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Finding Myself in the Cosmos

The cold winter wind rushes around me, freezing me to my core. I grip the instrument in my hands tighter despite the sensation of feeling being gone in my fingers. Around me, it is pitch black, the only light coming from outer space acting as a beacon for discovery. I look towards the sky, gripping my coat tighter as I scan for a familiar constellation among the thousands of stars. Tonight, I am searching for a planet in our solar system which, to my dismay, closely resembles these slivers of twinkling lights: Mars. Within the vast reaches of space, I finally find the constellation Sagittarius the Archer. I raise my telescope to my eye, excitement welling within me as I slowly scan the horizon. A shot of crimson light fills my vision, and I know I have found the majestic red planet.

This scene was one of my first adventures into the outdoors with my telescope. It is one of my fondest memories because of the immense satisfaction it brought me to observe Mars on the historic day of Perseverance's landing on the red planet. However, one year ago I would not have considered venturing into the wilderness to observe the night sky. As a virtual student during the pandemic, I had more time to explore classes at my high school and excel in my coursework. Out of curiosity, I asked my brother which class he enjoyed most at A. Linwood Holton Governor's School. I was particularly intrigued when he told me about Astronomy: to learn about the origins of space, analyze the fundamentals of physics, and take part in a developing scientific field hands-on. I listened eagerly as he praised the attentive professor and his excitement when he talked about his observations using a telescope. Yet, despite my enthusiasm, a voice within me had doubts: what if I was not able to perform like he did? How

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would I figure out how to survey the night sky with a telescope? My brother quickly realized my anxieties about the class and promised, once I got my telescopes and assignment from my professor, he would take me on a trip to discover the best place to gaze into the cosmos. After signing up for the class, I was given two telescopes to use for future lab reports: one designed after Galileo Galilei's refracting telescope and another larger telescope for observing comets, star clusters, and the Moon.

A few weeks later, it was finally time to try out the telescopes. My professor had assigned a lab report in which we were to observe and sketch a full Moon. During the day, my brother, sister, and I went to High Knob to scout an area with a good vantage point for studying the sky. We bundled in jackets and headed off, the leafless trees standing guard at the entrance to George Washington and Jefferson National Forest. We trudged through the brambles and bush before stopping to rest at a clearing. Suddenly, my sister gasped, exclaiming that we have to head further north. After inquiring why, she informed us that the High Knob Observation Tower would be perfect for stargazing. The wind had picked up, and I was reluctant to move from my position; deep down, I dreaded facing the burden of my assignment. Despite my weariness, we continued on until we reached the steps of the Observation Tower. After reaching the top, I was astonished at the view. Looking at the rolling valleys and clear blue sky, the icy breeze blowing around me left no harsh remarks; in fact, the scenery at the peak made me realize how infinitesimal my worries were compared to the mountains that encompassed me here. After discussing a plan for observing that night, we hiked back to the trail. I could tell that this trip had soothed my anxiety, and I was ready to conquer my stargazing adventure.

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We returned to the High Knob Observation Tower that night. The freezing temperatures were much more extreme then, and we bundled in thick coats and warm gloves. I carried my larger telescope in my arms and a boulder of nervous anticipation in my stomach. Without the sun shining on us, our guide was the light of the full moon illuminating the wilderness like a lighthouse in the heavens. We trekked up the hill for the second time that day, the familiar feeling of the stone steps easing my trepidation. After reaching the summit, I set up my large telescope on a stone platform in front of me. With a flashlight ready and my sketching materials on hand, I began to position my telescope towards the sky aiming for my target. The Moon, in all its brilliant, pearlescent glory, shone brightly through my lens. It did not take long to find it, and I soon sketched it for my lab report, detailing Mare Imbrium, Mare Serenitatis, and the Copernicus crater.

After the success of my first lab report, I was excited to prepare for my next challenge: observing Mars. Despite my excitement, this trip took much more planning. Through researching stargazing techniques, scouting the night sky, and using tools I was not previously acquainted with, I successfully observed Mars. I was able to locate Mars using trial and error, yet my maturity from this experience made it matter so much more to me. For this reason, I know my hard work paid off, and I am excited to embark on new adventures with my telescope in the future.

I am grateful for the lessons stargazing has taught me: patience, resilience, and determination. Although I began this hobby recently from my Astronomy class, I will continue to utilize it in the future as I traverse unfamiliar landscapes to gain a better view of the sky.

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Stargazing has inspired me to go out of my comfort zone and delve into the unknown. When I observe the cosmos, I no longer see a void of space; now, it is a realm of exploration and discovery which I can harness with my telescope. I will cherish the memories I have made from my discoveries and the countless more I intend to uncover because these are what make stargazing an unforgettable experience in the outdoors.