

The Starry Night

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and Jack Dann

Prophecy

Vincent knows now that there is no way out of this, that he will die in the asylum. He will never wander the sweet Earth again; his plans, mocked, are in ruins. "There is no hope, Theo," he says. "It is too late for me. It is too late for all of us." Theo looks at him, stricken. Once they were joined, one person in two houses, but this is no longer the case, not since the great burning.

"The stars will explode first," Vincent says.

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Outcome

On the great screen of the heavens are imprinted the empowering lineaments of the stars, no longer compact but thin, extending streams of gas, arms of destruction scattering, scuttling through the darkness. *I am the bearer of light.* Vincent gapes, incapable now of transcription.

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In the Museum: Intent

Rachel is six. Well, almost six. She will be that in four days and five hours, Mommy says. Rachel is proud. Here she is barely six, and she knows her letters, her numbers, all of the colors. And she knows how to draw. She can draw like a real artist. Daddy said that too, and Daddy knows all about art.

Now Rachel is in the Museum of Modern Art again, to which Mommy had promised weeks ago to take her for her almost-birthday. She stands with her sketchpad and pencil copying *The Stars Nit*. That is the name of the painting. The sign next to the painting says so—even though some of the letters are really smudged. It also says that Vincent Van Gogh is the artist. Rachel knows nothing about Vincent Van Gogh except that he is dead and that he was very unhappy. Daddy told her that. The stars are exploding.

The stars in the painting are exploding! It is very important to Rachel to get this into her picture. These are not simple stars; they are stars that are opening like seashells in the blue sky over the town.

Rachel copies the exploding stars and the flaming cypress tree and buildings of the little town underneath the stars. She has already printed the title carefully—THE STARS NIT—and is now working to make all of the little buildings just right. She has already copied *The Bather* in this room and from the second floor she has copied part of a very big painting, *Water Lilies*. If Mommy and Daddy will let her, Rachel plans to copy ten paintings this afternoon. She has listed *The Bather* in front of her book as already copied and is almost ready to enter *The Stars Nit*. When Rachel is big, she plans to have copied all of the paintings in this museum into five or ten sketchbooks just as big as this one. And when she is old like Mommy and Daddy, she will sit and look at all of her drawings and remember just the way the paintings in the museum looked.

Mommy and Daddy are not far away, only a few steps, but Rachel might as well be upstairs or at home for all the attention they are paying her right now. They are talking to one another and shaking their heads and holding hands in their way, looking at another Van Gogh painting. Mommy is saying something about color theories, but to Rachel it is only a murmur she can ignore. Just like the people in the painting are ignoring the exploding stars. They are all in their houses, not even looking outside, most of them sleeping.

Rachel needs to finish her sketch soon so she can record the title in her book and go on to another painting. She will not leave the museum today until she has ten paintings. When she is home she will examine all of them, but this is the one, she already can tell, that she will like the best.

The air is so blue, and the exploding stars so large and so yellow. She has never seen stars like that. Maybe she is growing up and learning to see them in a special way, like Vincent Van Gogh.

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In the Moment: Brooding

Vincent knows how Seurat would have painted this. A million dots, a hundred jolts, a mathematical equation devoid of emotion. He would have brought to *The Starry Night* what Seurat always brought: promise and selfishness. Georges saw only himself in everything and needed to break himself into essence, into golden scintillae ... into infinities of methodical points and dots. That was Georges' great secret, but Vincent could see through the dots. Seurat pretended to see, but saw only himself ... and his "method."

Which is why Seurat could not have done this. Stabbing at the canvas, opening the stars like flowers, Vincent proceeds. His easel is positioned in front of the barred window of his room in the asylum of Saint-Paul-de-Mausole in Saint-Rémy. The walled garden below is composed of purple and green shadows. The morning star blinks in the coruscating sky above, and behind him a table lamp casts its own revelatory shadows across the floor and walls. Slowly, nothing more now than the instrument of his design, he paints. His brushes are thick with ultramarine, cobalt, emerald green, zinc white. He looks out the window through the bars, looks up up and out ... casting himself toward God, and he feels a familiar dizziness. He wrests his attention away from the painting, looks around the room, the little room that is security and comfort, looks at his worn armchair covered with a tapestry, looks at the greenish gray wallpaper and sea green curtains blotched with roses and blood daubs of red, and he cries, for once again he can see the familiar auras. "Please, God," he prays, remembering that the last time he fell ill and had an episode, he squeezed all his tubes of paint into his mouth and swallowed.

