

Stars

By Asia Collick, grade 9

The little bedroom window squeaked as Leslie slid it open, half-smiling at the peeling paint on the windowsill. Her little farmhouse nestled in the rolling fields of the Alberta foothills had been there for so long, almost every floorboard creaked, the windows rattled, and the ceiling sagged. It wasn't hers exactly; it was the Davis' family property, so Leslie had to share it with her family. But as far as Leslie was concerned, on nights like this one, it was all hers.

Leslie swung her left leg up and out the window. Since the little house had only one floor, she was a mere few feet above the ground. Leslie had been using her bedroom window to leave the house this way every Friday night since she was five.

Leslie made it out all right, then dropped to the grass below. Beads of glittery dew sparkled on the ground like thousands of tiny diamonds, and the soft summer breeze rustled her wavy blonde hair. The soft pleasant scent of wildflowers greeted Leslie, the smell silky and sweet. In the distance, she could see the faint outline of a wall of aspen trees, and further out, the spruce trees forcing their way into aspen territory.

The wavering glow of the porch light helped to guide Leslie across the lawn, her socks muffling the soft movements she made toward a nearby hill. Her steps quickened when Leslie saw the dark silhouette of a figure sitting cross-legged at the crest.

Leslie marched to the top and stood next to her older brother.

"Hey," he said softly, leaning back and resting his head on his arms. The twinkling starlight glimmered playfully across his face, and certain features stood out to her in the semi-darkness--the deep brown eyes, the dark eyebrows, the slightly crooked nose, the twitching mouth just waiting to smile.

Leslie sighed and lay down next to him, staring into the black abyss of swirling darkness. "It makes you feel so small," she said into the silence that had descended peacefully over them.

Matthew grunted in agreement. "Hear the crickets?" Sure enough, the insects had begun to chirp in the long unmowed grass behind the house. The two listened for several minutes, enchanted by the hypnotic feel of the music mixing with the perfumed wind.

Leslie was half asleep when Matthew spoke next. His words were slow, adding to the weight of sleep that tugged at her mind.

"I'm gonna miss this," he said, waving his hand in the air, as if addressing the sky. But Leslie knew what he meant.

On Sunday Matthew would leave for college. He would leave behind the farm, the fields, the Friday nights on the hill. Leave behind his whole life.

He would leave behind Leslie.

"Stop it, Matthew. I don't want to think about it. Not on our last night." Matthew was quiet for a moment, and Leslie knew he was deep in thought.

"I won't be able to see the stars in the city," he said, as if to himself.

"Matthew--" They were both sitting now, staring into each other's eyes.

"I won't hear the crickets by my window each night."

Leslie gave up, laying back down. Obviously he was not going to stop talking.

Matthew said his next sentence in a hoarse whisper. "Leslie, I'm not even sure if I want to go."

This caught Leslie off guard, because for weeks she had been the one begging Matthew not to go, not to leave her behind. Leslie's world suddenly tilted, and she felt unbalanced as she said, "No, Matthew. You have to go. You should do what you want. Go to college. Get a good job."

"It's only until Christmas break. Then I'll come visit you," Matthew said, as if trying to convince himself.

They spent another hour on the hill, spotting constellations and creating some of their own. The darker it got, the brighter the stars seemed to shine, and Leslie found that she was

able to forget about Matthew leaving, at least until they were getting up, ready to head back down to the house.

Matthew suddenly grabbed Leslie's arm, causing her to jump. "Listen to me," he said in an urgent whisper, "I'll call you every night. Okay? Promise you'll answer the phone."

Leslie felt pressure building behind her eyes. "Promise." Matthew nodded, satisfied. He let go of her arm and backed away.

That's when the tears came, hot and salty, flowing down Leslie's face. "I'm going to miss you. So, so much."

Matthew smiled sadly, and then Leslie noticed the twinkle in his eye, and knew what was coming. "Well, I don't blame you. I mean, I am pretty great. Who wouldn't miss me?" Leslie scowled at her older brother through the tears and rolled her eyes. But then she grinned; he always came up with the strangest ways to make her smile.

"What if something comes between us?"

"Nothing will. Family over friends, alright?" Leslie nodded. "Come on, sis. The stars will be here next week." Matthew turned and started down the hill.

"But you won't."

