




What Miss Mitchell Saw

written by
Hayley Barrett

illustrated by
Diana Sudyka

 On the first day of August, in a house tucked away on the fog-wrapped island of Nantucket, a baby girl was born.

Like all babies, this baby was given a name.
Her parents whispered it to her
like a gentle breeze,





At first, little Maria knew
only her mother and father,
her older brother and sister,
and the simple rooms of home.

But as she grew, Maria came to know her island. She rambled
its gull-dappled dunes. She breathed the fragrance of its
wild roses. She listened to the creak of whaleships come
to harbor laden with heavy barrels and homesick boys.



She knew the ships by name.



Maria lived near town and often walked the long hill of Main Street, down to the crowded wharves and back up toward the grand brick edifice of the Pacific Bank. Along the way, she passed the bustle of many shops.



She knew the shopkeepers by name.



At home, Maria was trusted with tasks large and small. Schoolwork did not always come easily, but she studied with determination.

Mother took note of Maria's steady ways. When her husband sought someone to assist him as he observed the night sky, Mother said to Maria,





So Maria and her father climbed up, up,
up the steep attic stairs to the walkway on
their rooftop, high above Nantucket Town.
Together, they gazed at the night sky that
cupped their island like a vast, black bowl.

Father taught Maria to use a telescope. He taught her to sweep the sky carefully—bit by bit—as thoroughly as she would sweep a room for Mother. He liked to say,





THEE MUST WATCH CLOSELY.
THEN WILL THEE SEE
and KNOW for THYSELF.

Maria watched and she wondered. She saw
for herself and was captivated. From then
on, night after night, Maria swept the sky.

She made fast friends with stars that
shone as if punched into the black
with a whalebone needle.





She knew the stars by name.

POLARIS

RIGEL

SPICA

She observed planets that glowed
as steadily as whale oil lamps.



She knew the planets by name.

