A Starry Night

There's no way to describe what the night sky really looks like to someone who lives in a city. That was the first thing Julianna, Gabriel, and Pablo decided that night at summer camp.

They stood in the middle of a field, along with Ms. Evento and her telescope. The three sixth graders had been the only ones who'd wanted to participate in the astronomy activity. Although Gabriel was reluctant at first to go out into a big field after dark, Julianna had persuaded him to come along.

"You'll be able to see all the cool constellations," she'd coaxed him. "Orion and the Milky Way and both Dippers! It'll be the neatest thing ever!"

Now the four of them stood looking upward. It was such a clear night, with so many stars in the sky, that it was actually hard to make out which of them were in constellations and which of them weren't.

"The night sky is extraordinarily beautiful. That's what inspired me to become an astronomer," Ms. Evento said.

"We can't see stars like this in the city, that's for sure," Pablo said.

"Cities have so much artificial light coming from streetlights, cars, and buildings that it overwhelms our view of what's up there," Ms. Evento explained.

"I can't find the moon," said Gabriel, sounding a little annoyed. "I can always see it from my backyard at home."

"Someone took it, I'll bet," joked Pablo.

Julianna was all business and said, "We can't see the moon because it's in its new phase. That's the part of the lunar cycle where all the sun's light is on the moon's other side. The moon doesn't make its own light, so we can only see it because the sun shines on it." She looked over at Ms. Evento, who was nodding her approval, even though she was barely visible in the darkness.

"I knew that," said Gabriel, even though he really didn't.

For the following half-hour, they took turns gazing through Ms. Evento's telescope. They got a good look at Mars, Venus, and Saturn; identified some constellations; and saw quite a few falling stars.

"What makes stars fall?" Pablo wanted to know.

Julianna giggled, "You must be joking, Pablo."

"That's actually a good question," Ms. Evento responded. "Falling stars aren't really stars. They're meteors that fall to Earth at night, and the friction from our atmosphere burns them up before they hit the ground. We can see them because they're burning."

"It's a good thing because otherwise, Earth would have all kinds of craters everywhere, like the moon does," added Julianna.

"The moon that we can't even see," grumbled Gabriel, rolling his eyes.

"Just let it go, Gabriel," Julianna commented.

“Look up there,” Pablo interjected, as he pointed skyward, where a pinpoint of light moved slowly and steadily across the sky.

“That must be a plane,” replied Ms. Evento.

“I hope a falling star doesn’t hit it,” muttered Pablo.

“That’s very, very unlikely,” Ms. Evento assured him.

Suddenly, the object they were looking at came to a halt. It stayed in one place, as if pretending to be a star, although its lack of twinkle gave it away.

“That’s unusual,” commented Julianna.

“It’s certainly not acting like a plane,” Ms. Evento agreed. She crouched and put her eye to the telescope’s lens, turning the instrument for a better look. But before she could get it into focus, the object moved again.

“It’s zig-zagging! Planes don’t do that,” gasped Julianna.

Ms. Evento stood upright, and the four of them watched wordlessly. The object was indeed zigging, then zagging, then zigging again. It continued exhibiting bizarre behavior by halting again and slowly forming circles in the sky. Finally, it sped to a point directly overhead and froze there, as if it was looking down at them.

“Do you see that?” Gabriel exclaimed.

“I don’t know how I could miss it,” said Julianna, who was beginning to feel a little anxious.

“It must be a UFO,” declared Pablo.

“Probably not,” said Ms. Evento, who sounded as if she wasn’t quite certain.

“We don’t know what it is, so that makes it unidentified. And it’s flying,” said Julianna.

“Definitely flying,” interjected Gabriel.

Julianna scowled at him for interrupting her. Then she continued, “And it’s an object, so I would say yes, it’s a UFO.”

“We shouldn’t jump to conclusions. It’s far more likely to be some sort of atmospheric phenomenon,” said Ms. Evento, who sounded apprehensive.

“An atmospheric phenomenon,” repeated Pablo and Gabriel in unison, trying to convince themselves that Ms. Evento was right.

“A strange cloud or natural gas,” Ms. Evento explained. “Under rare conditions, things happen in the sky that look peculiar, but they always have reasonable explanations. You can bet that whatever this is resides on Earth, not some other planet.”

Again, Julianna gasped. “But atmospheric phenomena don’t blink!”

“It’s not blink—,” Ms. Evento began.

She stopped talking because the object above them was indeed blinking, flashing off, on, off, on. Each time it reappeared, it was a different color, first red, then blue, then green, then white.

“Atmospheric phenomenon, my eye!” said Julianna.

“I don’t want to see what happens when it lands,” Gabriel said, quickly adding, “I think I’m ready to go back to the cabin now.”

“I know that you see all kinds of UFO stories in the media, but you really shouldn’t assume that’s what this is. There are so many other things that it’s more likely to be,” said Ms. Evento.

“Like what?” asked Julianna.

Her question hung in the air; everybody went silent for a long moment. The object above them continued to blink, displaying every color in the rainbow. Then, at last, it blinked off and didn’t blink on again.

Ms. Evento sighed with relief and picked up her telescope.

“I think it’s time to head back,” she said.

Nobody argued with her. In fact, they got back to the camp in about half the time it had taken them to get to the field.