Matthew stopped in his tracks but didn't look back. "Leslie, I don't want to talk about it, okay?" Then he went the rest of the way to the house and around the back. A couple seconds later, Leslie heard his window slide shut.

Sunday morning was a big day in the Davis household. Matthew dashed around collecting random items--a phone charger, an extra pair of socks. Leslie wandered the house. No matter where she went, people were tripping over her.

"Careful there, sis!"

"Watch out, honey."

“Leslie, move quick, or my suitcase’ll crush you!” Leslie turned to see Matthew rushing towards her--she was standing between him and the door. Leslie jumped out of the way as Matthew went by, running outside with his overstuffed bag. She followed behind him and helped put his stuff in his car.

When the back of Matthew’s rusted blue car was closed, they both leaned against it, breathing in the crisp September air. Leslie sighed inwardly. Her life was changing, and she hated it. Why couldn’t everything stay the same?

Matthew broke the silence with a quick “You start junior high in a week”, and then he was heading back inside, swinging the front door shut behind him.

A sudden flash of anger surged through Leslie. “You only just noticed?” She said to the car, kicking its tire.

Leslie spent the rest of the morning sitting on the porch swing, watching as her mom and dad hugged Matthew. Watching as Matthew walked to his car and climbed in. Watching as it sputtered to life, inched forward while Matthew waved from the driver’s seat. Watching as the car pulled out of the driveway and turned right. Watching as the trees lining their little property blocked Matthew from her sight.

“Leslie, phone’s for you!”

“Who is it?”

“Guess!”

Leslie moaned, dragging herself off the couch. It was approximately twenty-four hours since Matthew had left, and her joints and muscles ached from underuse. Leslie walked, slouching, to the landline in her mom’s hand. One glance at her face, and Leslie knew who was calling.

“Hey, Matthew,” Leslie said, leaning against the wall and coiling the phone’s cord around her finger.

“Hi, sis! Whatcha been up to?”

Leslie glanced at the couch and smirked. “Waiting for you to call. How’s college?”

She could hear the smile in Matthew’s voice as he said, “Horrible. You were right! I should have stayed home.”

“Yeah, right. How’s the school?” Leslie asked, honestly curious.

“Amazing. It’s huge! I also have a roommate named Isaiah. He’s great.”

“Oh. Cool.” She guessed she should have known that Matthew might make other friends in college, but just as long as this Isaiah person didn’t get in the way of Leslie and Matthew’s friendship, she was fine with Matthew making new friends. “Um... I should probably go. I’m gonna go for a walk.”

“Alright. I’ll call you tomorrow, okay?”

“Yup! Can’t wait.”

“Alright, see ya.” Leslie heard a click from Matthew’s side, and knew he had hung up. Good. She needed some fresh air.

The fall air bit at Leslie’s hands, her face red from the cold. She’d been walking laps of their property for an hour now, following the faded white fencing.

Reaching up and brushing a strand of hair from her eyes, Leslie glanced back at the little house. It looked so small, she could scoop it up and put it in her pocket. And to think her whole life was on this property! In that farmhouse, on that hill.

It had been Matthew’s life, too--until he grew up; realized that he didn’t want to spend his life on a farm. He wanted to meet cityfolk. He wanted to go to a big fancy school and learn fancy things.

He wanted to leave.

It was nine o’clock. Friday night. Leslie stared out of her window, watching the dim bedroom light flickering in the reflection on the glass. The night sky was as dark as ever, little white stars

peeking out from behind the occasional cloud. She pressed her hands against the cool pane. It was now or never.

But looking at the black silhouette of the hill, standing so tall against the wind, Leslie knew she would not be able to go. Not with Matthew gone. So for the first time in years, she took a deep breath and stepped away from the window.

Leslie's door creaked slightly as she opened it and peered out. The coast was clear. Marching down the hall, she soon came to another door. Leslie almost knocked, but then remembered that the room was empty. So she pushed it open and crept inside.

The sudden darkness blinded her for a couple seconds, but gradually her sight returned and Leslie could make out the dark outlines of a bed, stripped of everything but the mattress. Then a dresser, then a desk. The posters taped randomly to the wall had been taken down; Matthew had brought most of them with him. But there was still his faded Iron Man banner stuck to the ceiling, hanging over his bed. And the broken hockey stick in the back of his closet.

