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TO THE MOON AND BACK EZIANA RAMAGE

A NOVEL

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TO THE
MOON
AND
BACK
A NOVEL

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A NOTE TO THE READER



While one character's background is inspired by a case involving the Indian Child Welfare Act, this is a novel. Its characters, action, and dialogue are wholly fictional and not intended to portray any real person or represent any real events. All the novel's characters, and any details about them, are the author's invention.

For my parents

“When you first came to us
we did not have an Ojibwe name
to know the sky beyond
the sky beyond the sky

How were we to know
he was she was
they are
you

How were we to know who?”

—From “How It Escaped Our Attention,” by Heid E. Erdrich

STEPH



REMOVAL

June 1987

I imagine her terrified. Our mother. Two children in the back seat. She drove like a woman followed, even after we left him at the foot of that tall hill. There was blood there, back in Texas, and tiny shards of glass still covered my sister. She sat beside me, her small body glittering in passing lights—the brights of cars, the moon.

I remember our mother pulling off the highway into dark towns, buying biscuits at the drive-through with small bills in a rubber band, pulled from under the driver's seat. Kayla slept and I ate three biscuits, hers and mine and our mother's, too. Our mother, who cried silently behind the steering wheel from Dallas to Plano to Sherman to McAlester. I practiced reading highway signs. Our mother helped me sound them out, until she didn't.

I was in my school clothes. My underwear said *Tuesday* in cursive. A long time later, we passed a blue sign with a buffalo-skin shield and eagle feathers and little brown crosses. *Oklahoma*. Our mother corrected me, *oh* not *ah*, but she was talking again. She was alive. She pulled off the highway at the first rest stop past the blue sign and she took one giant breath, in and out with her eyes closed. I copied her. Kayla wiggled against the straps in her booster seat. She started to sing, happily and to herself.

I would grow up with stories in Tahlequah, though never the kind I asked for. There were no stories for what had happened, for why we'd left Texas

and when we might return.

Instead, this: “When I was a little girl,” our mother said, “my mother and my father got into some trouble and my mother took us to spend the summer with my grandmother in Oklahoma. There weren’t any movie theaters, and we had to walk a long way to fill up jugs of water in the mornings, but my arms got strong, and I read a lot of chapter books, and it was peaceful, all the way to August.”

Instead, this: “When your great-grandmother was a girl, she was a student at the Cherokee Female Seminary, which was very special before it burned down. Your great-grandfather was a scholar, too, at the Cherokee Male Seminary. They learned there and then taught there, and even before that their parents had been educated there, too. One of them was a superintendent! People will tell you all kinds of things about Indians, all your life, but I’ll tell you this. You girls come from people who studied Greek and Latin. Who studied philosophy and astronomy. Steph! *Astronomy!*”

Instead, this: “When your great-*great*-grandmother was a girl, she had to go all the way from Georgia to Indian Territory. Not Tahlequah, but close, along the Arkansas River. To this land, for sure—it’s all ours—and on the way all sorts of people got sick and died. And after all that, Stephanie, no, for the love of God, I do not see the point in us moving again.”

Our mother took my sister and me, and she drove through the night to a place she felt a claim to, a place on Earth she thought we might be safe. I stopped asking questions. I picked little glass pieces from my sister’s hair. I watched the moon.

PART
ONE

1995–2000

STEPH



ALL THAT IS OR EVER WAS OR EVER WILL BE

June 1995

Eight Years Later

I was thirteen years old in Oklahoma. Eight years now in the house in Tahlequah to which our mother had brought us. I wanted, more than anything, to be gone.

To outer space. To a better school than my own, that could help me get to outer space. And before that, to Space Camp. *At least* to Space Camp! The one thing that could hold me over while I waited for the rest of my life.

At Space Camp, I'd heard, you could take turns sleeping in a pod modeled after the real ones. You could zip yourself into a sleeping bag tethered to the wall, strap yourself down and close the hatch like it was real. Like if you didn't do these things, you'd float away.

