

THE  
INCREDIBLE  
MAGICAL  
OF BEING



by Kathryn Erskine

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# 1

## BLACK HOLES AND MESSIER OBJECTS

Magic is all around us, but most people never see it.

Sometimes even I can't.

Like right now.

I'm in the backseat holding my breath, leaning away from the black hole and trying not to get sucked in.

The black hole is my sister. She didn't used to be a cosmic phenomenon, but something happens to people when they become teenagers and their brains explode. Pookie's went supernova. When she was twelve she was very high functioning, but now that she's fourteen she makes this noise like an orangutan, wears earbuds and sunglasses even inside, and has a Moody Place behind the house where she goes when she's mad, which is most of the time. I call her Spooky. Only in my head, though. I'm not stupid.

"Mom! Joan!" Pookie yells. "Tell Julian to stop kicking my bag!"

“I wasn’t kicking your—”

Mom pumps the brakes. I think she’s doing it more to get our attention than for driving purposes. It makes me feel like puking again.

“Julian, honey, try to stop jiggling your feet so much. Calming breaths, remember?”

Joan looks back and gives me a wink that means, *Hang in there, kiddo.*

I try to hold my legs still and take a really deep breath.

“You don’t have to suck all the air out of the van, freak,” Pookie hisses.

When I turn to answer my foot touches her KEEP OUT bag, which doesn’t even have anything good in it. I’ve checked.

She makes her orangutan noise in my face, so I squish over to my side like a dwarf star resisting the gravitational pull of the black hole, even though my door smells like puke with a twist of lemon-fresh wipe because I threw up on it in Delaware. Or maybe it was New Jersey. Probably both. Plus Connecticut. Motion sickness is a problem I have. It’s why I don’t like car rides or boats. Especially boats. I’ve never actually been on a boat, but I want to puke just thinking about it.

Plus, you can drown.

Mom says you have to deal with your fears to overcome them. So I saved up my allowance and bought a life jacket, which I’m already wearing because our new house in Maine is on a lake. I saw it on Google Maps. The lake is way closer to the house than necessary,

which means tsunamis. Technically they're only in the ocean, but this lake is big and it's close to the ocean. It could have a mini tsunami . . . a tsunamini.

Pookie says I'm highly abnormal for a nine-year-old and should be put in a lab at Caltech and studied like a mutant rat.

I think with a name like Pookie you should be careful what you say.

My foot touches her bag again and I hope she doesn't notice, but that's like hoping Mom won't notice if I bring a Labrador retriever home.

Pookie points to my telescope on the seat behind us. "Touch my bag one more time and I'm throwing your stupid telescope out the window!"

I hug my knees to my chest, take a deep breath, and remind myself that the magical thing about super massive black holes like Pookie is that they emit quasars, the brightest objects in the entire universe. I keep waiting for that to happen with Pookie, but I think this is one of those situations where I'd have to say, *Don't hold your breath.*

So I let my breath out, which makes her go all orangutan and snarl at me like I'm a worthless Messier Object.

FART!

(FART stands for "Facts and Random Thoughts." Plus, it's fun to say *fart*.)

## MESSIER OBJECTS

Messier Objects are not messier like my room, or Pookie's that's even messier. Mr. Messier was a French guy who was looking for comets, but certain objects—the stars and galaxies and stuff—got in the way, so he made this list of *not* comets so he wouldn't get confused.

Did you know that if you find a comet you get to name it after yourself? That's what I'm going to do. Then I can live forever.

No, really. I have a Dobsonian Orion XT8 telescope. It's good enough to see the Dog Star (the best star in the whole universe), all the Messier Objects, *and* comets as long as you're not in the city, where there's too much light to see hardly anything.

That's how come I think it's awesome we're moving to Maine. No light pollution! I'll find a comet pretty fast. Then I'll have lots of time left over to show my family the magic of the universe. Once I figure out how to make them listen.