

## Holes on the Floor of Heaven

Brian didn't want to go outside. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been there, and he saw no reason in going tonight.

But his grandma insisted. She'd said something about how clear it was, how she didn't know if she could make the trip after another winter, how she should have taken him years ago. She'd slipped a note about the trip under his bedroom door that afternoon, Saturday, the day he liked to sync up and hang with friends.

The last line of the note said something about looking but not seeing, and that he would thank her in the end.

After hours online, Brian reluctantly left his room. He became aware of the fading twilight as he walked down the hallway. His grandma had no lights on in the house, as usual.

He found her lacing a pair of big, dirt-caked shoes.

"What are those?" he asked.

"Hiking boots," she said, "for climbing hills."

"Why would anyone want to do that?"

"You'll see."

"What if I don't want to go?" Brian said indignantly.

"Dear, I am asking one thing of my grandson. Grab a coat, it's going to be cold."

She opened the front door and bypassed the transport hub that asked cheerfully, "Where to, Ms. Dockings?"

"We'll be walking today, thank you very much," she said.

Brian rolled his eyes. He hoped he'd be back before his friends all logged off, to tell them how awful the trip outside had been.

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They stepped out into the fluorescent street. Brian remembered that the idea for translucent streets had come from human rights group that argued more lights would discourage male aggressors. He had found that interesting—that people back then could do such terrible things to one another.

He followed his grandma through the streets toward the big hill behind her house. He could hear transits zooming along somewhere beneath them.

It was cold outside. Brian could see his breath. The crisp air reminded him of the time his parents had taken him to the coast. He thought about it and realized it had been his last trip outside.

They walked and walked along the vacant, bright street, and Brian quickly became tired.

Finally, his grandma stopped.

“There,” she said, pointing to a small opening at the base of the hill. It was a dirt path that led straight into the black forest.

“We’re going in there?” Brian asked incredulously.

His grandma didn’t answer. She went in and Brian could only follow, holding his hands up to deflect all the cobwebs and branches.

The path was steep. It got darker and darker as they left the city lights behind them.

His grandma trudged on. Brian followed the shock of her white hair as it led the way, unhurried, up the hill.

“What if we get lost,” he said after a long period of silence.

“We can’t.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’ve been coming here since before I had your Mom.”

He thought about his parents again. He missed them.

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It got to be so dark that Brian could no longer see the steamy breath billowing from his mouth, but he felt its heat coating his face.

He was exhausted. A stitch in his side made deep breaths impossible. His grandma seemed to be laboring, too, but to her credit she never slowed. He realized she was tougher than he thought.

They rounded a corner and Brian's grandma stopped.

"We're almost there," she said. "There's an opening ahead. You'll be able to see from there."

"See what?"

She didn't answer, but he thought he saw her smile. He couldn't be sure though. The darkness separated them like a wall.

The ground beneath them started leveling off. They were near the top, and Brian felt like he was waking from a fitful dream as the slope smoothed beneath him.

His grandma stopped in the middle of a clearing the size of a city block. Without explanation, she tilted her head back and looked up. Brian did the same.

And he'll never forget what he saw. Filling the black sky were thousands of dazzling white dots. He stared, transfixed. They looked like holes on the floor of heaven. He wondered why they didn't go out when the angels stepped on them.

He thought they were beautiful.

He thought of his parents.

Looking over at his grandma, he glimpsed her face and noticed it looked younger, somehow.

"What are they?" Brian asked.

"Stars."

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He knew the word, even knew what they were. He'd learned all about them in school, yet learning about them hadn't felt anything like this, like seeing them for the first time.

He wondered if his parents could look through those holes and see him standing there, on the top of the hill, looking up. Looking for them.

His eyes began to prickle. He didn't want his grandma to see him cry anymore.

He kept his eyes on the stars.

He turned his head slightly toward his grandma without taking his eyes off them. "Do you believe in angels, Nana?"

"Of course, dear," she said.

The rush of tears caught him by surprise, and they streamed down his face while he stared at the stars. They became lines of light behind the wet, jiggling lenses of his eyes.

The trip down seemed even harder than going up. Brian was more exhausted than he'd ever been.

He'd also never felt closer to his grandma.

"Thank you," he said to her when they got home. He wanted to say more.

"You're welcome, dear," she said.

When Brian got into his room, he saw the note that he had dropped haphazardly on his floor earlier that day. He picked it up and read it again, only slower this time.

Brian pocketed the note and realized it had all been worth it.