I used to get this feeling sometimes, where everything would stop, and it would be like I was flying above myself, watching, remembering the moment I was in but from years ahead. It happened in moments when I most believed that maybe my life would take the shape I wanted it to. I felt that so many nights, with my sister breathing softly in the bunk below. My sister, content. Me sitting up, shivering and wrapped in an old blue quilt, ordered piles of papers spread around me. Flashlight waving over PSAT scores and

essays. Financial aid forms filled with numbers, from pay stubs I had slipped from our mother's purse.

Whenever I started to think about how Phillips Exeter Academy might not let me in, and then how hard it would be to impress NASA without Phillips Exeter Academy, I'd switch off the flashlight. I'd lean back and look up at the glow-in-the-dark stars that Brett, my teacher but also my mother's boyfriend, had stuck to the ceiling.

I enclosed a letter with my application. I told them I was "on track" to become an astronaut, which meant I'd done very well in middle school science and would likely attend Space Camp in Huntsville that summer.

Then I waited for my Exeter acceptance letter. And I waited for my Space Camp application. My mother had said she would call to request it.

On the phone they said camp costs a thousand dollars. She said thank you and hung up.

She spent the next four weeks changing the subject when I asked about it, and then in April (still no word from Exeter) she sat down me and Kayla and said she had a surprise. (Brett was apparently excused from this family meeting, as he'd gone out to the country. He was visiting his ancient parents, and I wished he'd brought me with him.)

There wasn't money for Space Camp. It wasn't happening.

Kayla said, "Got it, okay, can I please be excused?" She'd been calling it "nerd camp" since Thanksgiving.

"No, you listen," our mother said, "both of you. You're not going to *the* Space Camp, but you are going to *a* Space Camp!"

"Oh no," Kayla said.

"Huh?" I said.

"I'm *running* it!" our mother said.

"Oh *no*," Kayla said.

"Kayla, watch it," our mother said, but she looked at me. Her hands gripped the couch cushion under her, tight. Her eyes were bright, wide, daring me not to be thrilled. I watched the clock above the couch, unwove the woven baskets on the bookshelf with my eyes.

Our mother explained that she and Brett had spent the last month staying up late, typing a grant proposal on the computer they'd bought together. "I even had a meeting with an astronomy professor, at his office," she said, clearly having waited days to tell me that.

"You're gonna make Cherokee Culture Camp all spacey," Kayla said, "aren't you?"

Our mother looked down at her hands, raw and rough but sweet-smelling from the bread factory where she worked. I used to press her palms to my face, used to breathe in the strange mix of rising dough and sharp-smelling machinery.

"You'll like Space-Culture Camp," she said.

I said we should try again for *Space* Camp. The real one, for next year. I could save up. Sometimes Exeter let kids have jobs on campus. I could see myself standing behind a tall marble desk in a library, getting paid to explain things to my fellow students. Maybe I'd wear my hair in a low bun.

Our mother looked like I had hit her. She was quiet and careful, opening her mouth and then closing it, and then she looked at me like, *Is this really who you are?*

She said, "This is the best that I could do."

All that was left was to pretend. We nodded and said great, thank you, can't wait.

We did the dishes. I washed and Kayla dried. I tried to look out the window over the kitchen sink, tried to find the night sky, but the lights were too bright. All I could see was the two of us reflected in the glass. Kayla played the Top 40 countdown on the radio and sang along.

Nothing stuck to her. The way she'd flit through the hallways at school—from class to class, friend to friend—it was incredible to me, and alien. My sister belonged, happily, like she'd sprouted out of the ground behind this house. I was something like a refugee, from a time and place my sister had forgotten. I wished I could have just a little of all that Kayla was.

At Space Camp, you strap into a multi-access trainer—like a spinning cage inside a spinning cage—and are rotated in every direction, no more than two turns the same way in a row, to keep the inner ear fluid from disrupting your balance. Astronaut candidates (they're called "ascans!") use something very similar in training, only with a joystick, so they can practice stabilizing a shuttle on reentry if it starts to spin out. Without stabilization, a real astronaut could experience g-forces so strong they die.

Space-Culture Camp was held in the middle school gym. It smelled like boys, and the lights overhead glared bluish green on our skin. Our words clapped off the walls and rushed back loud and harsh.

