

## 1 Afternoon Class

“Class, this is said to be a river, a river that flows with milk. Do you know what this faint whiteness actually is?” asked the teacher pointing at a section that resembled a galactic belt, a blurry whiteness from the top to the bottom in the large, black star chart hanging from the blackboard.

Campanella raised his hand. Soon four or five more hands were up. Giovanni was about to raise his, but instantly stopped. Those were definitely the stars he had read about once in a magazine. But Giovanni had been drowsy in class everyday. He hadn't had time to read the book nor a book to read and didn't feel like he understood much.

But the teacher was quick and caught him.

“Giovanni, you know what this is. Don't you?”

Giovanni hopped right up, but looking at him standing there, it was clear he could not answer. Zanelli, who was sitting in front of him, unintentionally laughed when he turned to look at him. Giovanni became flustered and blushed a bright red. The teacher again asked, “If you inspected a galaxy with a large telescope, what would it mainly consist of?”

“Stars of course,” thought Giovanni, but couldn't answer this question right away either.

The teacher soon became annoyed and looked toward Campanella to call on him.

“Campanella?”

Campanella, who had eagerly raised his hand, hesitantly stood up, but couldn't answer either.

Surprised, the teacher stared at Campanella for a moment, then pointed at the star chart and said, "Alright then. If you look at this faint white galaxy through a large telescope, you would see many small stars. Isn't that right, Giovanni?"

Giovanni, again flushed, nodded as his eyes soon filled with tears. He knew the answer, and of course, Campanella knew. He had read about galaxies in a magazine with Campanella, the son of a professor, at his house. When they finished reading the article, Campanella rushed to get a large book from his father's study and opened to the page about the Milky Way. They stared for a long time at the beautiful photograph of a jet-black page filled with white dots. Although Campanella had not forgotten, he did not answer right away. Giovanni had been working both mornings and afternoons. He went to school, but didn't play rowdily with the others and barely spoke to Campanella. But Campanella was aware of his situation and intentionally did not answer out of kindness.

The teacher spoke again, "Well, if you believe that this river in the sky is truly a river, each of these small stars is a cluster of sand or small pebbles in that river. And if you believe the river to be an immense flow of milk, then it would more closely resemble the Milky Way. That is, all of these stars are round, fine, floating balls of fat in milk. If that's the case and I ask what are the waters of this river, the answer is a vacuum in which light is transmitted at some speed, and in which both the Sun and the Earth float. We too inhabit these waters of the Milky Way. Look in all directions from the waters of the Milky Way and you can see many stars gathered together in the deep places where the bottom of the Milky Way is far away. This is exactly like deep water that appears to be bluer. Here, it appears as a white blur. Now, let's have a look at this model."

The teacher pointed to a large two-sided convex lens containing many grains of twinkling sand inside.

"The Milky Way is shaped exactly like this. Each twinkling grain is believed to be a shining star just like our Sun. The Sun is nearly at the center, and the Earth is

very close to it. At night, you are standing at this center and are looking around inside this lens. Because the lens is thin in this direction, there are few twinkling grains, that is to say, only a few stars can be seen. Because the glass is thick here and here, many twinkling grains, namely the stars, are seen and distant ones appear as a dim white blur. Well, this concludes today's discussion of the Milky Way.

"We're out of time, so we'll discuss how large this lens is, and the various stars inside in the next science lesson. Since tonight is the Milky Way Festival, everyone should go outside and take a close look at the Milky Way. Now, please put away your books and notes."

The room filled with the sounds of desktops opening and closing, and books being stacked. A short time later, everyone stood at attention, bowed to the teacher, and left the classroom.

## **2 The Printer's Shop**

When Giovanni walked out the school gate, seven or eight of his classmates were gathered around Campanella, who had not gone home, at the cherry blossom tree in a corner of the school grounds. They seemed to be talking about making blue lamps out of gourds for the star festival tonight and bringing them to float down the river.

Giovanni gave them a big wave and kept walking out the school gate. Outside of the houses in town hung balls made from yew trees, lamps attached to cypress tree branches, and many other decorations for the Milky Way Festival that night.

Giovanni didn't go home, but turned three corners then arrived at a large printer's shop. There, he took off his shoes and entered, then opened a large door at the end of a hallway. Although it was still daytime, the lights were on inside. Within the churning of many rotary printing presses and cutters, many people wearing bandannas or light shades worked while reading and counting as if they were singing.

