

Ephemeral

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She was there. Almost as if she had appeared out of nowhere.

She slept in a bed that drowned her in hospital linens, waves of white and blue holding her under. Her breath was barely noticeable, like a weak tide; rising, falling. She shivered.

I tiptoed into the room to adjust her blanket; it was no longer covering her feet. Small and pale, blue and purple. A twisted homage to *Starry Night*.

At the age of eight, she was fighting a war. Her opponent showed no mercy, impervious to our best offence, deaf to our silent pleas. It took her energy, stole her strength and had run off with her hair. Now, a warm little hat covered her head instead, with a unique design of white dots and lines. *Are those constellations?* I smiled. I'd have to ask her about this the next evening. With one last glance at her sleeping form, I left the room as quietly as I had come in.

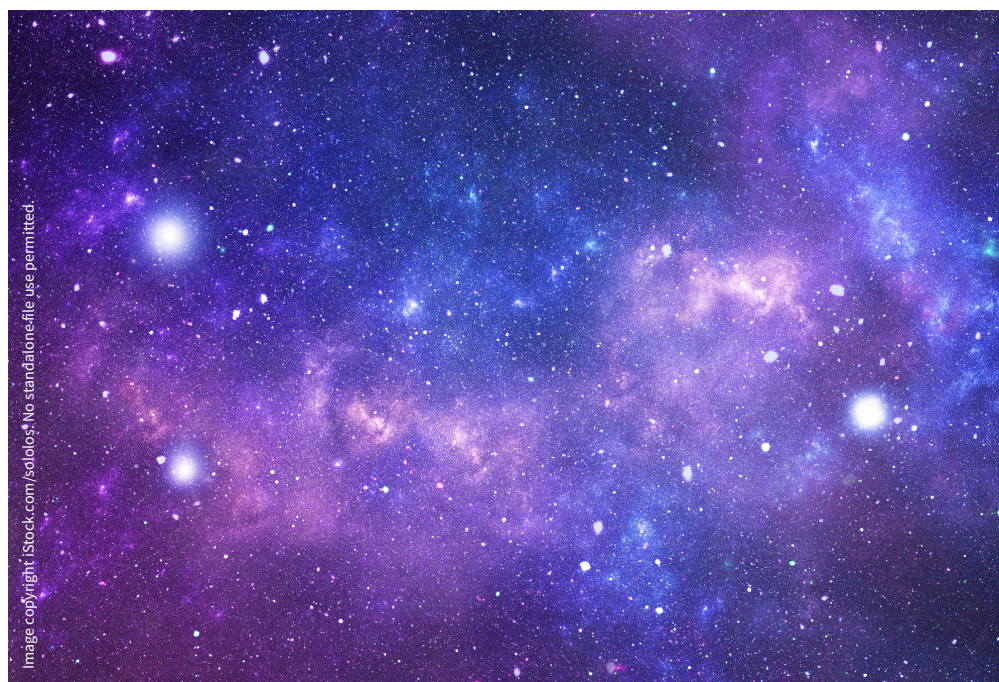
I put her first on my list of reassessments. As I approached the dark room, I was faced with a fortress of pillows protecting her frail figure. The glow of a flashlight shone through the cracks, and I spotted a book on her knees, a tiny finger trailing along the pages.

"That looks like a special book. What's it about?"

She looked up. Peeking through the pillows, she inspected the stranger disturbing her calm hideout. Her flashlight followed me as I walked over and sat at the foot of her bed. Her book was now shut, held close to her body, affording me a glimpse of the title.

"*Astronomy for Kids*. Matches the hat you're wearing!"

A hand tentatively reached out, removing a pillow from her fort, opening a narrow window. Behind it, her eyes lit up,



their glimmer a hint of the stars. "You like it? It has constellations."

"I love it. Here, let me show you a trick. Can I borrow your flashlight?"

I grabbed a piece of paper from my pocket and punched a few holes in it. Placing the paper in front of the flashlight, I pointed it toward the ceiling. She let out a small gasp, pushing away a few more pillows to get a better view.

"It's the Big Dipper!"

A laugh pushed its way through the lump in my throat as I showed her different constellations. While she was admiring the lights on the ceiling, I was admiring her. She was a bittersweet contrast: a soul so pure, trapped in a tainted body. A blank canvas being darkened too quickly. Life was radiating from her, warming my heart. As I reached out for her cold hand, I only hoped I could warm hers.

"What's your favourite constellation?"

Her gaze dropped from the ceiling for only a split second, long enough to whisper, "I can't tell you, it's my secret."

We spent the next few weeks talking about our common love for astronomy. Our discussions quickly became a place of comfort in an otherwise stark environment. She would tell me about everything she had learned, all the books she had read, and the telescope she had at home — how her mother had promised to bring it to the hospital soon. And once she was reunited with her telescope, she spent her evenings finding planets and satellites to share with me when I came by, ready to observe the universe together.

Some nights, when she was too tired to stand by the window, we would sit on her bed with her books spread around us. She would explain the difference between comets and asteroids; she would tell me why shooting stars were so important to

her (“You can’t tell anyone your wish, or else it won’t come true!”). She would recount how stars were born, how they lived, and how they died.

Some nights turned into most nights, and, soon enough, she was spending them lying in bed, gazing upon our constellations on the ceiling, her bright but tired eyes peeking from beneath the blanket. She held onto the flashlight tightly, willing life into the dancing stars above her.

One night, after another ceiling-gazing evening, she asked me to come closer. Once she was done whispering into my ear, she sank back into her sea of pillows, a faint smile on her pale lips.

“There, now it can be your favourite, too.”

I sat by the window, worn out. My gaze drifted over to the black dress, laid to rest in the corner of my room. My cat had already found comfort in it, rolling itself into the soft folds. I shifted, trying to get comfortable myself, leaning my head against the cold glass. Wiping my eyes, I looked up at the sky. No clouds, no moonlight. A perfect evening for stargazing. My eyes followed a familiar path, landing on a favorite constellation.

She was there. Almost as if she had always been there.

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This article has been peer reviewed.

The patient in this piece is a composite inspired by many different real encounters, with all identifying traits having been carefully removed or modified.

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