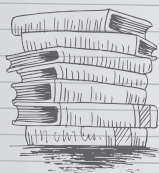


stars swirling around my head—my best friend, Ellison, chose this moment to dramatically quote literature. Lately, he was into Greek mythology. “Why could not I by that strong arm be slain, and lie by noble Hector on the plain?”

But the sound that ended our snow day home from school and echoed down the streets of Pine, Maple, Oak, and Cherry was the villainous guffaw of my arch nemesis and snowball attacker, Buzz Rublatz.

ELLISON'S BOOKMARK

The epic poem The Aeneid by Virgil tells the tales of the fearsome warrior Aeneas.



Hector was his cousin and a great Trojan warrior who was slain during the siege of the city of Troy.

I blinked. Or tried to. The cold air coated the teary eye that wasn't swelling shut.

Ellison's face hovered over me. His brown eyes stared through his thick, black-rimmed glasses. “Are you alive?”

“Uhhh, buhhh, ehrrrrrr . . .” was all I could mumble. My eye socket throbbed.

“But it’s the most important part, Daddy!” Midge protested, galloping to the door and stepping into her snow boots. “Donkey loses his way home, so he follows the Bright Star in the night sky. That’s when he finds baby Jesus lying in the manger.”

Midge happened to be starring as the Bright Star. And she wasn’t happy about it. “A real star does *not* have five points,” she’d complained when Mom was making her costume out of yellow foam board. “A star is a burning ball of gas.”

Midge had a point. Five, actually. But I suspected she secretly wanted to be the Christmas Donkey instead.

MIDGE’S PHENOMENAL FACTS

Stars, like our sun, are made up mostly of a gas called hydrogen. Because of pressure in the core of the star, some of the hydrogen turns to helium. All the energy that produces causes the star to shine. Stars, like kids, come in different shapes, sizes, and colors. This may sound strange, but blue stars are hotter; red stars are cooler.¹



I scanned the clear, dark sky and quickly connected the bright dots that curved toward the horizon.

“Now follow the handle to—there!—that bright, orange-red star,” she said. “That’s it!”

MIDGE’S PHENOMENAL FACTS

There’s a little saying to help stargazers remember how to find this star in the Northern Hemisphere: “Follow the arc to Arcturus.” Locate the Big Dipper in the night sky. From the dipper, follow the curved handle to the last star. Then continue drawing an imaginary line until you see a bright, orange star. You’ve found Arcturus!⁹



“I see it,” Buzz bragged. “What’s the big deal, anyway?”

“The big deal, Mr. Rublatz, is that the star is a Red Giant,” Midge said. “The brightest star in the northern sky and twenty-five times as big as the sun.”¹⁰

“Whatever.” Buzz turned, bumped his shoulder against me, and went back to bed.

“You know you can ask us just about anything, honey,” Mom said, sticking Midge’s spoon back in the bowl.

“Do you know how the fire started?” I figured Dad would have heard something since he sometimes works for the village building inspector, Mr. Cook.

Dad and Mom stopped mid-spoonful of healthy granola and gave each other a look. Look Number 2,831 that says: *We’re adults, of course we know something.* They then aimed Look Number 2,831B at me: *And what do you know?*

“If Buzz lived on Mars, his house wouldn’t have burned,” Midge interrupted. “There’s not enough oxygen for a fire to burn.”

I sighed. “Or for Buzz to breathe in the first place.”

“Now who’s the scientist?” Midge asked, scooping dry cereal into her mouth.

MIDGE’S PHENOMENAL FACTS

Mars is called the “red planet” because the rocks and soil contain so much iron oxide (a.k.a. rust!). Mars may be red, but that doesn’t mean it’s warm. It’s a lot colder than Earth since it’s farther from the sun. That also means it takes longer to orbit the sun. Kids on Mars would have to wait 687 (Earth) days until their next birthday!¹²



Standing next to her, Mrs. Henry stuck a finger in each ear.

“Act 2! Wise Men, on stage, please!” Miss Woodruff ordered.

“Thank you, Miss Woodruff,” Mrs. Henry said. She took her fingers out of her ears and gently pushed the megaphone down and away from the teacher’s face.