"Please, God—"

And Vincent feels that God is with him. This is not an episode, not a religious hallucination. This is God's method and he is the vessel and God has allowed him to see. God directs Vincent's attention again to His painting, back to the canvas waiting to become revelation. He-who-cannot-be-known draws Vincent's attention down to a fine, desperate point, a tube of comity into which he suspends paint and pain, and Vincent feels the heat radiating through the window from those damaged stars high in the sky ... stars that were once specks in the higher vault of suspension, now open, bleeding. Had Vincent been the first to see the stars as ruptured animals, screaming in their entrails, their decomposition?

Vincent applies paint to canvas in thick swirls and avenues of texture. He sees the Moon, bloated and wavering ... and it appears on the canvas. He sees a hamlet outside his window, and he paints its blue buildings and towers in ragged, horizontal strokes. He sees cypresses burning black and blue and gray, and he lifts his gaze to the canvas sky, vortexes of stars exploding, spirals and eddies and swirls of interstellar dust and there, always there, the planet Venus, an eye of God watching a great sun exploding in the direction of the constellation Monoceros, the Unicorn.

The truth of the past and future, the truth of twenty thousand light years' distance is spattered and sprayed onto the canvas.

Finished, Vincent falls backward and sleeps through most of the day until the good Dr. Théophile Peyron, the director of the asylum, awakens him.

"Vincent, I am pleased to see that your cure is taking hold ... but you should always wait for the light to do your painting, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes," Vincent says. "Yes, let us wait for the light." The great exploding light.

He can already feel the fire.

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The Heavens: Exploding

And have torn apart the curtain of God, Father Vincent Thomas, SJ, thinks, staring through the viewscreen. In the heavens above, the glory of His firmament. But the heavens are exploding, the stars igniting, the wall of God shattering. His hands tremble on the instruments. He tries to steady himself, but what shakes him cannot be resisted. It is that fracture across the design of Revelation and he can only see the stars, that star, lifted beyond his measure, tongues of fire cutting the hue of surface. *Now in this time there was a decree and Simon Augustus desired that all were to be taxed.* That star is taxed; it is yielding of itself.

Remember the distance, Thomas thinks. This is not happening now; it happened months ago. Any distance closer to this distraught and weeping fragment and he, the instruments, the ship itself, would fracture with the star.

Behold the heavens in their majesty.

Father Thomas is alone in this enclosure of wire and darkness, shielded from the flat consequence of devastation, but not, he knows, from its horror, from its force. It is good that he is alone here, that he has been dispatched on this dark and terminal probe without company ("the solitude of a priest is the absence of multitudes" he had suggested, departing), and yet he can feel the awful and enclosing pressure, the *presence* of this destruction as he could never have imagined. The host, the tyranny of the Lord Himself, is not sufficient to protect him from this imminence.

This star, this lost star, has in the high reckoning of the final hour reached the end of all trials. *There is no ascension.*

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God's Craft: An Appreciation

Rachel, still almost six, dreams about only one painting, the painting with the thick daubs of blue and white and yellow, the painting that was exploding right there in the museum, and the explosions have awakened her. But she's not scared. Well, maybe a little scared. Ever so quietly, so as not to disturb Mommy and Daddy who are now making thumping noises in their bedroom, she tiptoes to her desk.

Pale moonlight and the absent wash of the streetlamps illuminate Rachel's sketchpad. She stands before her desk in her fuzzy blue pajamas with the dots and reindeer and flicks through the drawings until she gets to *The Stars Nit*. She knows what "nit" means. She learned about knitting from Miss Catalphason in kindergarten last year, and she understands that is exactly what Mr. Gogh saw God doing to the exploding stars. God was knitting them all together to make a face of fire. She saw the fire in the museum and wondered why she was the only one. She had to stand back from the painting because she could feel the heat and did not want to get burned, but other people didn't notice at all, and a fat woman with a black hat and a big bow in the front even tried to touch it. Her fingers were not burned, so Rachel knew that the fat woman was probably an angel or one of God's helpers.

Rachel stares at her sketch and feels disappointment. It does not really look anything like Mr. Gogh's painting. There's no fire in there, no color, no raised surfaces like little mountains and rivers of fiery paint. Just stupid lines on a stupid page, that's all. There are no church steeples, buildings, big fat stars, or faces of fire in her sketch, and she tries to remember the faces she saw in the painting in the museum, how the exploding stars knit into shifting faces, shifting expressions. So she remembers that and begins to feel funny—a bad feeling in her stomach—and wonders whether she should tell Mommy and Daddy that she might be sick. But, no, they were making their noise, and so she won't disturb them. She will wait and see. Mommy said that when Rachel got sick sometimes it was because she was a genius too, just like Mr. Gogh.

Rachel stands still in front of her desk and raises her gaze to the window. She looks over the sparkling city. Its gauzy lights are exploding too, but not like stars, in the watery air of August. She listens to Mr. Air Conditioner making his gargle noise, remembering the face she saw in the painting. It makes her feel tingly.

