

LYING DOWN TO LOOK UP

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

I was never really Girl Guide material. Wearing a uniform, and especially a skirt, was a penance that had to be endured during school hours not something I'd choose in my free time. And I wasn't too convinced about the swearing allegiance bit either – how would I serve the queen, and what even was my duty to God? I never made the promise, but somehow they let me join in anyway for what I saw as the 'good bits' – camp fires on the shore, melting chocolate into bananas slit lengthways, and, best of all, sleeping under the stars.

I must have been about 12 years old, in a big field in northern Lancashire, free within the limestone wall that curved along its boundary. It was the first time I ever remember lying down to look up at the night sky. Sure I'd seen the stars before: we'd moved here when I was 11, from the city to this coastal village with darkness at night and the sheer quantity of stars. But this was different: all the time and space we had to do nothing but gaze, and the angle from which to do so.

Crane your neck and look up into a star-clustered sky, and I guess you take in about 90 degrees of the view, a bit more if you tip your head right back. Lie down and that angle widens expansively – suddenly the sky gets a whole lot bigger. Somehow it feels like 360 degrees of sky. That's what I remember – the sense that the stars were above, around and beneath me. I was vaguely aware of the caterpillar-people in sleeping bags snoozing and shuffling or gently chatting close by. We lay on our camping mats in a wide circle near the middle of the field, our toes towards each other, the heavens above us all. As the sky edged from deepest blue into indigo and then on towards black, more and more stars appeared. They were scattered and strewn above me, or was it below me? I stared and stared and stared. Until I was in space, floating through this immensity on a small, round, turning planet. The edgy feeling that I might fall off the world and into the darkness just added to the thrill of that night.

Gradually the chattering around me ceased, ceding to gentle snores and the heavier breath of slumber, then silence. Was everyone else asleep? The girl closest to me was, and I was surprised by the sudden urge to kiss her. Not because of who she was but because of the way the light of the night was glancing her skin, just a silvery hint of contours: neck, chin, forearm and upturned hand as she slept. I'd never felt more awake or alive myself, snug in my sleeping bag cocoon with the whole universe twinkling and shining above and all around me. I wanted never to sleep, just to drink it all in, the cool night air and the smell of the grass and the million, billion, gazillion stars.

Did they *all* have names, I wondered? And who joined the dots and when? Who decided which stars belonged with each other to make a shape? I'd learned a few of the main constellations, like Orion with his belt and his sword hanging down (or, as Becky said, giggling, his willy), but where was he? I couldn't see him but I found the saucepan – why is that called the Great Bear? And the 'w' – is that called Cassiopeia, and why? I had vaguely remembered notions about them and their stories and wondered if you could do a Girl Guide badge in the stars. And if you didn't wear the uniform could you still get the badges? Where would I put them? Maybe you could just join the dots yourself, create your own stories. Trace the shapes across the sky and let patterns and pictures be revealed there, like you do when you're gazing at clouds. Maybe the names didn't matter? I was just there in the midst of it all, dazzled by the sky and the immensity. I felt tiny and enormous all at once. The bigness was glorious, my head dizzy with delight at such expansiveness, and my heart thrumming with a surge of optimism and hope.

I guess I must have fallen asleep eventually as I don't remember the dawn, but not before the images and sensations of the night were sealed into my mindscape. It was the first of such memories, and if I scan the path of my life now, dark sky moments shine along the way.

There's an evening in New Zealand when I was in my 20s, wallowing in natural hot pools after a day's fruit picking in a mandarin orchard. The thick sulphurous smell of the water quickly faded and I was aware only of the strange texture, the way my limbs softened and

floated in it. I leant back, enjoying the curious sensation as steam swirled around me from the water below and cool air reached down from the darkening sky above. It made me think of pancakes with hot blackberry sauce and ice cream, the surprise in your mouth at the mix of temperatures. I shut my eyes, savouring it all and when I opened them the sky was thick with stars, absolutely crowded with millions of tiny lights sprinkled in unfamiliar patterns. How could it hold so many? Were there more stars in the southern skies, or was the night here clearer than anywhere else I'd known?

Later in life I'd settled in Scotland and there's a night in Pitlochry, the children already asleep in a holiday cottage one February half term. I slipped into the garden to let the dog out before bed, and gasped at the brightness of the scene – deep snow gleaming on the ground and brilliant stars above. I decided to wake the kids, thinking how my colleague from Shetland remembers being woken at night and lifted from her warm bed to see the 'merry dancers' as northern lights shimmered in the cold winter skies. This too was worth getting up for. The cold air was exhilarating and we delighted in our plumes of 'dragon's breath' reaching into the sky where the stars shone with such precision. At home I'd got used to a smudgy screen of sky glow between us and the stars, here they were so close, so bright, like you could reach out and touch them.

This I could promise: one day we'll sleep outside with the stars and look up as long as we want. It made my heart sing to share this moment, yet also ache to have lived in another time. I realised how I think of such sights – rare, over the course of a mostly urban life – as if the stars were there, a revelation tied to a particular earthly location – a field in Lancashire or a hot pool in New Zealand. Of course they're always up there, it's our view of them that comes and goes and is mostly eclipsed by too much artificial light. Once upon another time this was normal, a sky full of stars was once part of an everyday night.

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