Struck by a sudden idea, Leslie climbed up on the stiff mattress and tore the banner from the ceiling. Matthew obviously didn't need it anymore, anyway. Then she snuck back down the hall and into her own room, grabbing a roll of tape along the way.

When the banner had been hung in its new place above her own bed, Leslie shut off the lights and dove under the covers. A sudden memory washed over her, and she stared at the ceiling, filled with longing.

Leslie is five years old. It's her bedtime, and she's climbing under her soft pink blanket. The door creaks open, and Matthew appears, signaling for her to be quiet.

"Hey, sis. Follow me," He whispers, and then leaves the room. Leslie jumps out of the bed to follow. Together they enter Matthew's room, and then go to the window. He slides it open before looking at her. "This is a belated birthday gift, okay? But you can't tell Mom and Dad. This is our secret."

“Our secret,” she repeats as he lifts her up and out the window, and then sets her on the ground outside. The night is cool, the grass slightly damp. A breeze rustles her hair, And Leslie sighs happily. “Matthew?”

Matthew climbs out of his window and closes it before answering. “Yeah?”

“Where are we going?”

“Follow me.” Matthew walks away at a steady pace, and Leslie is forced to run to catch up. Together they march up the hill.

Once at the top, Matthew lays down and Leslie imitates him. “Now look up,” he says in a whisper. Leslie does, and what she sees takes her breath away.

The sky is dark, a bottomless pit of inky black. Tiny stars wink at her, sparkling like jewels, and the half moon glows softly, letting off a silvery light. Despite the chilling breeze, Leslie can feel warmth pulsing through her, like oozing honey.

Suddenly she never wants to leave. Right here, in this enchanted world of stars and soft grass, is where she wants to be.

“Can we do this every night?” Leslie’s voice seems to echo in the silence.

Matthew slowly turns toward her, and Leslie can see a twinkle in his eye as he says, “How about every week? Every night seems a bit much.” And in that moment, Leslie knows that’s exactly what she wants.

As the months passed, Matthew’s absence grew more normal, and the empty house seemed less hollow. Leslie’s first day of junior high came and went, and then snow was falling, coating everything in bright white powder. Matthew would be visiting for Christmas, and she couldn’t wait to see him. With Christmas break and Matthew coming home in only two days, Leslie grew festive, and the red and green lights twinkling above the windows and snaking around the porch railing reflected her mood perfectly.

The sound of the phone ringing jerked Leslie's mind out of her book, and she set *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* on its shelf before dashing down the hall toward the kitchen.

Leslie took the phone from its place on the wall and held it to her ear just in time to hear her older brother say, "Hey Leslie! How ya doin'?"

"Fine. How are you?" Leslie couldn't believe she was being so formal with Matthew after only a couple months.

"Great, actually."

"So are you excited?"

There was a pause, and then Matthew said hesitantly, "Huh? Oh, like for Christmas, you mean?"

She was taken aback by his response. Leslie understood that she was obviously more excited than him, but for Matthew to forget that he was visiting over Christmas break? That was a punch in the stomach. "Um. Yeah. For Christmas."

"Oh. Leslie..." Matthew trailed off, and she could tell he was searching for words. "So Mom and Dad didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what, Matthew?" A cold finger was running down her back, causing Leslie to shiver.

"I mean, they told me I should be the one to tell you, but I didn't think they meant it."

"Tell me what?" Leslie was growing impatient.

"How do I say this..."

"Spit it out, Matthew!" Leslie shouted into the phone, suddenly glad both parents were out for the day.

"Leslie, I won't be coming home until Christmas Eve." The faded yellow walls around Leslie grew taller. The floor tilted. The kitchen cupboards danced across the room.

"...What?" Leslie said weakly, sitting down on the cold floor. "What?" She repeated. "I thought you were coming home in two days."

"I know, but--"

Suddenly something red-hot was rushing through Leslie's veins, pounding in her ears, hammering in her chest. It replaced the hurt and replenished her strength. "No."

The pain was palpable in Matthew's voice. "Leslie--"

"No, Matthew! Why aren't you coming until Christmas Eve? That's not fair. I thought you cared. We haven't seen each other in months, and you don't want to spend Christmas break with your own family?"

"I do! But--" That was when Leslie hung up.

She spent the rest of the day on the hill.