I'd better get into bed, Rachel thinks. If she was going to have what Mommy called "her little episode," better to be in bed; but it's too late for that, too late to move, too late to cry out. She gazes into the starry heavens at the face. She knows that face now. Knows that it is not Mr. Gogh, but someone far away, someone burning with

God's true fire, someone just like her who is watching the stars explode again and again and again.

Mommy and Daddy are thumping.

The air conditioner sounds like a squirrel.

God is knitting.

And her heart is beating so hard: exploding in the epileptic heat.

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Recursion: The Secret Paintings

Winter in Saint-Rémy and Vincent works in a white heat, producing thirty paintings a day in his little studio in the asylum. Most of the rooms in the asylum are empty. Vincent paints inside, in the crackling warmth of the hearth. His brother, Theo, is writing him once a week. Theo is worried that Vincent is hearing voices and hallucinating again, that he is overworking himself, overwhelming his fragile health; but Vincent assures him that the winter light is invigorating and that standing in front of an easel is a better cure than any medicine. He writes Theo that he is copying work by Rembrandt, Delacroix, and Millet, and that this has led him to create smaller versions of his own work, interpretations he calls them; but he gets stuck painting *The Starry Night* over and over, even though he considers it a minor work.

Of course, Theo was right to be worried about him; but it is too late for that. Vincent cannot help himself. He paints over and over the rising, living cypress tree, the church with the elongated steeple, the swirls of stars in a pigment-swathed sky. Interpreting interpretation, that is what it is, warding off the ever-imminent epileptic attack; and he interprets and reinterprets that moment of holy calmness when he had that pure vision of the stars bloating, inflated by some cosmic calamity, and the universe shifting, dying, tearing itself into rebirth

It was then that he had started painting the angels. It had begun as he was applying paint to the exploding sky, and suddenly he had seen a perfect angel transposed above the steeple of the chapel, a wingless angel, a child with cerulean blue eyes and golden plaited hair held with a tortoiseshell comb. She was wrapped in a cobalt blue robe with zinc white edging. This angel could have been one of the *Two Putti* by Andrea del Sarto in the Uffizi in Florence, but then she dissolved, evaporated into the angry, coarse swirls of stars and atmosphere.

Vincent felt an overwhelming sense of loss. Fearful of losing the image, he threw the

painting to the floor and grasped another canvas to bring her back to life. The background was the same—exploding stars, swirling stars, bands of stars concatenating in the blue-bleached atmosphere, in the blue night; and she stood before him, looking past him at other heavens, other exploding stars.

The angel stared past him, her eyes as remote as the arching heavens.

"The stars knit," she whispered.

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Image of the Host

Priest in a coffin: Thomas hovers at some unimaginable distance from the ruddy Antares Cluster, so threatening even at this great remove. Why is he alone? This has always been for him, for them, for all the other priests in coffins, an imponderable so vast as to approach Crucifixion, or one of those Stations on the way.

The stars are ratcheting, pinwheeling the sky.

Astrophysics has put him in this surveyor starship, but it is faith which is now the truer entrapment, faith which has turned him with whatever longing is possible to the distant, betrayed God behind this fierce canvas. Father Thomas, trapped inside this perished cluster, evokes the specter of a man whom he has not seen in forty years, the senile priest, Carl, who stalked the seminary and muttered, "We will tear down the curtain before God, and we will find his stricken face our own. Our own, our own: no wafer but blindness."

Portent. Mystery. In this recollection Carl is unyielding, grants no forgiveness. "Rip aside the firmament it is decreed and our vanity will show us nothing at all." Dead decades later Thomas is still seeking response, still trying to find a way to renounce the ravings of the mad, useless old man.

Thomas has been a priest in a coffin now for a period of time so attenuated that it is beyond measure. But Carl has provided a measure for his entrapment. The heavens are, in retrograde time, exploding, the stars igniting. Locked into a space so limited that he can barely move, Thomas trembles as his hands tremble on the instruments. The cluster, however distant, however removed in time, surges with fire. Soon, at this insurmountable distance, it will reach with bands of fire to gather him. There is nothing that he can do. There is a fracture across these heavens that will overwhelm him. Thomas quivers in his wretched enclosure. Priest in a coffin. Neither astrophysics nor the force of divine revelation could save him now.

In this enclosure of wire and darkness, shielded by little more than the illusions of distance and his own damaged perception, Father Thomas knows that all is out of his control. Somewhere outside the arc of his vision the great, wounded star is boiling, shedding itself. Plunging toward Calvary. It is surely best that he is alone here, that he has been dispatched on this terrible exploration to hear Carl's admonition. Tear down the curtain of God. He cannot speak for what might have happened otherwise, if someone had been beside him.

