

A Bucket of Stars

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Scholastic Canada Ltd.

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557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012, USA

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PO Box 579, Gosford, NSW 2250, Australia

Scholastic New Zealand Limited
Private Bag 94407, Botany, Manukau 2163, New Zealand

Scholastic Children's Books
1 London Bridge, London SE1 9BG, UK

www.scholastic.ca

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: A bucket of stars / Suri Rosen ; cover illustrations by Steven P. Hughes.

Names: Rosen, Suri, author.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20230217915 | Canadiana (ebook) 20230217923 | ISBN 9781443192798

(softcover) | ISBN 9781443192804 (EPUB)

Classification: LCC PS8635.O6495 B83 2023 | DDC jC813/.6—dc23

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T H R E E

TRUE FACT:

If you could nibble the centre of our galaxy, it would taste like raspberries.

You're probably wondering why Kyle and I communicate in this weirdo ancient language that hardly anyone can speak.

It all started two years ago, with the Zombie Invasion of 2001.

And in case you're worried, this story isn't going to suddenly turn into a full-fledged zombie apocalypse tale. The only victims of this particular zombie attack were my family members, and the lone person snatched was my father.

Before 2001, when he became undead, Dad was my best friend. Our family lived in central Alberta, and at least once a week, we'd head out to the wilderness to catch stars and comets — and if we were lucky, the northern lights. We would take his telescope and be

dazzled by the sky. That's the way it was for us; we were addicted to dazzle.

Once upon a time, Dad was studying to be an astronomer. But when Mom died, he dropped out of his doctoral program and launched a business selling science supplies to schools. It wasn't exactly his dream in life, but it was okay.

Only then his business went under, and Dad really lost his way. That's when the zombies came and took away my best friend.

He lost interest in astronomy. He lost interest in playing chess with Kyle. He lost interest in Kyle. And finally he lost interest in me too.

Dad suffered from constant headaches and couldn't tolerate any noise. So one evening, when Kyle and I were waging a perfectly entertaining pillow war, he marched us over to the local community centre and told us to sign up for courses two evenings a week.

The course offerings were a bit limited. Heartbroken that cake decorating and synchronized swimming were filled, Kyle and I settled on Living Latin.

It turned out to be a win for everybody. We embraced the language and spent hours translating pop songs, TV commercials, and jokes into Latin. Well, *bad* Latin. Like, *really bad* Latin — as in, we might have actually been saying some pretty strange and terrible things. But it didn't matter. Bad Latin became our secret language. We could share ideas that we didn't want anyone else to hear, even while we were standing right

in front of them. I mean, you could never assume that people around you don't understand Bad Latin. But there were plenty of times we took a chance. And lots of times it worked.

Like when you're discussing a bully right in front of him, or talking about the green-eyed girl who just gave you her Mars bar.

As we exited the store, I heard the cashier shout to her.

"You okay, Tara? Give Max Newman a hug for me."

Tara grinned. I'd just met her and I already hated Max Newman.

Kyle and I stood outside the store, guzzling our sodas while Tara unhitched the leash from the lamppost and patted her incredibly sad dog.

I must have been gaping or blushing or making some other horrifically revealing gesture because Kyle elbowed me in the ribs.

"*Dic aliquid,*" Kyle said as he shoved me toward Tara. Say something.

I swallowed, then stepped in front of her. "Hey," I bleated.

Smooth opening, no?

"So . . . is Mars your favourite chocolate bar?" I said, my cheeks on fire.

Tara studied me like I was a complete freak.

"*Defectus sum,*" I muttered to Kyle. Yep. I felt like a loser.

Kyle grinned. "*Scio*," he said, patting me on the back. I know.

Tara raised a package of Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. "I'm not fussy."

"I like those too!"

"That's . . . good to know. I guess?"

"*Quae me odit*," I muttered to Kyle. She hates me.

"*Probabilite*." Kyle said thoughtfully.

"What is that language?" she asked.

"Latin," I said.

"*Bad Latin*," Kyle corrected. Despite our terrible translations, we still understood each other. It's like we shared a secret dialect of a secret language.

She shook her head. "Why?"

"Because we didn't want to do ballet," I blurted out. She studied me again. I was a study in weirdo.

"Well, I guess that's why they all spoke Latin in ancient Rome," Tara said with a shrug.

"Exactly," Kyle said with a grin. "When was the last time you saw a Roman in a tutu?"

"Seriously, why do you speak it?" she asked again.

"We had to take a course at the community centre in the place we used to live out west, and nothing else was available," I said.

"Well, it's not much better here," she said, pointing to a stack of flyers wedged in a newspaper box.

I glanced down. Apparently, the community centre in neighbouring Unionside was still looking for instructors for the fall courses. A thought popped into

my head, and I grabbed a flyer and shoved it in my pocket for later.

“Well, nice meeting you,” Kyle said to Tara. “Noah, we have to go.”

I didn’t want to go. But it was time.

We said goodbye, grabbed our bikes, and strode off in the direction of the two dudes in ripped jeans and sour faces. What *was* it about this place? Queensport seemed to have an endless supply of both indoor and outdoor goons.

Kyle paused, his eyes landing on a skateboard wedged against the curb. “Hey,” he said to the dude with the tuque.

That’s when I knew that Kyle was a goner. He came in two speeds: skateboarding and chess. And ever since Dad had abandoned their games, Kyle had ditched chess and gone full-on skateboard.

“I’ll come home later,” he said to me.

“*Seriously?* It’s ten o’clock. What’ll I tell Dad if he asks where you are?”

Kyle snorted.

“Yeah, you’re right,” I said, then dropped my voice to a whisper. “But I don’t think he’d appreciate you hanging out with these guys.”

Kyle’s lips curled into a smile. “Well, now I’m sold. I’ll see you later.”

I climbed on my bike and cycled home under a canopy of stars, sailing past cornfields and fruit orchards, the air heavy with the scent of ripening apples.

The light pollution in Queensport wasn't actually so bad, and the sky was decently black. Have I mentioned how much I love the dark?

I'd be an awesome vampire.

Ten minutes later, I arrived home. We'd moved to Queensport so we could live rent-free in Dad's childhood home, a time capsule from the 1950s. I tiptoed through the front hall and into the small kitchen, shuddering at the sight of a pot lined with congealed macaroni and cheese next to a stack of dirty plates.

"Noah, come in here."

I froze. Dad didn't really do anger — that took too much effort — but I'd gotten so used to the Classic Zombie Voice that this new Irate Zombie was unnerving.

I stepped into the living room.

Sitting on the worn couch, across from my father, was a police officer.

"Noah Cooper?" the policeman said. "I've been looking for you."