Giovanni went to the man seated at the high table third from the entrance and bowed. After searching the shelves for a short time, the man handed him a scrap of paper while saying, "Here get these." Giovanni picked up a small shallow box at the foot of the man's table, went over to the corner of a propped up wall affixed with many electric lights, crouched down, and began picking up one tiny type, about the size of a millet seed, after another with small tweezers. A man wearing a blue printer's bib passed behind Giovanni and said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Magnifying Glasses." Without making a sound or looking at him, four or five people who were nearby laughed coldly.

Giovanni picked up the types one by one although he often had to rub his eyes.

A little after 6 pm, Giovanni compared the small box filled with the letters he had picked one last time with the sheet of paper he held in his hand, then took the box back to the man at the table. Without a word, the man took the box and nodded slightly.

Giovanni bowed, then opened the door and went over to the register. There, a man wearing white clothes without a word handed one small silver coin to Giovanni. Giovanni perked up and bowed smartly. He picked up his bag under the machine and dashed out to the street. Whistling lively, he made beeline to the bakery. There he bought one loaf of bread and a bag of sugar cubes, and dashed out.

### **3 Home**

Full of life, Giovanni arrived home, a small house on a back street. Purple kale and asparagus were planted in an open box near the leftmost of three entrances. The sunshades were pulled down over two small windows.

"Mom, I'm home. Are you feeling better?" asked Giovanni while removing his shoes.

“Oh, Giovanni, hello. You’re probably worn out from work. It was cool today. I felt fine all day.”

As Giovanni stepped up from the entryway, his mother covered with a white cloth was resting. Giovanni opened the windows.

“Mom, I bought sugar cubes today. I’ll put them in some milk for you.”

“You should have some first. I don’t want any yet.”

“Mom, when did Sis come home?”

“Around 3. She made all of that, over there.”

“Your milk wasn’t delivered, was it?”

“No. It wasn’t.”

“I’ll go and get it.”

“You eat first while I rest. Sis can make anything from tomatoes. She put it over there.”

“Well, I’ll have some.”

Giovanni took a plate of tomatoes to a window and gobbled it up with some bread.

“Hey, Mom. I think Dad’s coming home soon.”

“So do I. But why do you think so?”

“Well, today’s paper said that the fishing up north was great this year.”

“Yes, but your father probably isn’t fishing.”

“I’m sure he is. Dad wouldn’t do anything bad that would land him in jail. The giant crab shell and reindeer antlers he gave to the school are in the specimen room. The sixth grade teachers pass them around in class.”

“Your father said that this time he was going to bring back a sea otter coat for you.”

“Everyone will say I look good in it, but they will be making fun of me.”

“They’d tease you?”

“Yes, but Campanella would never say anything. But when the others say those kinds of things, Campanella feels bad for me.”

“Campanella’s father and your father were friends since they were little, just like you two.”

“Oh, so that’s why Dad took me to Campanella’s house. That was a fun time. Sometimes on the way home from school, I stop by Campanella’s house. He has a train that’s powered by an alcohol lamp. There are seven tracks to put together to make a circle. He also has telegraph poles and signals. The train only passes

through when the signal light is green. Once when the alcohol ran out, we used oil, but the boiler got sooty.”

“Is that so?”

“Even now, I go there every morning to deliver the newspaper. But it’s always so quiet at that house.”

“Because it’s still early.”

“They have a dog named Sauer. His tail is like a broom. When I leave, he comes with me sniffing all the way to the edge of town. Sometimes, he goes even further. Tonight, everybody’s going to float gourd lamps on the river. That dog will definitely be there, too.”

“Oh. The Milky Way Festival is tonight.”

“Yes, I’m going to have a look when I go get the milk.”

“You may go, but don’t go in the river.”

“Okay, I’ll only watch from the river bank. I’ll be back in an hour.”

“Go and have some fun. If you’re with Campanella, there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Yes, we’ll definitely go together. Mom, should I close the window?”

“Yes, please. It’s a little cool.”

Giovanni stood up and closed the window, straightened up the dishes and the bread bag. Then he nearly jumped into his shoes and ran out the dark doorway saying, "I'll be back in an hour and a half."

#### **4 Night of the Centaur Festival**

With a sad, pouting mouth, as if he were whistling, Giovanni left town down a hill covered by the blackness of lines of cypress trees.

At the bottom of the hill, a large street lamp stood radiating a splendid bluish-white light. As Giovanni slowly approached the street lamp, his long dark shadow stretched behind him like a phantom slowly darkening to jet black. He raised his legs and waved his hands so that they wrapped around to his side.