On the bleachers, which were folded against the wall, our mother had taped cutout paintings of planets and stars. She'd made them herself the night before, on the backs of old protest signs. *Moms Against Nukes* on the back of Venus. *Della Owens Belongs with Her Tribe... Support the Indian Child Welfare Act!* on the back of the moon. Our mother was never good at protest slogans and gave too much of herself to other people. When things didn't go as she had hoped (when, for example, Della Owens was taken from her family and sent back to the adoptive couple in Utah), our mother saw it as evidence of her own powerlessness. Like she alone had let down the world.

After snack time, our mother and Brett stacked everyone into the bed of a truck and drove us to the top of a low hill behind the cemetery. They then brought out a new, clean garbage can with Styrofoam duct-taped to the inside, and tipped it over. One at a time, we put on a helmet and climbed in.

Our mother did a countdown from ten—she was working from a limited base of knowledge, and for near everything we did, she had to say "blastoff"—and pushed us down the hill.

When everyone had gone, we sat in a circle in the grass and talked about how it had felt. How we thought astronauts might feel in *the same scenario*.

“This circle time is just like a mission debrief!” is what she would have said, probably, if she even knew about mission debriefs. Most people didn’t.

“They’d maybe be scared at first,” said Meredith. She was new in town, and had wide-set, blue-green eyes. She had a look to her that was serious and a little spooky to me, but also made me want to stare at her when she wasn’t looking.

“They’d get used to it, though,” I said. “If you can’t handle the vomit comet, then you can’t handle space!” I was proud to know that nickname —“vomit comet.”

Brett laughed. “Doyu hadvneliha,” he said. It was nice sometimes, having words and phrases in Cherokee as our own language.

“Anyone else?” said our mother. “How would astronauts *feel*?”

“Nauseous,” said Daniel. He’d lingered in the trash can at the bottom of the hill, before throwing up inside it and ending the activity for everyone. Kayla helped him climb out and brought him water and rubbed circles on his back with her hand. Kayla was always taking care of people. Even our own mother when she was sad, which was often. Kayla was so good at looking good, I sometimes looked bad in comparison.

“Nauseated,” I corrected. Brett scrunched up his eyebrows and cocked his head at me, like he did at school or at home whenever I “got in my own way.” That’s what he called it when I was a show-off or a know-it-all or a bad friend. “Tsanelododigwu awaduli,” he’d say in the living room, the lunchroom, the carpool line. *I just want you to try*. Whenever he said that, whenever he made that face like he was worried about me, like I was the kind of child one had to worry about, I felt alone. I felt thrown out of the air lock, suited up without a tether. *Do you see me?* I wanted to say. *Do you see me at all?*

. . .

At Space Camp, there’s a twenty-three-foot-deep neutral buoyancy lab for mission training. At the bottom of the pool is the pretend wall of a pretend

space station with loose screws and deep tears and faulty supply tanks. A death trap—but pretend! You swim down with a scuba tank on your back, and they give you a problem and you fix it. There’s an underwater countdown clock and a siren that gets louder and faster as you work, because it’s space, and in space you’re always one second from death. A red light flashes through the water, your white suit turning from swimming pool–blue to danger-red, and then blue, and then red red red, system failure like in Starfleet when the captain calls blue alert and it’s dark and quiet and time to focus or else. And you’re in your space suit, a hundred-pound mock space suit with the boots and everything, and with your clumsy, padded, white-gloved hands you’re trying to turn a small screw back in place with a silver wrench, your wrist turning and your legs flailing out behind you—you’re weightless, almost, you’re almost there.

We didn’t have that. We were driven to the creek behind Brett’s friend Beth’s house. Beth sat up high on her porch in a pink bikini and sunglasses like Barbie, and every so often she’d wave down to us. She held a cocktail with an umbrella in a tall glass, and I wondered again why my mother lived her life like fun was illegal. Why she was so downtrodden. Sometimes at church, back when we’d been new to town and had gone more often, I used to see charity posters of poor people in other countries, staring into the distance with everything they owned wrapped in blankets on their backs. In my mind I’d swap in my mother’s face.

“Ma, there’s a scuba park at Lake Tenkiller,” I said.

“Camp is free,” she said, and slapped a snorkel in my hand.

