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## *In the Light of the Sky*

It was ten o'clock, and I had been asleep for almost an hour. That small sliver of peace was obliterated in seconds by the impatient prodding of a boy too anxious to sleep.

"Mommy, I can't sleep."

Rubbing the exhaustion out of my eyes, I turned on the light. Todd had crawled onto the bed; he cradled a storybook I used to read to him.

"What's wrong, sweetie?" I yawned.

"I can't sleep. It's too dark."

"Too dark?" I asked as I slipped out of the warmth of my bed. I opened my arms, and Todd eagerly came to my grasp. He hugged me tightly, gripping the fabric of my cotton nightgown with his tiny fingers. "Why don't I just turn the light in the hall on; would that help?"

He shrugged sheepishly.

After tucking him back into bed, I turned the hallway light on, praying that it'd be enough to get him to sleep.

For fifteen minutes, I thought my expert parenting had earned me rest for the night. That was until three hard pokes into my side called me back to consciousness.

I turned on the light again to see Todd standing at my bedside.

"It's still too dark. It's scary."

My back ached, reminding me of the long hours I had worked during the day. Hours and hours of retail work offset by my job at a local restaurant were forever ingrained in my muscles. My feet still

complained of numbness, and my brain pointed out that in less than twelve hours, I'd have to suffer through it all again. With that in mind, I patted the bed, offering Todd to sleep with me for the night.

He climbed up next to me without any hesitation. Nestled comfortably by my side, I turned the light off again, and closed my eyes.

"Mommy, are you afraid of the dark?"

"No," I said softly. "I think it's really nice, actually."

"It's so *scary*," he insisted, snuggling closer to me. Again his nails dug into my gown, as if he were afraid the second he let go, I'd float away like a balloon.

Stomping footsteps from above caused him to let out a quiet whimper; distant, indiscernible yelling caused another.

"Nothing bad is going to happen," I promised. "I'll protect you."

That seemed to placate him, so I closed my eyes, and tried to find sleep while I still could. By midnight, I had fallen into a dreamless sleep. The darkness there was peaceful. By two o'clock, though, I was up again.

When I reached next to me, I reached into a cold emptiness. Panic forced my eyes wide open as I called out his name. I nearly ran out of my bedroom in search of him, but he hadn't gone far.

Todd sat against the wall in the hallway, looking over his book carefully. When I asked him what he was doing, he shrugged, tracing his fingers across the brightly-coloured characters.

"It's late, sweetie. You need to go to sleep."

"I *can't*."

"Yes, you *can*."

"But I'm afraid," he complained. "There are so many noises and screaming. It's scary in the dark."

*No, this apartment complex is scary*, I thought. The tiny place was all I could afford, but I'm sure our angry, always-fighting neighbours, the weekly break-ins and distant gunshots from somewhere in the city were to blame for Todd's phobia. There were many times in my life that I chided myself for living there but scars on my skin reminded me that it was a better home than my previous one with my abusive ex-husband.

Pushing aside those thoughts, I sat against the wall with Todd,

watching him stare at his book. He turned to a page that depicted a young knight sleeping soundly in his bedroom that included a big window. It showed a blanket of stars and a huge, smiling moon.

“Do you know why I like the dark so much?”

He shook his head.

I pointed to the book. “Without the dark, we wouldn’t have the stars. We wouldn’t have the moon.”

He tilted his head in confusion. I took his hand and led him back to my bedroom. The window overlooked other buildings in the city, and, though it only showed a fraction of the sky, I asked him to look at it.

“What do you see?”

“I just see the sky.”

“Do you see any stars?”

After squinting his eyes and scanning the sky, he shook his head.

“Do you know why?”

Again he shook his head.

“Because there’s too much light,” I said, as I directed his eyes to neon signs, illuminated windows of other apartments, and street lamps. “The stars can’t shine if it’s too bright out.”

“Is that why we can’t see stars during the day?”

I nodded.

“I want to see the stars.”

“I’ll make you a deal,” I said. “If you go to sleep tonight and tomorrow, then on Saturday, I will take you to see the stars.”

He stuck out his pinkie. “Promise?”

I wrapped mine around his and smiled. “Promise.”

Todd grinned and ran back into his bedroom. That night we both got much needed sleep, and the next night went uninterrupted as I had hoped.

Saturday night came, and as I had promised, I took him to see the stars.

He eagerly got into the car, so excited he couldn’t keep still. I told him it’d be a long drive but he said, “I don’t care—I just want to see the stars.”

As we drove, the sky transitioned from the pink of dusk to the indigo of night. I thought he’d fall asleep, but he didn’t.

“Mommy, why are we at the beach?” he asked when I parked the car.

I explained light pollution to him simply, telling him we could see the stars because the beach wasn’t overcrowded with the city’s lights.

I took his hand and led him onto the sand. I set out a beach towel for the two of us to share, and, when we were comfortable, I instructed him to look upward.

He gasped in awe as he saw stars. With admiration in his eyes, he smiled, speechless.

“Did you know that these stars tell stories?”

“Like my storybook? How do they do that?”

“Look at those stars,” I said. “That’s the Big Dipper, and—” I drew my finger across the sky, “—that’s the Little Dipper. Their story is about a mother and her son.”

“Like you and me?”

I nodded, letting out a quiet snort of laughter. “The story goes that the Greek god Zeus turned a woman into a bear to protect her from his jealous wife, the goddess Hera. Years later, her son became a hunter. One day, the son came upon the bear, not realizing she was his mother. Zeus was afraid that the son would accidentally hurt his mother, so he turned the son into a bear. They were finally reunited, and Zeus put them in the stars so they could always be together.”

“Is Zeus going to put us in the sky?”

I shrugged. “Maybe some day.”

He looked around the sky and pointed to another cluster of stars, asking, “What about them?”

So I ran through story after story, pointing out each constellation with ease. By the time I had recited the story of Orion, Todd was softly snoring.

With him asleep, I cradled him in my arms. He had stolen all my attention from the sky, but the twinkling stars didn’t seem to mind.

I selfishly sat there for a few minutes longer, closing my eyes from time to time to soak in the crash of ocean waves and the cool breeze. There were few moments in my life where I could have peace and be awake simultaneously. The smell of the salt stung my nose and the wind caused goosebumps to rise underneath my thin sweater. But

the only noise came from the waves, and it was softer and kinder than any lullaby.

Eventually I pulled myself away from the sea, carrying Todd against my chest. While I gently buckled him in, I said a silent prayer that he'd stay asleep as we made the drive back to our apartment.

That was well over twenty years ago. I've told this story a hundred times over; it's one of my favourite memories.

Now, it sounds a little different through my son's voice. He has told it a hundred times over too, each as an explanation for his love of the stars and astrophysics.

Right now, he tells it with heartbreak in his voice as he holds my hand in a hospital room.

I complain that it's too white, too bright, and there's too much light, coughing, "I can't see the stars with conditions like this."

Todd sighs. I don't think he knows what to say, but I don't mind. I've always valued quietness like I've always valued darkness; they make the moments filled with noise and light a little more valuable.

There have been few times in my life when I've felt the end coming, when I was sure it was over. Most of those moments were at the hands of my ex-husband, and they were filled with terror.

But this one?

I've never been calmer.

I feel it coming now and I say to my son, "Todd, tell me the story of your favourite constellation."

With tears staining his voice, he gently tells me the story of the Big Dipper and Little Dipper. I close my eyes and envision the stars in my head until each point becomes brighter and brighter.

Then there's nothing but light.