

The Stars Have Eyes

a memoir by Mohit Gore

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I was five years old when my dad stood on my bed with a plastic bag full of stars in his hand. I was a little indignant to see my dad do this when he had constantly told me not to for my entire life, but I watched regardless as he stuck a small plastic moon to the ceiling, then a sun and three little stars. A few little white dots went up as well, to represent the distant stars in the night sky. After a few moments of pushing the adhesive in as much as possible, my dad stepped down from the tiny bed and observed his handiwork. It didn't look like anything special, just shapes on a ceiling. Then he turned and shut off the lights.

"Oh," I whispered. The stars were glowing a neon green, and they would continue to glow green every night, all throughout the summer. When I started kindergarten, the leaves turned brown as the stars glowed green. When I was sitting alone with my jump-rope draped across the bench, the stars would glow. They would glow until I would get home and turn the lights back on in my room.

The stars glowed as I made a friend – a boy with mousy hair – and the stars glowed as I, at his Halloween party, put my hand in the chip bowl, only for a plastic jaw to close over it. The stars glowed as I got a strike at a friend's birthday party, set in a neon purple bowling alley. Between rounds, the TVs would play various music videos, and the lyric video to David Guetta and Usher's "Without You" was playing on the monitor as I took my last few bites of pizza and sipped the last drops of punch.

The next year was a blur. When I was throwing staplers at my first-grade teacher, the stars would glow. When I ripped up papers, when I cried, when I punched, and when I bullied, the stars would continue glowing. The stars glowed when I, the wildest boy in the first grade, became friends with the mildest boy in the first grade.



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The stars glowed as I learned how to read a clock. The stars glowed as I stole the teacher's own Post-It notes and began to fold origami in the corner, all while she went on and on about some math thing.

At the end of the year, our class watched *Frozen*. The rest of the boys were dismayed, because they wanted to watch *The Minions*, but not me. I didn't care that *Frozen* was a "girl movie," or that it starred two princesses, or that love was a central theme. I loved it all the same.

That summer, I sang "Let It Go" by Idina Menzel onstage in front of a huge crowd of my classmates and their families. The stars glowed proudly. I had never felt stage fright in my life, and this made me more confident that I would never feel it, ever. It was only after that, during a loud performance to Rachel Platten's "Fight Song..."

This is my fight song

Take back my life song

Prove 'em all right song

...that the stars began to glow with something new. No stage fright. What could that mean?

My power's turned up

Starting right now, I'll be strong

I'll play my fight song

My head spun in circles... but I landed on thoughts of *Frozen* and "Let It Go." I loved that song. I loved that movie. A new thought entered my head: why? How did the creators of



Frozen make something people loved that much? How did they make a "girl movie" into something a boy can love? How does something even become enjoyable? Could *I* ever make something so good people love it? Could my shaky phone videos with my toys ever lead me to – could I *possibly* become –

And I don't really care if nobody else believes

'Cause I've still got a lot of fight left in me

No, I've still got a lot of fight left in me

...something else clicked.

From then on, I would confidently tell anyone who would listen that I was going to make a movie when I grew up. The stars were still glowing, but I felt like now... they glowed a little brighter. It also felt like all of a sudden, they had grown eyes.

The stars glowed all throughout the next year.

“Mohit,” called my dad. I lifted my eyes from *Well Done, Secret Seven* by Enid Blyton.

“Mohit!” he called again. I sighed, put the book on the ground, and scampered downstairs.

(Scampered. Get it?)

“Look what came,” he said as I neared. My heart practically did a jackknife looking at the glossy cover of *Star Wars Origami*. I grabbed the book and raced back to my room, shooting a thankful smile at my dad as I went. The Secret Seven could wait. I carefully folded my first AT-AT as the stars glowed smugly. That night, I lay in bed reading *The Penderwicks at Point Mouette* by Jeanne Birdsall. I finished the entire book in two hours under the watchful eyes of the glowing stars.



I stared at the cover of the book, wondering how Jeanne Birdsall got so good at writing. And if the world was a book. Sometimes it kind of felt like one. But if it was a book, I definitely wasn't the main character.

So maybe I'm a character in someone else's story, I remember thinking. I live in a quiet, tiny, sleepy town. I'm going to somehow become best friends with a boy in a big city and we're going to fight an evil power together. I'm going to be the one who makes him laugh, fights with him in the middle, and makes fun of him for liking the girl. I'm going to be the one he sacrifices everything for and nearly dies for. That's pretty cool. I'd take it.

In the next year, the sun fell off (the one on my ceiling, that is). I don't know where it went, but the real-life sun always seemed a little quiet after that. Nobody talked about it as much. It didn't come up in conversation. The stars and moon kept glowing, though, both in real life and in adhesive form. My mind kept returning to them. Some evenings, I would run through the forest next to our house with my head looking up at the barely visible stars, paying no attention to the mud splattering my light-up Nikes.