MERCURY



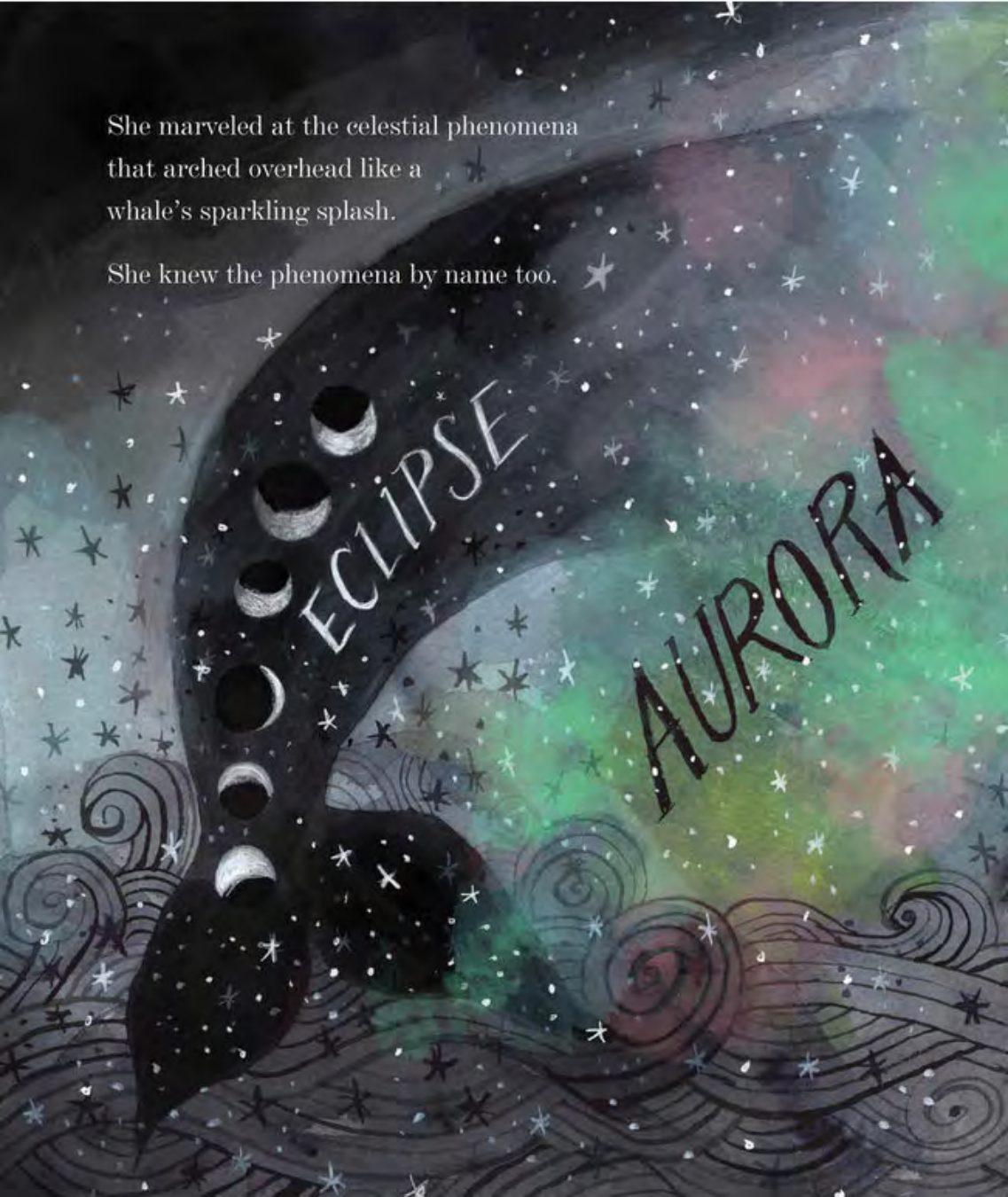
VENUS



SATURN

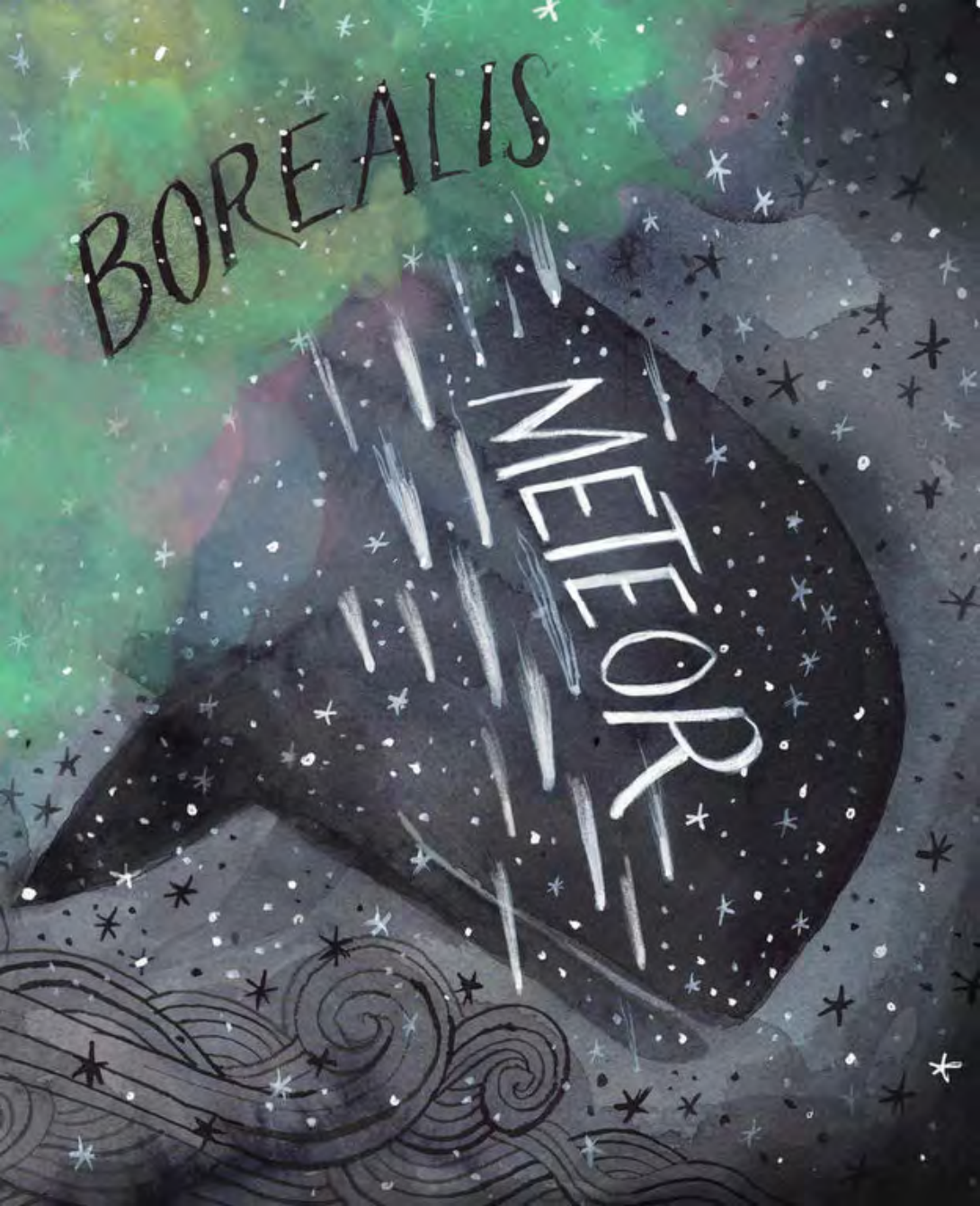
She marveled at the celestial phenomena
that arched overhead like a
whale's sparkling splash.