One of the seventh graders stepped up to the mic and began to read the story of the Wise Men—or Magi, which sounds cooler. “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem to worship Him.”¹³

ROGER'S RIVETING HISTORY

The Magi had likely traveled over eight hundred miles from a land called Persia (today known as Iran). These “wise men” probably would have known the prophecy about the birth of the Messiah. They’d have read the writings of Daniel, who had once been a high-ranking official in Persia. They might have also known about a prophecy that said a “star” would “come out of Jacob” (Numbers 24:17).



Then came the scene when evil King Herod sends the Wise Men to Bethlehem to find the Christ child. He lies and tells them he wants to worship Jesus too.

The small group of Magi walked across the stage with their camel as the narrator read: *“Then they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.”*¹⁵

ROGER'S RIVETING HISTORY

Most manger scenes show three Wise Men, or Magi, coming to visit baby Jesus in the manger or stable. But the Magi probably didn't see Jesus and His parents until days, or even years, after He was born. In Matthew 2:11, we read that the Wise Men came to a house to worship Jesus.¹⁶



Sonic pointed up toward the pastor's pulpit.

Midge appeared in the pulpit where Mini-Fridge had acted out the angel's words. Well, her head appeared anyway. She was barely tall enough to reach the microphone, even though it was curved down as far as it could go.

cherries on top. But the plastic dishes decorated with Christmas trees on Ruthie's table were filled with miniature cheesecakes, gingerbread, and spiraled slices of poppy seed roll.

RUTHIE'S RECIPES

The little, black poppy seed is a popular ingredient in traditional Polish dishes, especially around Christmas because it symbolizes happiness and prosperity in the new year. These seeds, which come from the poppy flower, taste nutty. They are so tiny that it takes one million seeds to make a pound!¹⁷



Her grandma set mugs of what smelled like raspberry tea in front of each of us. I breathed in the fruity steam, dropped in six cubes of sugar from the crystal sugar bowl, and then blew across the top to cool it.

"Thank you, Babcia,"¹⁸ Ruthie told her grandmother. She reached for another cheesecake over the head of Captain Beans. The cat was dressed in one of the costumes she'd sewn for her—a green felt Christmas tree with a yellow star hat.

“So, what’s the 10-35?” asked Roger, wrapping up a slice of gingerbread in a piece of waxed paper Babcia had handed him. “What’s the confidential information?”

“I haven’t told a soul, but I think Buzz may have started the fire.” I said it as plainly as “please pass me another pierogi.”

RUTHIE’S RECIPES

A pierogi (pronounced puh-ROH-gee) is a kind of dumpling filled with delicious things like mashed potatoes and cheese or meat or vegetables. The word is actually the plural form of the Polish word for dumpling. So if Jack had really asked for another pierogi, Ruthie might have passed two!



Roger stopped mid-fold. Ruthie said something in Polish. And Midge kind of glared at me for some reason. Ellison quoted literature, which he tends to do during tense situations. “And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.”¹⁹

Mom blinked at me as if she might be dreaming, but said, “That’s a nice idea, Jack. I’ll call Mrs. Rublatz.”

As soon as we all got home from our school Christmas parties, I called an emergency Tree Street Kids meeting at my house and told each person to bring something they could wrap up and give to Buzz at my grandparents’ after the play. I also asked Ruthie to bring supplies for a new costume I had planned for Midge. Mom had already done her best to clean the muddy snow splotches out of the other one.

An hour later, we were all sitting on the living room floor ready to execute my last mega plan of 1995—Operation Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh.

ROGER’S RIVETING HISTORY

The Bible tells us in Matthew 2:11 that the Magi brought Jesus valuable gifts, including gold (precious metal), frankincense (for perfume or incense), and myrrh (for anointing oil). There are various theories about why these specific gifts were given to Jesus, but they were common gifts to give to kings in the ancient world.²³



It was Midge, cheering me on. And nearly the whole church heard her.

Chuckles carried across the invisible audience.

“And fun fact,” she whispered too loudly again, “they need their friends around them.”

MIDGE'S PHENOMENAL FACTS

Just like kids, donkeys like to have friends!
If there aren't other donkeys around, they
will bond with animals such as horses or
mules. They can even become ill if they're
separated from their friends, so
it's important for them to have
companions if they travel away
from home.²⁴



A *hee-haw* burst out of me, and everyone laughed harder.

“I’m Hee-Haw the Donkey, and I’ve lost my people. I’ve lost my home . . .”

After I finished my scene and walked to the side of the stage to graze, the angel Gabriel and Mary, Jesus’ mother, walked on stage.

She switched on the string of lights attached to her costume, and Arcturus, the Red Giant, glowed yellow and orange above us.

