

Through the Stars

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*My first story. I felt like doing something totally out of the ordinary. And then this popped into my mind.
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Chapter 1

It was the morning that would change Heather's life, and she was removing her screaming little brother from the local shuffleboard court.

After looking both ways, Heather crossed the road and opened the door to her apartment building. As she passed by, people were opening their doors and looking out. Nathaniel, her little brother, had the most piercing scream on her side of New York. She carried him up the steps and into their apartment, room 205. Her mother, Krista, wasn't there. Probably grocery shopping, Heather thought with a sigh. If you can grocery shop at the liquor store, then she is.

"Come on, Nat. Stop crying," Heather begged. She always called her brother Nat, because he couldn't pronounce his real name. Nathaniel had stopped screaming, but now was sniveling. He never could hold a tantrum for more than a few minutes. Heather stood up from her seat on the floor and walked into the kitchen. It was a mess. I'll add "Clean the Kitchen" to the list, thought Heather.

"Cookies," she said to herself, "cookies. Nat loves cookies."

Heather spotted them on top of the refrigerator. Her mom probably put them up there without noticing that Heather was twelve years old, stood five foot three, and could see over the top of it. She grabbed two double chocolate chip; they were Nathaniel's favorite. Nathaniel let out a wail. He was going to start crying again. Heather rushed back into the room and picked her brother up.

"Look, Nat, cookies!" she said.

"Cookies?" Nathaniel began, in his high-pitched voice he always used when he wanted something, as he took the cookies from her hand.

The room grew silent, with the occasional munching noise that Nathaniel made. Heather was relieved. The last time Nat had broken out in a tantrum, the person in the next apartment had called the police. They thought that he was being beaten to death. Luckily, though, the crisis had been averted, and Heather left her brother to nibble his cookie. Taking care of her brother always wore her out. I shouldn't be doing this, she thought, I should be at the mall with my friends, or playing outside, or something. Krista should be doing this. There were a million things Heather wished her mom would do. At the top of the list was clean the apartment, or hire someone to. There was a pile of dishes in the sink that had no interest in being washed; a lonely whisk sat on the floor, a victim of Nathaniel's play; the garbage was two months past full; the stove was close to rusting over, for the last time it had been used was before the divorce. Worst of all, though, Nathaniel's asthma was growing steadily worse. Sometimes he would cough for an hour, and Heather would take him to the doctor. The mold in the apartment was horrible, so

horrible that even though she knew better, Heather could have sworn you could catch asthma.

A breeze blew through the open window. "I can't dwell on the negative, or I might just explode," Heather admitted. "I'll take a bath, have breakfast, and then everything will seem better." She walked down the hall into the bathroom, and let out an awkward noise that was between a gasp and a laugh when she looked into the mirror. When Heather had seen Nathaniel down in the shuffleboard court, she had thrown on her bathrobe and ran downstairs. Since it was only seven o'clock, she had just woken up. Her hair was a mess. Usually straight and golden brown, it puffed out in all directions around her pale face. The brush bounced off like an arrow hitting a cement wall. After the third try, she gave up and began pouring herself a bath. Back in the main room, Nathaniel was now happily playing with his toys and still eating the chocolate chip cookie. She was glad he had stopped crying. They were low on aspirin.

By the time Heather returned to the bathroom, her tub was close to overflowing. She walked over and turned the knob into the off position. The faucet continued dripping. Just another thing to add to the list. Heather slipped in and closed her eyes. Everything was quiet, almost peaceful. The birds outside were chirping, preparing to leave for the winter. It was only October, but that didn't mean it couldn't get extremely cold. Already the water in the bathtub was losing its warmth. Reluctantly, Heather lathered up her hair with shampoo. She would have loved to keep soaking, but she didn't want to freeze.

Once the tub had been drained and Heather was finished getting dressed, she went in search of Nathaniel's coat. He loved the park, and she wanted to get away from the apartment, for her and Nathaniel's sake. At times she felt like he was the only thing keeping her from leaving, just walking out the door without a note or anything. After she had discovered his blue and purple sweater in a pile of plush toys, she took hers off the coat rack in her room and returned to Nathaniel.

"Park?" he inquired as Heather entered the room with their coats in hand.

"That's right, buddy," she said. He smiled and reached for his sweater. Heather let him have it and went into the kitchen. Among the clutter, there was a small red notepad. "Gone to park. Be back soon," she wrote, and left the pad open on the counter. Her mom never saw the notes, but Heather felt secure when she wrote them. She grabbed the key to the apartment of the counter and found Nathaniel hanging on the doorknob.

"Let's go," she said to him. He released the doorknob and allowed her to open the door. They walked down from the second story and exited the apartment. It was blustery outside, and Nathaniel got hit in the head with a leaf as he jumped the last step out of the apartment. A couple of boys were playing catch in the middle of the road with a football. It wasn't the safest thing, because there was a park right down the road, but not too many cars accidentally came down their street. Heather grabbed Nathaniel's hand (she still didn't want him running into the road,) and set off for the park.

Despite all of the places she would rather live, Heather loved one thing about New York: you could find anything there. Just recently a small shop had opened at the corner of her block selling antiques. She went in out of interest, and found some "antique" tissues that really looked antique. She chuckled when she thought of it, even though it wasn't too funny. They were yellow and most were torn or disintegrated when touched. But as she walked to the park that morning, her stomach rumbled. I totally forgot about breakfast! she thought. As the park came into view, though, she noticed a new shop called "Benevolent Breads." It smelled enchanting, and Heather decided it wasn't too late for a little breakfast.