She knew the phenomena by name too.



BOREALIS

METEOR



Ship captains, home for a while from their whaling, relied on the Mitchells to help them navigate. They brought chronometers—costly timepieces made to withstand ocean voyages—to the little house on Vestal Street.



By her father's side, Maria learned to rate the chronometers. Using a sextant and careful calculation, she determined their accuracy so that sailors at sea might establish their position and, when their arduous work was at an end, set a course toward family and Nantucket Town.

Maria knew the whalers by name.



For a while, Maria was a teacher.

But she intended to advance her own education too.





So she became a librarian. Her quiet hours at the Athenaeum were devoted to the study of advanced mathematics and celestial navigation.

And year after year, when day was done and darkness settled over Nantucket, Maria climbed the steep stairs to her rooftop to sweep the sky.

One clear October evening, Maria saw something new: a nameless patch of light, bright and blurry, not far from familiar Polaris.





A comet!

She hurried to tell her father.

“My Maria,” he exclaimed,



The letter, bound
for Boston, took two
long days to leave
stormy Nantucket.

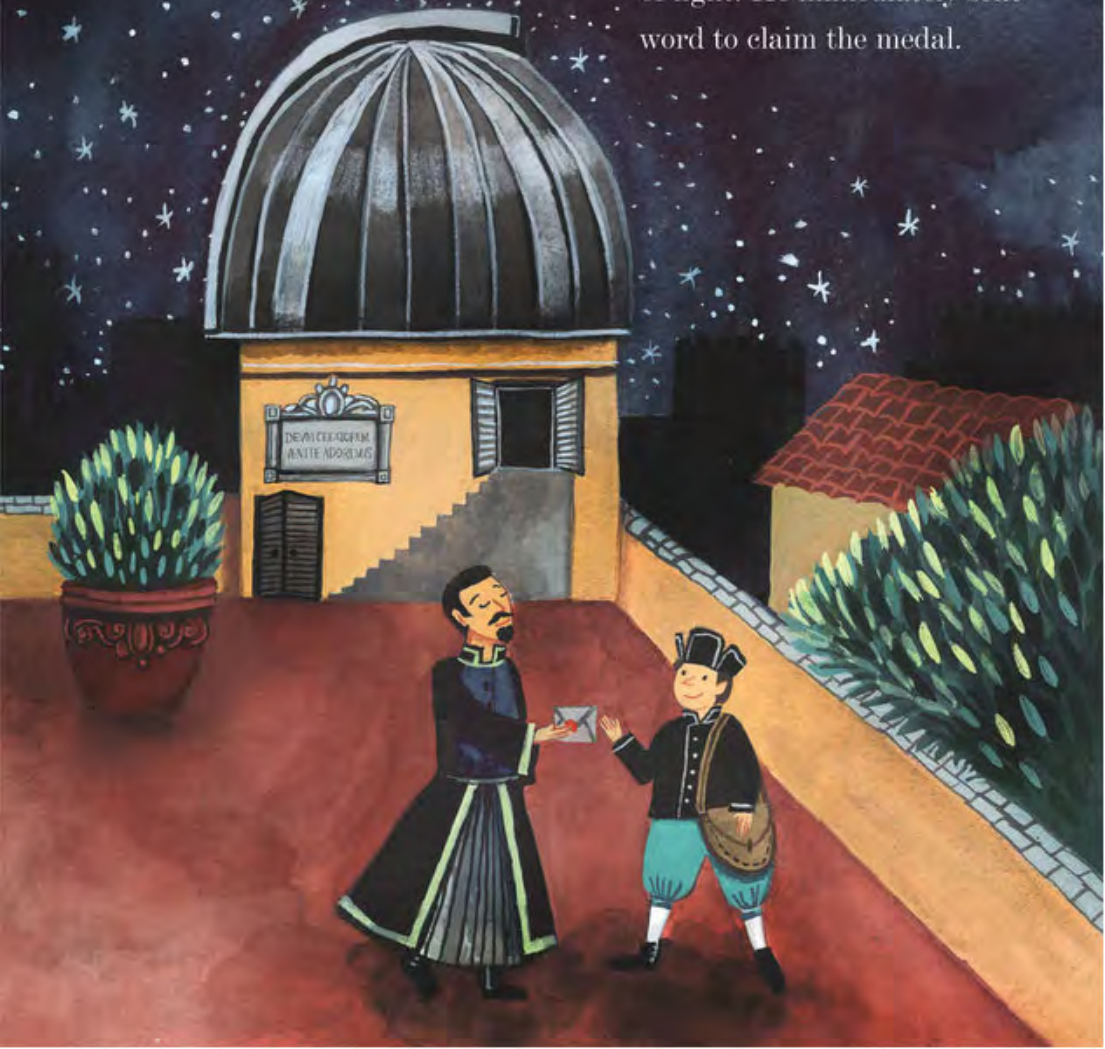


Half a world away, other stargazers scoured the skies.
The king of Denmark had pledged a gold medal to any
astronomer who discovered a new comet with a telescope.



Finding one of these hurtling chunks of ice and gas was
a rare feat, and many hoped to win gold and glory.