Solitary priest in a coffin. Every perceived star is alive with its own extinction, just as on Calvary Christ burned in death fire. In a coffin, witness to this final and deafening light.

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Memory of the Garden at Etten

Gazing at the crinkling stars in the gauzy, funny-looking black sky, Rachel stands still as a statue before her window. She knows she is having an episode, but she is not biting her tongue or making echoey noises, at least not yet. Maybe she will not. She's not shaking, not trembling; in fact, it doesn't even seem that she is breathing now, just looking into the swirley sky, looking at the image of the strange man superimposed on the stars and the night. She imagines then that she is up there with him, scrunched into the seat of something like a car except that through the big window she sees not a road but stars and lightning.

She and the man are drifting in space, drifting in the stars nits themselves.

Rachel may be having one of her episodes, but she is still sensitive to everything that is going on around her. As if from a great distance she can hear Mommy and Daddy *still* making noise in the bedroom. Once she had run in there to stop them, to stop Daddy from hurting Mommy, but Mommy said that it was all right, that they were playing; and Rachel decided then and there that she never wanted to play that way. After a few minutes Mommy stops screaming and breathing. Everything stops. Rachel concentrates on the man in the car in the sky. She can see him dimly; he is sitting beside her. He is dressed in black like a priest.

He *is* a priest.

She is still in her funny pajamas.

Being in space is nice, she thinks, just like those cartoons on television where the characters bounce and dance in the sky, and she is moving too. But her moving is only part of being a little sick and having an episode. Rachel knows there is no

reason to be frightened. Soon she will be back in her own bed with Mommy and Daddy nearby, and she will once again look at all of the sketches that she has copied at the museum. They are good sketches, whatever she might have felt before. That is why they bought her the sketchbook, because she is good.

The man sitting in the space car is old, older than Daddy, and for a moment he does not see her, so intent is he upon staring through the big window. But then he turns to her suddenly and says: "Do I see what I think I see? But how can this be? From where did you come, child?"

"My name is Rachel," she says. "I drew the stars nit."

"Look at that," he says. "Look out the window." And Rachel follows his finger. There are the stars nits themselves. They look just like the painting.

The stars are exploding, and she wishes that she had brought her sketchpad so that she could show it to the man. She feels strange here, like she always feels when she's having an episode; but when she looks at her hands, she sees that they are glowing. Her pajamas look funny too, as if light is pouring through the fabric from underneath. She shakes her head. She cannot remember glowing before, not even when everybody thought she was going to die that time in the hospital.

"For an old priest in a coffin to see *this*," the man says. "To witness the death of everything, the death of time. But why have they sent you?"

"Nobody sent me," Rachel says. "I came myself. I can make myself go places; sometimes I can be anywhere I want. I can draw the stars nits and even be in them. Is that what you want?"

Rachel knows she is sick now. The sickness has come over her. She could bite her tongue or hit herself or bang her head on the desk, but there is nothing to be done about it. She's here with the priest in the space car. If she only had her sketchpad, she could show him what she had done; but that is not to be.

"Oh, yes, child," the man says. "I know you can because you are here." He reaches out to her, and there is no room for her to move; he touches her, then hovers close. "Transubstantiation," he says. "It is the most remarkable thing." She feels him shaking, even though they are not touching. "What have I believed?" he says. "For what have I been given this?"

"What is transub—? I don't understand." For the first time she is a little scared. She wishes that she were in her room, not in this space car with the stars glowing and exploding like the stars in Mr. Gogh's painting.

"I'll go back and find my drawing," she says. "Do you want to see my drawing of this?" She waves her hand, leaving trails of light, points to the outside. "Yes, that is

what is happening outside. It is just like the painting. The stars nit."

"You can draw *this*, child?"

"Oh yes," Rachel says. "I have it at home. I tried to make it just like this. The stars are exploding. They look like little puffs of fire. If I had my sketchpad I could show you."

"Transubstantiation," the man says again; the word is very long: *trans-sub-stanch-ee-ation*. "That I would live to see this. To see this and all that it was."

Rachel thinks very hard. If she thinks hard enough, she knows that she will be able to leave this place; but maybe not; she is not sure ... she is not sure of anything. She is truly scared now. The stars are leaping like wild animals. There is a big star ringed in white fire that is getting larger, moving closer.

The space car is shaking.

"I want to go home," Rachel cries. "I want to go home right now."

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In Arles

Vincent had known even at this tranquil time that it would end in the asylum, in holy entrapment, in the midst of fires he could not see. Torn aside, that curtain of the heavens. But it was too late, too late for anything now but to transcribe what he saw so that they would know, so that he would know how the fire would come.

In his sleep a small solemn angel holding a sketchpad drifts through his perception, but he is unable to reach her ... unable to touch her.

The End