Leslie watched as her parents pulled up. They waved at her, smiling gently. They knew Matthew had phoned her. About an hour after Leslie should have gone in for dinner, her mom came out with a steaming mug of something and brought it to Leslie. It was tea, her favourite thing to drink in the evenings, curled up with a good book. She didn't have a book right now, of course, but it was still pretty good.

"Mom?" Leslie sipped the hot liquid, felt its warmth travel down her throat.

"Yes?"

"What's Matthew doing, anyway? Why's he avoiding me?"

"He's not avoiding you, honey."

"Then why's he not coming until Christmas Eve? What's that all about?" By the time Leslie had finished speaking, she realized she was yelling, and mumbled a quick "sorry".

Her mom hesitated. "He's gonna spend some time at Isaiah's house. He'd rather be here, but... Matthew values their friendship, and besides, they've got some homework to go over, too."

"So now it's friends over family," Leslie muttered.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing."

Matthew came home on Christmas Eve, his car loaded with chocolates and gifts, and the rest of the Davis family paused their Christmas matinee, running out into the snow to greet him.

Leslie hung back by the porch steps while her dad shook his son's hand, asking him how college was and if Isaiah's family was well. Her mom hugged him and talked loudly about how much the whole family loved him and missed him.

"...Oh! And goodness me, I can't believe I almost forgot. Grandma Josephine dropped by and left you a whole batch of cookies, all for you! And then, you know Mr. Miller from just down the road? He says he has some jobs around the farm for you, if you ever have any free time during break. Of course I told him, 'Well, I guess we'll see. Matthew will probably want to be spending a lot of time with his family, but we'll see'. And did you know we forgot to tell Aunt Ruby that you left for college? That caused all *sorts* of problems when..."

Matthew just smiled and nodded until she finally backed away, sighing contentedly.

And then he turned and saw Leslie. She stood a couple feet away, and didn't plan on getting any closer. Her hair was tucked into a messy ponytail, and the lopsided striped red-and-white Christmas sweater Leslie wore hung limply from her shoulders, wrinkled and depressing.

There was a moment of awkward silence, and then their dad spoke up in a frustrated voice. "Well, you guys had better talk to each other, because you're not coming into the house until you at least look like you love each other." Then he stepped inside, pulling the door closed behind him.

Matthew stared at the ground, Leslie at the sky. She suddenly felt weak, embarrassed even, that she had gotten so angry with Matthew. But then her thoughts went to war, battling hard: one side fought for peace with her older brother, the other for justice. Eventually the sounds of conflict that echoed around in her mind grew too loud; she sat down on a nearby rock and sighed. Leslie's movement must have woken Matthew from whatever daydream he had been in, because he looked up and stared into her face, trying to make eye contact.

“Leslie...” Matthew’s voice was strained. “You’re not being fair. I am sorry, but can we move on? I’m here now, and I’m not planning on leaving until Christmas break is over.”

Suddenly Leslie wanted to slap him. “*I’m* not being fair?” She stood, met his gaze. “You said you’d be home at the beginning of Christmas break. It’s Christmas Eve now, Matthew. School ended a week ago!”

Something flashed in Matthew’s eyes. They glared at each other, then he muttered bitterly, “Grow up, Leslie. Quit being a clingy baby.” Matthew turned, marched up the porch steps, swung open the front door, and disappeared. Leslie was sure she heard him say “Merry Christmas” before slamming the front door.

The rest of Christmas Eve crept by, and it was as if the weight of a thousand Christmas trees had dropped on her shoulders. She and Matthew avoided each other, and their Mom, who seemed oblivious to their silence, dragged everyone into the living room after dinner to watch a movie and eat Christmas cookies. It was after ten o’clock when Leslie was finally able to escape.

Her room was blissfully peaceful, filled with dancing shadows and the soft creaks of a settling house.

Leslie took a deep breath and opened the window. She climbed carefully out of her room, then crept across the snowy lawn to the hill. Once at the top, she laid down on the soft pillow of white and stared up at the stars. Every once in a while a comet would shoot playfully across the sky, and then disappear forever.

Leslie suddenly found herself wondering who else was looking up at the sky at that moment. Neighbours? School friends? Even people in the city, who saw only a flat gray expanse of clouds?

Was Matthew watching out his window? He definitely wasn’t outside.

“Merry Christmas!” Leslie awoke to her mother’s head poking into her room, smiling cheerfully.