The stars glowed as I, clinging onto my mom's arm, asked the librarian lady if she could please check these books out for me. Her eyes travelled over the books: *Matilda* by Roald Dahl, *The Jungle Book* by Rudyard Kipling, and, of course, my favorite, *Captain Underpants and the Invasion of the Incredibly Naughty Cafeteria Ladies From Outer Space* by Dav Pilkey.

She arched an eyebrow, but made no comment.

The stars glowed as I had a breakdown at my afterschool and threw a metal water bottle at some kid's head, screamed on the floor, and refused to get up. Eventually, I was hazily carried to my mom's car by the exasperated woman who ran the place, where we drove home and the radio played Nicki Minaj over my sobs.



Original characters, plot threads, stories, drawings, music, comics, movies, reading and photography kept flowing through my brain, but everything seemed to come back to the stars. I began journaling more frequently in a charming little grey composition notebook. The stars glowed as I had trouble starting my first entry, so I wrote "Dear composition notebook" and nibbled my eraser for a while, before deciding that that was a weird way to start and instead wrote "Hi! I'm Mohit!" and continued from there. Afternoons were spent drawing flipbook animations, created with Andymation's finest paper and screws, illuminated by the stars. These were never that good, but they kept me busy, and my mother would always find a way to compliment my animations.

One year, my parents ushered me to a nearby theater summer camp for elementary schoolers. Everyone there called it PAC, for "Performing Arts Camp," but I tried not to; it always sounded like I was talking about Cub Scouts. The building was large and grand, very different from the square-mile life I was used to. The kids there were friendly, but a little bit insane in their own way. This was the start of a pattern I would soon spot with theater kids, and before I knew it, I was one myself.

The stars glowed as I talked to them, laughed with them, thought with them, became friends with them – indeed, one of the girls had this unfamiliar effect on me that caused my brain to go through a peculiar procedure whenever I was talking to her. My mind would go blank, I would get sweatier, and my heart would begin to race. This stumped me. Finally, after much thought, and after consulting my favorite novels, I excitedly deemed it a crush, and thus was the beginning of my lifelong journey of a hopeless romantic. *Just like in a book!* I'd think, with giddy excitement.



The stars glowed while I dreamily thought of the showtune from *The Sound of Music* that went "you are sixteen, going on seventeen..." and prayed that one day, I, too, would one day dance with a pretty girl in a white dress in a glass greenhouse. *Maybe when I'm a teenager*, I mused.

(This still hasn't happened.)

The stars glowed as my sister and I rolled down our windows. The camp wasn't too far away, but the drive did take fifteen to twenty minutes – just enough time for me and my sister to shout the names of every store and restaurant that passed by on either side. I have no idea why we did this, but it would be the last time we would.

Because in the next few years, the whole world seemed to slow down.

Life was no longer about flashing lights and playing games, or shouting restaurant names. I didn't really look at the stars anymore, either. That was for kids. Plus, walking at night with my head turned all the way up to the sky, the way I used to, could get my shoes dirty! Only kids got their shoes dirty! Little did I know, just because *I* wasn't looking at the stars anymore didn't mean that *they* couldn't look at me anymore.

"You need to learn to put school before – before everything else," snapped my father irately. I was now in *sixth grade*, and the only thing on anyone's mind was grades. We were in middle school! High school was the next step!

"They won't let this slide in high school!" my math teacher screeched. (They did.)

"You waste your time with this papercraft," my mom said coldly, gesturing to an articulated version of Steve from Minecraft sitting on the floor. Movable joints, all made from paper.



"Another story," a girl two years younger than me said eagerly. The gaggle of kids around me glanced up.

"Another one?" I replied, laughing.

"This walk is talking forever," a boy complained. "One more, man. That's it, I promise."

"Fine," I said, smiling (deep down, I had really been hoping they would ask). *This is your purpose*, I thought for the umpteenth time. *You figured that out all the way back in first grade. Your purpose is to tell stories.*

"Wait," I said, thinking out loud in my room. "Me singing in front of that crowd was the end to an arc of figuring out my purpose. An arc," I said excitedly. "Just like a character!" The stars above my head glowed approvingly as I glanced at them. I turned my gaze outside to the real stars, where I blinked and they winked back. My life was going well.

Then the world ended.

The thing is, the whole situation sounded like such a cool idea for a book in retrospect. The entire world shuts down because of a virus and everyone is stuck inside. Then a character gets visited by a stranger who proclaims that they are immune to the virus, but they don't know how or why. They investigate it, get involved in government things, solve a mystery, reveal a scandal, and save the day.

I learned one thing during the pandemic: the world isn't a book.

