tread-tracks left by heavy construction equipment.

He looked up at the sky as he walked. The stars were all around him. They filled the night.

The darkness of the sky deepened. The darkness was so rich that it grew while he looked at it. New stars surfaced gracefully from the depths, but the depths themselves never ended, only carried him forward.

He drifted across the ground, into the starlight. His body felt airy, almost weightless.

The night drew him in. The sky engulfed him. The stars were above him, below him, suspended about him in every direction. He floated, lost in the disorientation—the madness, really—of every star’s relationship to every other star.

Vertigo. The dizziness of gliding through space.

In his mind a fleck of interstellar quartz, no larger than a dime, caught and reflected the image of a quasar, a frozen-methane moon, another fleck of quartz.

Then a globular cluster—hundreds of suns bound to each other by gravity—burned ahead of him in stippled whites and blues. Dust shells and flare stars added subtle streaks of shade, sharper stabs of light.

Then a pulsar preyed on its companion star, absorbed the star through the incandescent stream of hydrogen pulled in by the pulsar’s spin. The star was deformed, and the side facing the pulsar bulged into the stream, into the particle wind’s ferocious suction.

And then beyond. Through the spiral arms of a whirlpool galaxy flooded with brightness. Through the galaxy’s central disk. Through the bursts of star formations and explosions and magnetic fluxes. Through the light sculpted in arcs and streamers, loops and filaments.

And out again. Into the vacuum, a thousand light-years of emptiness. And then across a thousand more light-years of dust veils, dark matter, hot stellar winds.

Billows of glowing gases twisted through the dust grains. Nebulae. Brilliant young stars set the clouds of gas on fire. The clouds flamed with the fluorescence and translucence of giant

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jellyfish, ghostly hybrids of light and shade. Throughout the gases' burning pinks and reds, the vast dust veils mirrored the starlight in cool splashes of blue. Color wrapped around color, cold around heat.

Galaxies gathered about galaxies, hundreds of them, thousands, too many to count. The galaxies tilted at odd angles to each other. Their radiant disks and spirals were scattered haphazardly, their groupings thicker in some places, thinner in others.

All around the galaxies, arcs of light streaked and played. The arcs were background galaxies, distorted by the gravitational effects of the dust and gas and other dark matter distributed across the universe. In the deflection of the arcs a galaxy could be itself or the twinned image of itself. A single galaxy could appear over and over again in varied elongations and sizes millions of light-years apart.

Beyond the galaxies were different textures, different shapes. But they were baffling, obscure, indecipherable in the darkness. Nothing was distinct. Nothing could be heard. Endless silence. Endless distance. An endless starless chill.

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