“Get up, sleepyhead!”

She moaned and sat up groggily. Then the weariness of sleep drained away, and reality hit. It was Christmas! But along with that came the anger at Matthew, though it had dulled considerably.

The tree glittered, the presents shone, the hot cinnamon buns on Leslie’s plate steamed, and a sharp scent of pine wafted around the house. Outside the sunlight shone on the snow, causing golden light to pour through the windows.

Matthew and Leslie even began speaking to each other.

When the presents were opened, Leslie noticed that she had gotten far more from Matthew than anyone else, which made her feel an emptiness in her stomach that seemed to eat away at Leslie’s happiness. How could she have been so unfeeling? After all, Matthew was the one who had been through so much change in just four months. All Leslie had done was start junior high and sit around waiting for her brother to get home. He was the one who had gone off on his own, made new friends, and taken challenging courses in his new school. And even after all that, Matthew had remembered to buy gifts for Leslie. He had been thinking about her after all. She had not been forgotten.

Halfway through their turkey dinner, Leslie noticed Matthew looking out the window. The sky had darkened considerably, allowing the stars to peer out of the sky at the house. Perhaps they were admiring the Christmas tree, or maybe watching her happy family seated around the dinner table.

When dinner was over, the Davis family sat in the living room and played a Christmas game, and then Leslie and Matthew went to bed.

Looking around her room, Leslie sighed. Though she was tired, Leslie didn’t want to be stuck inside on such a beautiful night.

There was a tapping noise at the window, and she jumped, whirling around. The window was creaking open, and suddenly her older brother was looking through the open square, squinting at the brightness of her bedroom light. Leslie smiled.

This time Leslie was the first one up the hill, leaving Matthew behind to plow through the snow on his own. The air was cold, but Leslie had put on three layers of pajamas--having not been able to get her coat from the front door--and only her face and hands felt the harshness of the night wind. It had begun to snow a while ago, dusting the already snowy ground with more of the soft white stuff. It fell silently, almost eerily in the darkness, melting instantly against Leslie's skin.

"You've gotten faster," Matthew panted, finally reaching the top.

"Or maybe you got slower," Leslie shrugged, and then stared at the path her older brother had plowed through the snow. "Don't you think Mom and Dad will see your big footprints tomorrow morning?"

Matthew hesitated before speaking. "Nah, the snow should cover them."

"If you say so." The siblings stared at the sky, neither of them wanting to break the silence, as if they feared the beauty of the night would shatter along with it. Eventually Matthew spoke in a whisper.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't be. You were right. I was being a clingy baby." She felt a strange happiness welling up inside of her.

"No, but it's my fault. I shouldn't have gone to Isaiah's house. I should have come home."

Leslie just shook her head. "You came home for Christmas, and that's what matters." Leslie was finished with feeling grumpy. Staring up at the dome of darkness above them, she smiled. It felt as if the weight she had been carrying around for months had slipped away,

leaving behind a blissful feeling of lightness. The tangle of thoughts in Leslie's mind had straightened themselves out, with only clear ideas and emotions left. So she decided to relax, and just focus on the present. The past was in the past, after all. And the future was yet to come.

It was the week after Christmas break--the week everyone dislikes the most, because all the decorations must be taken down and put away for next year--and Matthew had left for college again. Though the house was empty of lights and tinsel, and the walls echoed with Matthew's absence, Leslie felt a strange calm. Her brother was gone again, and school was back, but it didn't bother her very much anymore. Of course she missed Matthew every day, but the knife of loneliness that had been cutting into her mind had dulled.

It was Friday. Night had fallen, and the stars were back again. That was something Leslie enjoyed about stars--they always came back. Stars were something predictable and unchanging that she could hold on to during the days to come.

The window creaked as Leslie slid it open and climbed out. The ground was still coated in snow, and she marched briskly through the white stuff to get to the top of the hill.

Laying down, Leslie could see the thousands of stars dancing across the sky, slowly making their way toward the horizon.

The stars made her think of Matthew. Since it was Friday, he would probably be looking at the sky right then, too, and Leslie wondered if he could see the same stars.

She and Matthew were hundreds of kilometers apart, but in that moment she felt like they were right next to each other.

Leslie smiled to herself. *Stars*, she thought. *After all these years, they're still the thing that unites us.*