I laid my towel out neat on the grass and put on sunscreen, which no one else had bothered with even though skin cancer kills. I moved slowly down to the creek, keeping an eye out for sharp rocks and snakes, making contingency plans for if I cut myself or got poisoned. I only had about a decade or so to rid myself of every fear I still had. In the place of all those old fears I would put a more honorable kind of fear, which I called (and which NASA called) awareness and preparedness and disaster response protocol.

By the time I made it up to my shoulders in the water, most of the group was downstream. I hurried to catch up to them. John, a fellow almost ninth grader who had been mean to me when we first moved here, said he was Irish. Gracey, an almost seventh grader who was consistently kind and boring, said English and Polish and Scottish. Daniel said *full-blood*, the “full” sound like *fool*. His accent was country, like my father’s had been. My mother tried to correct us away from it.

It was a weird ritual, the listing of fractions. But you had to be a tribal citizen to go to camp, which required having ancestors on a list of Cherokees the government had made a hundred years ago. That left a lot of room for working out what now set us apart. Meredith waved me back over to the group—I had been swimming away from them, inches at a time.

I smiled and shook my head and cupped my hands in the water, pretending to catch tadpoles.

When people asked “what are you,” they meant what was my mother and what was my father. My father was white and dead. My mother refused to talk about him, except to say there’d been a car accident. She wouldn’t talk about her parents, either, but that was because they’d kicked her out of their house.

Meredith shouted my name. Everyone turned and looked at me. I gasped in as much air as I could hold, pinched my nose, and sank underwater.

My eyes squeezed shut. My toes dug into the muddy creek bed. I made myself small.

. . .

My father was shouting about the universe again. The memory pushed into me like cold water on all sides.

“It’s like *this*,” he said. The two of us, left alone together. The last few days had been bad ones. Soon I’d see him crumpled over the wheel.

My father stepped away from me, into the woods behind the house in Texas, and I was afraid. I was cold. I thought of my purple coat on its low hook by the front door but knew he wouldn't let me leave. If I did, he'd chase me.

The white beam of a flashlight shone in my eyes, and a wall of black pushed toward me. I heard the heaviness of his boots on the ground. The crush of sticks and leaves.

"Can you see me?" he said.

I shook my head and turned away. Across the yard, through the bathroom window, I saw my mother bent over the bath. When my father had announced it was time for an astronomy lesson, she had let him take me.

I was getting too old to do bath time with Kayla. I missed our little boats with sails and our Marine Biologist Barbie. Our shark, toothy and open-mouthed. With a few turns of a crank, our father could make his fins move.

"Steph!" he said. "Try again! *Can you see me?*"

He turned my head back toward him and shook the light in my face. I closed my eyes.

"No, sir," I said, careful. I needed my coat, the toilet, whatever my mother had saved for me from dinner. It would be a long time before my turn in the bath.

"Exactly. Quasars are supermassive black holes, feeding on gas in young galaxies. They're like flashlights! So bright you can't see what's around them, or behind them—none of the whole rest of the galaxy."

I nodded, eyes still closed, and my father continued to talk. He held the light steady in my eyes and told me to be tough. Earth was tiny and unprotected. The universe was big, deadly, not known well enough to trust. It didn't matter who you were or where you came from. This part mattered because my mother was "part-Cherokee and stuck-up about it."

Whoever you were when the end came, you had to be ready to run.

"I am," I said. But he never believed me.

"I'm trying to protect you," he said, when my eyes filled with water. "To teach you. It could be an asteroid! A super volcano. Nuclear war. Whatever it

is, there's gonna be a battle for resources. You gotta run before that, Steph. To the moon and back, if you've gotta."

"I know," I said.

My father nodded. With one hand, he brought the flashlight closer to my eyes. With the other, he counted out options for the end of the world. The Big Freeze, the Big Rip, vacuum decay.

I felt the wet on my cheeks. My eyes hurt so, so bad.

"Don't tell me you forgot what those are?"

"No, sir," I said, but it was a lie. I was five.

. . .

I came up for air.

Meredith spat water out her snorkel, dangerously close to Gracey's face. Gracey laughed good-naturedly. I climbed out of the creek, unsure where I was supposed to go now, and Meredith called my name again.

"Um, I've got cramps!" I shouted, running toward the woods. When I looked back, Meredith nodded slowly and swam away from where I'd stood in the water. John stared at me, forehead creased, like I had broken a rule.

