

LOOKING UP

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1

It all started, as things so often do, with the stars. One clear, perfect night Pete lay on his back on the trampoline in the middle of the back lawn and gazed up at the stars. Some were big, while others were so small they almost weren't there. Some twinkled, just like in the song, and some pulsed like tiny silver hearts beating in the night sky. Then there were the ones that were just wincy points of light, bright against the black. All of them, Pete thought, were beautiful.

As he lay there, gazing skywards, his thoughts drifted to his birthday. He was going to be ten

in a week. Double digits at last! He was hoping — desperately hoping — for a telescope so that he could see everything much more clearly. He wanted to see which were really stars, and which were planets, to make out the clusters of stars which to the naked eye masqueraded as one, and the thousands of tiny stars which for now appeared as big dusty smudges on the inky sky.

Pete had been poring over telescope catalogues for months and had finally set his hopes on the Moonstar 300. There were lots of bigger — and maybe better — telescopes, but they cost hundreds, even thousands, of dollars, and he knew Mum couldn't afford that much.



'Pete! Time to come in.' Mum's voice drifted across the yard from the open back door. It was getting late. Pete took one last lingering look, then padded across the lawn.

Mum looked up from the kitchen table as he came in. 'Whatcha been doing?'

Pete shrugged. 'Not much. Looking at the stars.'

Mum smiled. 'They're beautiful, aren't they? I used to love stargazing when I was your age. I remember —' She stopped. Pete saw her face flicker with some unknown memory then close down. Typical Mum. She didn't like to talk about her childhood. Pete didn't know anything about when she was little.

'Anyway. Time for bed, honey.' Mum smiled again but Pete could see the frown lurking on her forehead. He wished he could reach out and rub it off. Instead, he wandered down the hall to brush his teeth.

Through the bathroom window Pete could see the night sky. As he brushed he closed his eyes and imagined himself looking at the stars close up through a telescope.

When Mum came to tuck him in, Pete wondered if he should remind her — again — about the telescope, or show her the picture in the catalogue he kept under his pillow. But he knew Mum wouldn't forget. He had told her at least a

hundred times how much he wanted a telescope. The issue wasn't whether she would remember, but whether she could afford to buy him one. Money was tight, and the kind of telescope Pete wanted cost a lot of money. No point bugging Mum about it. He'd just have to wait and see.

2

Coming home from school was Pete's favourite part of the day. After being stuck inside listening to Mr Thompson drone on about maths, or spelling, or history, he was always glad to get home and be free to do whatever he liked. Today, as he came through the front gate, Pete lifted the flap on the letterbox, then stopped. This was different.

There was an envelope. Addressed to Pete. He'd never received mail of his own before.

Mum got plenty. Usually bills, although sometimes she got an invitation to a party. And every weekend their letterbox was stuffed with what Mum called junk mail — catalogues from all



the big chain stores wanting them to buy stuff.

But never before had Pete opened the letterbox to find something with his name on it. He picked up the yellow envelope and examined it. The writing was kind of wobbly and loopy, not like Mum's flowery writing, and not like Pete's own printing which Mr Thompson said was not neat enough. Pete was sure he'd never seen this writing before.

He turned the envelope over. Sometimes on the back of Mum's letters there was an address from whoever had sent it. Not this one. The back was empty, just a neat triangle, stuck down to itself with no hint of what might be inside.

Pete felt a teensy tremble of excitement .

'Who could be writing to me?'

It was a mystery, and Pete loved mysteries. Almost as much as he loved stars.

Resisting the urge to rip open the envelope, Pete walked slowly across the front lawn, down the side of the house and up to the back door.

He plonked his schoolbag on the mat while

he dug in his pocket for the key.

Miaow.

‘Hello, buddy.’ Pete stooped to scratch the cat rubbing at his ankles. Coulsen was a loyal friend, always there waiting for him after school.

Unlocking the door he pushed it open and dragged his bag inside. Coulsen padded through behind him, miaowing again. Pete opened the pantry, took out the container of kibble and poured some into Coulsen’s bowl. He watched for a few seconds as the cat nibbled daintily, then turned back to find himself something to eat.

Finally, with a choc chip biscuit in one hand and the letter in the other, Pete sat down at the kitchen table. Chewing the bickie, he examined the envelope again. There was no clue who it was from. He knew that opening it would probably answer that question but Pete wanted to prolong the anticipation. The mystery tickled his brain as he read the front again, looking for a clue.

Then, when he could stand it no longer, he ripped it open.

A birthday card. In the excitement of finding the envelope, Pete had almost forgotten his birthday. He pulled out the card and examined the front. Most birthday cards he’d had in the past — from Mum mostly, but also sometimes from Mum’s friends or kids at school — had featured clowns or cars or cartoon animals. This card was different. This was an image of stars, swirling and sprawling across a deep blue background. It was like a painting. Pete could feel himself being pulled into those distant galaxies.

‘Wow!’ He was sure the sender must be someone who knew him well, who knew how he felt when he lay on the back lawn and looked at the night sky. But who? Finally, he opened the card, reading the few lines inside.

*Dear Pete
Happy Birthday.
May all your dreams come true.
Love, Grandad.*

Grandad? Pete frowned. He didn't have a grandad. Not that he knew of.

There was just Pete and Mum at home. Dad lived far away, in the city, and although he rang occasionally, he never visited and he never wrote. Dad had a girlfriend called Shara and a fast car and a little flat near the beach. There wasn't a lot of room for Pete, and Pete got the feeling that was the way Dad, and especially Shara, liked it.

As far as Pete knew, that was all the family he had. It was always just Pete and Mum, Mum and Pete. He'd asked Mum once about grandparents. Other kids at school had them, so why didn't he? But Mum had said both her parents were dead. She'd looked so sad when she said it, that Pete had changed the subject.

Now, though, there was this card, from someone calling himself Grandad.

Strange. Very, very strange.

3

Pete was waiting when Mum came through the door from work.

'I didn't know I had a grandad.'

He watched, intrigued, at the way his mum's face changed from happy to see him, to confused by what he'd said, to something else he couldn't name. She was not quite frowning, not quite smiling and Pete knew, without a doubt, that whatever she said next would be not quite true.

'What makes you think —' she started, then paused, swallowing.

Pete held out the card he'd been holding tightly ever since he'd opened it.