The entire audience oohed and aahed.

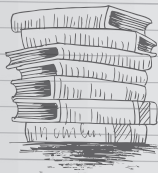
We carefully shuffled sideways to lead the Wise Men to the place where Joseph and Mary sat with the preschooler playing the Jesus child.

Then Midge cried out, “O Jesus, my Companion, my Guide upon the way, morning star to evening star—what wondrous love is this! God so loved the world that the Creator of it all came to be with us. Then, and now, and forever. Thank you. Amen . . .”²⁸

And all together all of us kids shouted, “Alleluia!”

ELLISON'S BOOKMARK

Midge's quote is from a book by Madeleine L'Engle, author of *A Wrinkle in Time*. In *Bright Evening Star*, she writes the true story about her faith as a young child and how she grew to know Jesus and love Him more and more as she grew too.



NOTES

1. “Star,” Britannica Kids, <https://kids.britannica.com/kids/article/star/353808>.
2. This saying is a reference to Hebrews 13:2: “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.”
3. Grandpa Ernie is quoting part of Psalm 145:9: “The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.”
4. Luke 2:10–12.
5. Luke 2:15.
6. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, philosopher, botanist, composer, quoted in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, last edited April 21, 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rousseau/>.
7. Albert Schweitzer, quoted in *Nobel Lectures, Peace 1951–1970*, ed. Frederick W. Haberman (Elsevier Publishing Company, 1972), posted in The Nobel Prize, “Albert Schweitzer Biographical,” <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1952/schweitzer/biographical>.
8. Deborah Byrd, “Arcturus, the Brightest Star of the Northern Sky,” EarthSky.org, May 9, 2024. “You might notice sparkling orange Arcturus passing high overhead on late spring evenings. In summer, it is high in the sky shortly after dark.

- Autumn observers need to look early because it sets by mid-evening. In winter, the best time to observe it is in the wee hours before dawn,” <https://earthsky.org/brightest-stars/bright-orange-arcturus-use-the-big-dipper-to-find-it>.
9. Joe Rao, “Arc to Arcturus, Speed on to Spica,” Space.com, June 15, 2007, <https://www.space.com/3953-arc-arcturus-speed-spica.html>; and Valerie Stimac, “7 Facts About Arcturus, the Red Giant Star,” November 30, 2023, <https://science.howstuffworks.com/arcturus.htm>.
 10. Byrd, “Arcturus, the Brightest Star of the Northern Sky.”
 11. Colossians 3:12.
 12. “Facts About Mars,” National Geographic Kids, <https://www.natgeokids.com/uk/discover/science/space/facts-about-mars/>.
 13. Paraphrase of Luke 2:15.
 14. Matthew 2:2.
 15. Matthew 2:9.
 16. “What Does the Bible Say About the Three Wise Men (Magi)?,” GotQuestions.org, <https://www.gotquestions.org/three-wise-men.html>.
 17. “Poppy Seed (Makowiec), Flavor of Poland,” <https://www.flavorofpoland.com/desserts/poppy#>.
 18. Pronounced BOB-cha.
 19. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince* (Pan Macmillin, 2016), 68.
 20. “The Little Prince Characters and Analysis,” AresearchGuide.com, <https://www.aresearchguide.com/the-little-prince-characters-analysis.html>.
 21. “The Little Prince, Chapters 21–23,” Spark Notes, <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/littleprince/section7/>.

22. C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, The Chronicles of Narnia, illustrated edition (HarperCollins, 2004), 747.
23. Biblical Archeology Society Staff, “Why Did the Magi Bring Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh?,” Biblical Archeology Society, November 30, 2024, <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/jesus-historical-jesus/why-did-the-magi-bring-gold-frankincense-and-myrrh/>.
24. “Donkey Facts,” The Donkey Sanctuary, May 13, 202, <https://www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk/articles/donkey-facts#>.
25. Luke 1:28–32.
26. Luke 1:46–48.
27. Matthew 2:9.
28. Madeleine L’Engle, *Bright Evening Star: Mystery of the Incarnation* (WaterBrook, 1997), 191.
29. Written and composed by John Henry Hopkins Jr. in 1857; published in his *Carols, Hymns, and Songs* in 1863. *BBC Music Magazine*, “Who Composed and Wrote ‘We Three Kings’?,” December 15, 2021, <https://www.classical-music.com/articles/we-three-kings-lyrics>.