As Giovanni took big steps past the bottom of the street lamp while imagining, "I'm an awesome locomotive. I'm speeding down on a hill. Now I'm passing the street lamp. My shadow is a compass. When I go around to there, I end up in front." Zanelli from his class wearing a new shirt with a pointed collar suddenly emerged from a small dark alley on the other side of the street lamp and brushed passed him.

As Giovanni said, "Zanelli, are you going to float gourds on the river?"

Zanelli yelled back, "Giovanni, did you get that sea otter coat from your father?"

Giovanni, whose ears were ringing like he had been punched, yelled back, "What? Zanelli," but he was already inside a house with hinoki plants across the street.



He wondered, "Why does Zanelli say things like that to me when I haven't done anything to him? He always runs away like a rat, out of habit. He's just a jerk for saying things like that to me when I haven't done anything."

As Giovanni walked down the street decorated with lamps and tree branches, many thoughts raced through his head. The clock shop had bright neon lights. The red eyes of an owl made of stone spun around each second. Various jewels were set on a thick glass plate colored like the ocean and rotated slowly like stars, and a copper man and horse slowly inched around from the far side. A black planisphere at the center was decorated with blue asparagus leaves.

Giovanni was lost in thought as he gazed at this map of the constellations.

It was a very small copy of the map he had seen that day in school. If the plate is turned to match the date and the time, the sky that would emerge at that time appears to move in an ellipse. As expected, running vertically down the center, the Milky Way appears as a dim, fuzzy belt that looks as if faint explosions were billowing up from the bottom. Behind it, a small telescope on a tripod stood in a yellowish light. On a large chart pinned to the back wall, the constellations in the sky were depicted in the shapes of a beast, a snake, a fish, and a jar. Giovanni stood dreaming about whether the scorpion, the hero, and all the others were really so close in the sky, and wanted to see how far he could walk among them.

Giovanni suddenly remembered the milk for his mother and left the store.

Although bothered by the slight tightness of his coat around his shoulders, he stood tall and swung his arms like he was on a mission as he passed through town.

The crisp clear air flowed through the streets and into the stores like water. The street lamps were wrapped with the branches of fir and oak trees. Many small lights hung from the six sycamore trees in front of the electric company, the image of a mermaid city. Children in their new creased kimonos were having so much fun playing the song Hoshi Meguri, The Star Journey, on their whistles,

chanting, "Centaurus, send us dewdrops," in a plea for life-sustaining water, and lighting up blue magnesia sparklers. Burdened by thoughts far from that liveliness, Giovanni with his head hanging low hurried to the milk dealer.

Giovanni soon came to a part of town where poplar trees floated high in the starry sky. He entered the black gate of the dairy and stood in front of a dark kitchen amid the faint perfume of cows. He removed his hat and said, "Good evening." The house was quiet. No one seemed to be there.

Giovanni stood up straight and again said, "Good evening. Is anyone here?"

A few moments later, an old woman, who looked sickly, slowly approached and asked what he wanted.

Giovanni earnestly said, "Hello, no one delivered my milk today. Could I get it now?"

"Nobody's here now. Come back tomorrow," she said while rubbing her reddened eyes.

Giovanni lowered his eyes and said, "My mother is sick. So if it wouldn't be too much trouble, could I get it tonight?"

"Come back a little later, please," she said as she walked away.

"Oh, okay. Thank you," said Giovanni who then bowed and left the kitchen.

As he turned the corner of an intersection in town, Giovanni saw a jumble of black shadows and blurry white shirts of six or seven students in front of the general store across the bridge. They were coming towards him blowing whistles and laughing, and everyone was carrying a gourd lamp. Those laughing voices

and whistles sounded familiar. They were Giovanni's classmates. Without realizing it, Giovanni was about to turn back, but changed his mind and enthusiastically walk towards them.

When Giovanni was about to ask if they were going to the river, he choked up a little thinking about it. Just then, Zanelli yelled, "Giovanni, are you getting a sea otter coat?"

Everyone immediately joined in and also yelled, "Giovanni, are you getting a sea otter coat?"

Giovanni turned bright red and without thinking quickly walked past them. Campanella was in the group. Campanella said nothing and laughed a little, but seemed to be miserable, and looked at Giovanni to see if he was mad.

Giovanni avoided his gaze. Soon Campanella's tall form passed by and everyone was again blowing their own little songs on their whistles. When he turned the corner, he turned around and saw Zanelli looking back. Campanella was blowing a loud whistle and walking toward the dim, distant bridge. Words could not describe how sad and lonely Giovanni felt. He immediately started to run. Small children who were giggling while covering their ears with their hands and skipping on one leg thought Giovanni was funny and squealed with delight.

Giovanni ran away so fast he was soon at a black hill.