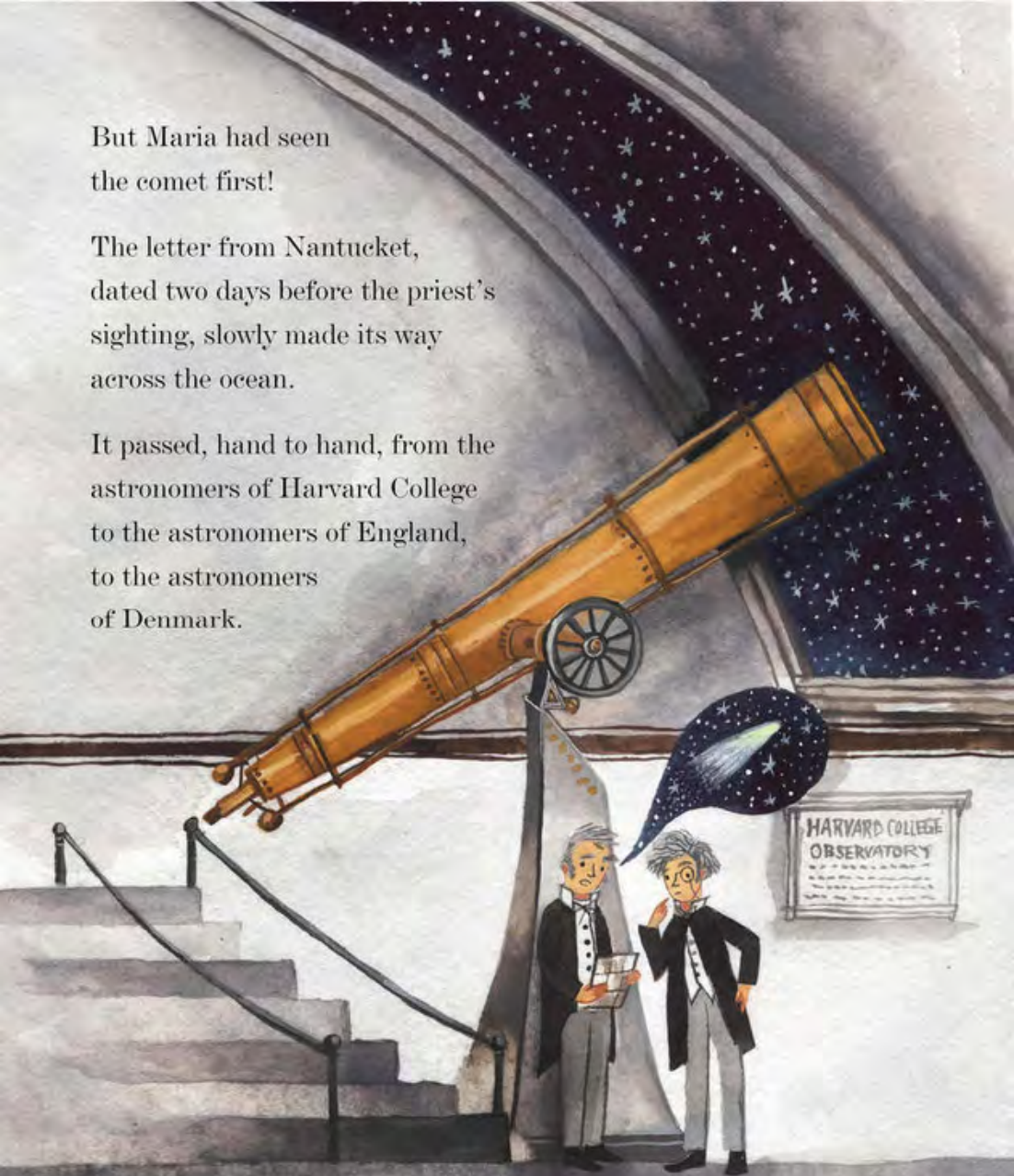
In a grand observatory in Rome, an astronomer-priest spotted the same bright bit of light. He immediately sent word to claim the medal.



But Maria had seen
the comet first!

The letter from Nantucket,
dated two days before the priest's
sighting, slowly made its way
across the ocean.


It passed, hand to hand, from the
astronomers of Harvard College
to the astronomers of England,
to the astronomers
of Denmark.



Maria knew the Harvard astronomers by name.
They were family friends.



She had not met the others but knew them by name as well.

An illustration of a woman, Maria Skłodowska-Curie, in a dark, star-patterned dress, holding a long telescope. She is looking through the telescope, and a bright, wavy, yellow-green light emanates from the eyepiece, sweeping across the dark, starry sky. The sky is filled with numerous small white stars and larger, stylized star shapes. The overall style is whimsical and artistic, with a focus on the woman's discovery of radioactivity.

While these men of science considered the dilemma
of who ought to rightfully claim the medal,
Maria swept the sky.

While they scrutinized the
letter from Nantucket,
Maria swept the sky.



While they consulted the
astronomer-priest of Rome,
Maria swept the sky.

At long last, they concurred and affirmed Miss Mitchell's discovery.

And so the heavy gold medal made its way across the ocean to Boston, to Nantucket, and to Maria's steady hand.

The King of Denmark sent it
with his compliments.



The medal was inscribed with the name her parents gave her,
the name known
to shopkeepers,
to sea captains,
to sailors,
and to schoolchildren—
Maria Mitchell.



And it bore the motto:



NOT IN VAIN
the SETTING

DO WE WATCH
and the RISING
of the STARS.



Miss Mitchell saw a comet.

The world saw her.