



# see You on a Starry Night

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# One

## NEW HOME

Casper, my old, white kitty, sat perched on my nightstand, studying me like I might unpack a can of tuna any second. Poor cat. No tuna here, just all of the moving boxes marked *Juliet*.

“I’m sorry, sweet boy, but you have to move.” I picked him up and kissed the top of his head before placing him on my green-and-purple striped quilt. I only had a couple of boxes left to unpack. I’d already made my bed, unpacked my books and put them in the bookcase, and filled the drawers of my dresser and desk. Now I reached into the box that held pictures and posters and pulled out a framed family photo taken at my eleventh birthday party last August.

As I put the photo down in its spot right next to my bed, I studied it and felt a pinch in my chest. Mom, Dad, my older sister, Miranda, and I all wore pointy red-and-blue hats and had party horns in our mouths. The picture captures a quick moment of a fun and busy day. Besides making

me feel pretty ridiculous, the hat's elastic strap had dug into my chin a little, so I hadn't worn it long. None of my friends had, either. Well, except my best friend, Inca. She wore it the entire time because she's nice like that. Pretty sure she didn't want to hurt my feelings, even though the hats weren't my idea in the first place. I'd only bought them because Dad had practically insisted on them and the horns when we went to the party store for invitations.

"Dad, no," I'd said when he took them off the rack. "I'm too old for those."

"Nonsense," he'd said. "A party isn't a party without them."

Mom had spoken up in my defense. "Bruce, if she doesn't want—"

He didn't let her finish. "What's the harm in getting them for people who want to wear them? It's a *party*. We should have hats and horns. End of story."

I'd glanced around, hoping no one was watching us. I hated when they argued in public. Hated it so much. But for once, I could put a quick end to it. "Okay, okay, let's just go."

When Mom showed me the photo, I couldn't believe how happy we all looked. I asked if I could have a copy framed.

Now I loved it even more, because not only had we been happy, we'd also been together. A family.

I'd have worn one of those silly red-and-blue hats every day if it meant we didn't have to move away from everything I'd ever loved. As if my parents' split wasn't bad enough, my

mom had to freak out and move us four hours from the town where we'd always lived, and right in the middle of the school year.

Moving meant I had to say so long to the house I'd grown up in, to the art studio that had become like a second home, and to my favorite librarian, Mr. Richie. He gave me a bookmark with his picture on it so I wouldn't forget him. At least that was one good-bye that made me laugh. Before I walked out of the school library for the last time, he told me, "Remember, Juliet, just like in books, everything usually works out in the end. And if it doesn't, that means you simply haven't reached the end yet."

So here we were, in the old red cottage with faded white shutters at Mission Beach in San Diego. My grandparents have owned the rental house for years. We'd stayed here once, on vacation when I was five or six. My grandma had wanted to do some renovations in between long-term renters, so we came for a week before they started the work. Never in a million years had I imagined *living* here. First of all, it's really small. Second of all, it's really far away from the place I've always known as home—Bakersfield. And third, living on the beach always seemed to me like something mostly old people do when they retire.

Not that I don't love the beach. I do. But living there year-round? I just wasn't sure if I wanted sand in my life, in my fingernails, and in my underwear 365 days a year.

"How long are we staying?" I'd asked my mom.

“Indefinitely,” she’d replied.

That is one word that will never make it onto one of my favorite word lists. It’s so useless. Why not just say *I don’t know*?

Anyway, the house. My old room was double the size of this new one, and even worse, all three of us would be sharing one teensy-tiny bathroom. At least I had the freezing-cold ocean nearby to bathe in if we ran out of time in the mornings and I didn’t get my turn, right?

I know what you’re thinking. Why in the world am I complaining about living at the beach? The thing is, we could have been moving into Cinderella’s castle at Disneyland and I still would have been sad. Okay, well, maybe not *too* sad. Dole Whips in my backyard? Yes, please! But you know what I’m saying. Moving away—from your neighborhood, your school, your friends, your father—is hard. Plus, our family wasn’t a whole family anymore. I’d heard adults use that term “from a broken home,” but I’d never really understood what it meant. Until now. When your parents break up, everything feels kind of . . . broken.

Mom and Dad decided Miranda and I would visit Dad once a month in Bakersfield, and spend part of summer and winter breaks with him, too. I just kept telling myself I’d see him, and hopefully my friends as well, every time we went back there.

Still, it was a lot of changes at once. In one week, at the end of spring break, I’d have to start at a new school in the

middle of the year when everyone but me knew how to find their classrooms and who to sit with in the cafeteria. All I'd have was a book with Mr. Richie's bookmark to keep me company. Maybe the art room or the library would be open at lunch. I could only hope.

If only Mom had been willing to wait until the end of the school year to move. But she'd insisted that we needed to do it now. When I'd asked her why, she'd just said, "Trust me, Juliet, it's for the best."

Best? But why? And for who?

After I unpacked my boxes and hung up my favorite poster, Vincent van Gogh's *The Starry Night*, I asked Mom if we could go down to the beach. She was busy putting dishes away in the kitchen cupboards.

"I can't go with you now, but maybe Miranda can."

"No!" my sister called from her room.

My sister loves me a whole lot, as you can tell.

"Can I go by myself?" I asked.

"I don't know, honey," Mom said.

"What's the point of living near the beach if I can't, you know, *go to the beach*?" I asked. "If all we wanted was to listen to the sound of waves, we should have bought one of those fancy sound machines."

"She has a point," Miranda called out.

Was that my sister, actually taking my side? What a miracle. I watched as Mom reached into a box of crumpled-up newspaper and pulled out a stack of plates.

“Oh, all right,” she said. “Just for a little while. Take my phone with you, just in case. If something happens, call Miranda immediately, all right?”

“You know, if I had my *own* phone . . .”

Mom gave me her “Don’t go there” look.

“It’s two o’clock on a Sunday,” I said. “The beach is going to be packed. What could possibly happen?”

She looked at me. “Honey, a lot of things can happen, unfortunately. Please don’t go in the water by yourself. And don’t talk to strangers. And—”

“Don’t get into creepy windowless vans?” I teased. “Mom, in case you’ve forgotten, I’m in sixth grade and I haven’t been abducted a single time.”

With a scowl she replied, “Don’t even joke about that. It’s not funny.”

I sighed. “Sorry. I’ll be fine. I promise.”

I picked up her phone from the counter, stuck it in the back pocket of my jeans, and headed toward the door. “The pass code is 123456,” she called out.

“Mom, are you serious?”

“I know. I’m not very creative. Hey, watch out for Casper, okay? He may try to sneak out with you.”

I looked around for him, but he was nowhere in sight. He was probably hiding under my bed, wondering how he’d ended up in this strange place. Well, that made two of us.



## Things I already miss about Bakersfield

1. *My dad and his ugly blue recliner that he'd never let Mom sell.*
2. *My best friend, Inca, and the way she makes me laugh like nobody else.*
3. *Going to see the peacocks at Hart Park practically anytime I wanted to. You know what you won't find at the beach? Peacocks.*
4. *Mr. Richie and the best school library in the world.*
5. *Meek Pickles at the Haggin Oaks Farmers Market. I mean, where else can you get pickled carrots? They're good, I swear!*
6. *The lines on the doorframe in our old kitchen that show how much Miranda and I have grown every year since we started walking. I saw them every morning as I got myself breakfast.*
7. *This list could be 77 items long if I wanted it to be. So I'll just end with—basically everything.*