Creek Day, I knew, would stretch well into the afternoon. My suit was too tight, a one-piece with bright yellow fabric pinching at my bottom, and the sun was hot on my back. I sat at the foot of a tree and closed my eyes. I remembered the mosquitos and opened my eyes again. I wanted to yell out in frustration. I wanted to be somewhere else.

I slapped a mosquito on my leg, and blood shot across the surface of my skin. My thighs were heavy now, and therefore more often covered, and lighter-colored than the rest of me. The line where my suit hit my legs had hairs peeking through, a new and humiliating problem that I might never solve. I pulled my legs up to my chest and held myself, covering my thick thighs and pointy knees and oily face. *You can't be the kind of person who cares about this*, I told myself. I was better than other girls, better than

Brittany and Gracey and even—especially—Kayla. Kayla took a lot of pride in what she looked like. Because of that she had many burdens, like having to brush her hair every day. But I was different. I was a scientist.

I heard a laugh, high and fast, and then “hey, shut up!” Another laugh, deep or trying to be. I stood up and tiptoed forward.

The voices started up again, fast, excited. “You don’t think she got in?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“Daniel, please, it’s June! She can’t keep waiting at the mailbox. It’s sad.”

The air was hot and humid, my skin wet from the creek or sweat or both. Quietly I stood up. Every step hurt the soft bottoms of my feet, not used to the twigs and rocks and cracked acorns strewn across the ground. The trees overhead made pretty patterns on my arms, surprising me, the sun passing through them to print a hundred little leaves against my skin. My arms were strong, even if they didn’t look it, and my fingers were long, thin—just right, I imagined, for fixing mechanical errors on a ship.

I was just observing, I thought to myself. Observe, orient, decide, act. They do that in the air force. A lot of astronauts start out in the air force.

I saw a foot sticking out behind a tree, a bare shoulder leaning against the bark.

“I mean, hasn’t she always been like that? Like, kinda *off*?”

That was Daniel.

“No! She’s fine. Normal. But sometimes it’s just like, *we get it!* You know a lot of shit about space!”

My sister.

Daniel laughed. He made his voice go up high and dumb and ridiculous, like a girl. Like me. “Excuse me,” he said, “but I feel like the aerodynamics of this stickball game are highly problematized. If you’d simply anticipate the coordinates of this dimension...”

Kayla snorted. Daniel stood and reached out a hand, pulling Kayla up beside him.

She saw me. Her face fell.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Kayla said. “Steph. Can we talk alone for a second?” She stepped toward me, and Daniel stepped toward her. She shook him off. Daniel reached for her again.

I caught the way Daniel draped his hand over her shoulder, his fingers dangling a few inches above her chest like it was nothing. The bow on her bikini had been tied and retied, haphazardly. Loose strings dangled over her belly. She was twelve years old.

“Steph, we were just—”

“Being mean to me?” I said. “Or letting Daniel *molest* you in the woods? Which is it?”

“Shut *up!*” she said, gripping her own shoulders. Then, softer, “Please, quiet down. Let’s go talk somewhere.”

“Let’s talk about this *logically*,” said Daniel.

“Shut up,” said Kayla, and me. Daniel held his hands up and stepped back. He ran a hand through his hair. It was thick and black and wavy. No, *disheveled*. I wanted to hit them both, but I had to keep Kayla safe. I yanked her by the arm and pulled her body behind mine.

“We’re supposed to be at swim time,” I said. I was looking at Daniel but talking behind me, to my sister. My younger sister. I felt her breath just under my neck. She was shorter than me.

“You’re just jealous,” she said.

That was unkind. Hadn’t she been a toddler on my lap, hiding in a closet? When our father locked us outside the house, I’d sat with her by the door. I would have taken her away with me, if I’d been older and known where to go. Now I really could run, soon, to Exeter—they were wrong, I still had time. But it was sad to know I’d be leaving her behind.

She seemed fine with that, though. She didn’t remember what had happened to us.

I could barely believe what had happened to us. The fact that it *had*, the unthinkable part on the night we ran, made nothing that could come after it unthinkable. Our planet and everyone on it, sucked into darkness in the space of a breath.