The door opened with a small ring from a bell. The smells of fresh baked sourdough, rye, wheat, pumpernickel, Italian, and French bread swirled around like a tornado. An oven sat at the opposite end of the store, and a man with an apron on was pulling bread out of it. There were small tables throughout the store that would sit two, three, or four. Shelves around the store held various memorabilia, from bobble-headed baseball figures to plates exported from Romania. Nathaniel seemed to levitate towards the display case, even though he only liked white bread.

"May I help you?" a voice from behind the counter asked. Heather broke out of her trance and peered over. Behind it stood a woman who looked to be in her mid-30s, with bright amber eyes, her hair up in a bun and a grin that looked like she had just pulled a practical joke on someone. She was rearranging the dishes in a stack, presumably to be washed.

"Oh, yes," Heather replied, "I'll have two cinnamon rolls and two cups of water please..." Heather glanced at her nametag. "Joise."

The woman smiled her broad, practical joke grin. "People don't often call me by my name." Just then Nathaniel came running up. He tripped over his shoelace though, and grabbed Heather's leg. She stumbled and fell to the ground with an explosive thud. Nathaniel showed about five different emotions on his face before deciding that the fall was funnier than hurtful, and with a quick hiccup began laughing.

"Are you all right?" asked Joise. Her voice sounded concerned but her face told another story. "And who is this little guy?"

"That's my brother, Nathaniel," replied Heather, still disoriented from the fall.

"Well, he's quite the cute one!" said Joise, resuming her abstract smile. In fact, she was right. Since Heather lived with him, she didn't really notice. She tended to take it for granted. Nathaniel had golden brown hair, like her, and green eyes. Heather always found this strange because no one in her family, including her, (with her grayish blue ones,) had green eyes. He was four feet five inches, tall for a boy who was only three. Heather actually was the oddball in the family, with her perfectly straight teeth, golden brown hair, and a small red birthmark on her wrist that no one ever noticed.

Meanwhile, Joise was heading over to the opposite end of a case, filled with pastries, and removed the two rolls. She also took a loaf of white bread from the oven and placed it in the bag with the rolls. "Here you go. And the loaf is on the house." She smiled again, and Heather smiled back, depositing the two dollars and ten cents she owed in Joise's hand. She ripped off a piece of the warm bread and stuck it into her pocket, heating her jeans to a comfortable level.

Only when Heather turned to head out the door did she see that Nathaniel was gone. "Nat?" she called into the air. "Nat?!" Heather shot out the door and looked up and down the street. The wind was still blowing strong, but some dark grey clouds were looming in the distance, as if to warn her of the event. Heather frantically shouted Nathaniel's name to no one. Whipping her head around, she thought she

saw a man turning down an alleyway. He wore a dark coat, which billowed to both sides. In her panicked state, she followed him. Reaching the corner, she turned and saw him farther down the street.

Heather lost track of time as she followed him, through crowds, busy streets, and deserted neighborhoods. What might as well have been a minute seemed like an hour. All the streets looked the same, and no matter how far they went, and how tired Heather got, the man continued at his brisk pace. There was no way he could be moving this fast with a child underneath his coat, she thought. Finally, only moments before she felt like collapsing, Heather made one final turn off an empty road to find a dead end alleyway. This time she actually did collapse. She felt hot tears pouring down her cheeks. Where did I lose him? she thought. I swear, he turned here. Where could he have gone? She felt like she was drowning, with every breath becoming harder and harder to take.

When she finally looked up, Heather noticed something she hadn't before. In a dark corner, hardly visible between the old boxes and trash bags, something was reflecting a tiny ray of sun. It wasn't very unusual to find something like this in an alleyway. It could be a broken bottle, or a mirror someone threw away. But Heather was desperate to do anything, anything to take her mind of Nathaniel and the shadows slowly creeping over her. Forcing herself to get up, she slowly approached the shining object. She knelt down and grasped it, realizing it was smooth, had a chain, and it was... warm.

Heather held the charm in the palm of her hand, scrutinizing it. Now that it was in the light, its more peculiar features were shown. It was bright, neon green, with a yellow center and some kind of seal, or symbol, carved into the yellow circle. The symbol consisted of a figure with a squiggly line on the top, and two vertical lines underneath it. On top of the squiggly line was a sun, and then some kind of animal Heather had never seen before. The opposite side was black, and an upraised silver square on the side. Heather prodded the button, and to her amazement it sunk into the charm.

Since she wasn't prepared, Heather was totally knocked off her feet when a silvery substance erupted from the charm. It floated around and then attached itself to the wall. My day cannot get weirder or worse, Heather thought with a touch of humor. Upon regaining her footing, she noticed the liquid, or whatever it was, had formed a perfect circle on the wall opposite to her. She picked up a used tin can from next to her, and lightly tossed it at the liquid. Heather rapidly tucked her head between her knees and braced for the kind of impact that she had initially experienced. But it never came. One second the can was there, and when she looked up, it was gone. She found another object, a computer manual, and threw it. This time Heather did not curl up. She watched object soar towards the shimmering circle and disappear. Then it struck her: It was a portal!

Heather was bewildered by this newly discovered fact. It would explain why her weary eyes had seen the man one second, and then he had vanished. "Nat." The word drifted out of her mouth of its own free will. Nathaniel was through there. She just knew it! Heather stood up reluctantly, and approached the portal with the necklace in hand. I'll find Nathaniel, she thought, taking a step. I'll find the man who stole him away. She took another step. I'll get away from here. She took the final step through the glassy substance, engulfing her as though she was just another can or manual, and dissolved behind her.

The next day, when she was being held prisoner on a Cacusinian war vessel, she would terribly regret her decision.