A lot of things I used to do were stopped during that time, including martial arts, Boy Scouting, acting, coding, and singing. I no longer switched signs with George and Harold. I no longer went on caravan rides and trekked in damp caves with the Secret Seven. I no longer went to carnivals and lived on islands with the Famous Five. I no longer attended Divination lessons and laughed at Professor Trelawney with Harry, Ron and Hermione. I no longer accompanied



Calvin on his extended flights of imagination with Hobbes. I no longer solved mysteries and fought gangsters with Tintin. I no longer watched *Game Theory*. I no longer built castles or played Bedwars in *Minecraft*. I no longer thought up characters or sketched out world maps, and *Star Wars Origami* sat collecting dust under mountains of old homework and drawings.

By the end of sixth grade, school was virtual and my personality had taken a complete turnaround. My last comic book was drawn months ago. I only had a few friends, and gone was the extroverted, social and funny Mohit. I was shy and lonely, two words that felt continents away previously. I was *depressed*. Never in a hundred million years would those words have been used to describe me, until now.

This dread continued into seventh grade, where puberty struck and my outside felt as wrong as my inside. I hadn't glanced at the stars on my ceiling in months. But once again, they were always watching *me* regardless of me doing it back. They had watched humanity grow up, after all. The ones on my ceiling and the ones in the sky. I was just one of the billions who had focused on them. I knew I was nothing special... but the stars always seemed to have a soft spot for me, considering my first word was quite literally *star*.

Then I had to move rooms, for extremely complicated reasons that had to do with my grandmother that no adult would give me a straight answer to at first. Once I finally got a proper explanation, I begrudgingly agreed. I was rather a spoiled child, coming from a large family with a history of freedom fighters, writers, historians, artists, and teachers. However, to me, my studio had been a separate space for a separate side of me, and the privilege of having two rooms essentially all to myself was lost on me. Now, those two sides were coming together... and I was going to have to part with the stars on my ceiling. So I sighed, bade goodbye to the hearts on my door handles, cleared out my bookshelf, unpinned my posters, and trudged into my new room.



The pandemic was a blur. I wasn't myself.

I thought my voice might vanish from a lack of use.

If you told me five years ago that I would be shy now, I scribbled in my journal. I would laugh at you. Then I would run away from you, because you're clearly mentally deranged.

I was shy. Me. Me, the same boy who would never get stage fright, who would make friends with everyone, who would entertain small crowds of eight-year-olds for hours on end at his afterschool by improvising complex storylines with a few LEGO Minifigures and his best friend.

I have lost friends since then – many friends, including some who had lasted from my first few years of schooling. My best friend drifted away from me. My other friends discovered themselves and grew up. The mousy-haired boy who invited me to that Halloween party all those years ago still talks to me, though. I went to his concert just the other day, in fact. The faint aroma of weed in the air outside made way for a clean peach scent inside. After the concert, a friend and I sat on the sidewalk, side-by-side, our backs against the wall, waiting for her dad to pick up a call.

No, the world isn't a book, but it's pretty poetic sometimes. Has a sense of humor, y'know? Yes, the world can be boring, but that's subjective, isn't it? I bet the characters in books and movies feel like their worlds, the ones we long for, are boring too. It's what they're used to as protagonists. Actually, my theory is that we're all protagonists, and everyone else in our lives are characters in a story we're writing about ourselves.



In Conclusion

Eighth grade. The pandemic had just ended and masks were finally off. The world was back to normal, but I felt as wrong as ever. Socially, I was a little weird. Emotionally, I was a little absent. And somehow, I had forgotten how to make friends.

My eyes swept the dark landscape of the familiar street, straining to see the areas that weren't directly illuminated by streetlamps. I could feel a few water droplets land on me. I looked to my left at one of the few friends I did have, who lived close to me.

“Uh,” I said. “It’s starting to rain.” By the time I said this, it had practically become a storm. My friend looked around and grimaced, then took a single glance at me and began to run across the street.

“Why are you running?” I yelled as I ran to catch up with him.

“To get away from the rain,” he answered evenly. He suddenly stopped short and I nearly ran headlong into him. Ahead of me was a truck, its sides getting wetter by the second as it slowly reversed. The rain shone in patches around its taillights. I groaned.

“Go around,” he said abruptly. He turned and ran onto the other side of the road, and so did I. We curved around the truck and onto the sidewalk, and ran for a few more blocks, before we came to the next street. We slowed into a walk. I began to hear something squelching under my friend's feet as he walked; I looked at him, and he was staring wide-eyed up at the stars, arms dangling.

“Man,” he said. “Those stars look so cool.”

“What?” I said blankly.

“I don’t know why!” he said defensively. “But they do!”



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“You’re going to get your shoes dirty,” I pointed out. “You’re stepping in mud...” he shrugged. We continued to walk in silence for a while, his shoes continuing to squelch, before I lifted my gaze from the mud to the stars, the squelch of my shoes joining his. And yeah, they were pretty cool.

“Two men looked out from prison bars,
One saw the mud, the other saw stars.”

– *Dale Carnegie*