

Chapter 1: Afternoon Class

"Class, this is called a river, a river that flows with milk. Do you know what this cloudy whiteness is?" asked the teacher pointing at a section that resembled a galactic belt, a blurry whiteness from the top to the bottom in the large, black star chart dangling from the blackboard.

Campanella raised his hand. Soon four or five more hands shot up. Giovanni was about to raise his but stopped. He was sure those were the stars he had read about in a magazine. But Giovanni had been drowsy in class every day. He had no time to read the book and no book to read. He didn't feel he understood much.

But the teacher was quick and caught him.

"Giovanni, you know what this is. Don't you?"

Giovanni hopped up, but anyone who saw him standing there knew he couldn't answer. Zanelli, who sat in front of him, couldn't suppress his laughter when he turned to look. The flustered Giovanni blushed a bright red. Again, the teacher asked, "If you observed a galaxy through a large telescope, what would you mainly see?"

Stars, of course, thought Giovanni, but couldn't bring himself to answer this question right away.

The teacher soon became frustrated and looked at Campanella and called on him.

"Campanella?"

Campanella eagerly raised his hand but hesitantly stood up, and, in the end, couldn't answer.

Surprised, the teacher stared at Campanella for a moment and then pointed at the star chart.

"All right. If you look at this dim white galaxy through a powerful telescope, you would see many small stars. Isn't that right, Giovanni?"

Giovanni flushed and nodded as his eyes filled with tears. He knew the answer, and Campanella knew, too. He read about galaxies in a magazine at Campanella's house; his father is a professor. When they finished reading the article, Campanella rushed to get a

large book from his father's study and opened the page about the Milky Way. They stared for a long time at the beautiful photograph of a jet-black page filled with white dots. Although Campanella had not forgotten, he did not answer right away. Giovanni had to work in the mornings and afternoons. He went to school but didn't play rowdily with the others and barely spoke to Campanella. Aware of his friend's situation, Campanella did not answer on purpose, out of kindness.

The teacher said, "Well, if you believe that this river in the sky is truly a river, each of these small stars is a cluster of sand or small pebbles in that river. And if you believe the river to be an immense flow of milk, then it would more closely resemble the Milky Way. That is, all of these stars are round, fine, floating balls of fat in milk.

"If that's the case, my next question is what are the waters of this river? The answer is a vacuum in which light travels at a particular speed, and where the Sun and the Earth float. We live in these waters of the Milky Way.

"Look in all directions from the waters of the Milky Way and you can see many stars gathered together in the deep places where the bottom of the Milky Way is far away. This is exactly like when deep water looks bluer. Here, it appears as a white blur. Now, let's take a look at this model."

The teacher pointed to a large two-sided convex lens containing many grains of twinkling sand inside.

"The Milky Way is formed like this. Each twinkling grain is believed to be a shining star just like our sun. The sun is nearly at the center, and the Earth is very close to it. At night, you are standing at this center and looking around inside this lens. There are few twinkling grains in this direction because the lens is thin. In other words, you'll see few stars.

"On the other hand, the glass is thick here and here, so you can see many twinkling grains, namely the stars. The distant ones look like dim white blurs. Well, this concludes today's discussion of the Milky Way. We're out of time. In the next science lesson, we'll discuss the size of this lens and the variety of stars inside.

"Tonight is the Milky Way festival, everyone should go outside and take a close look at the Milky Way. Now, please put away your books and notes."

The room filled with the sounds of desktops opening and closing, and books being

stacked. A short time later, everyone stood at attention, bowed to the teacher, and left the classroom.

Chapter 2: The Printer's Shop

Giovanni walked out the school gate to see seven or eight of his classmates gathered around Campanella. Instead of going home, he was at the cherry blossom tree in a corner of the school grounds. They seemed to be talking about making blue lamps out of gourds to bring to the star festival tonight and float down the river.

Giovanni gave them a big wave and walked out the school gate. Balls made from yew trees hung outside the houses in town. Lamps swung from cypress tree branches. These were some of the many decorations for the night's Milky Way festival.

Giovanni didn't go home but turned three corners to finally arrive at a large printer's shop. He took off his shoes and went in. He opened a large door at the end of a hallway. It was still daytime, but the lights were on inside. Amid the churning of many rotary printing presses, men wearing bandannas or light shades read and counted aloud as they worked and sounded like they were singing.

Giovanni bowed to the man seated at the third high table from the entrance. After searching the shelves for a short time, the man handed him a scrap of paper.

"Here, get these."

Giovanni picked up a small shallow box at the foot of the man's table, went over to the corner of a propped-up wall with many electric lights attached, crouched down, and began picking up one tiny type, about the size of a millet seed, after another with small tweezers. A man wearing a blue printer's bib passed behind Giovanni and said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Magnifying Glasses."

Without making a sound or looking at him, four or five people nearby laughed coldly.

Giovanni picked up the types one by one, often rubbing his eyes.

A little after six that evening, for the last time, Giovanni compared the sheet of paper he held in his hand with the letters he picked up and placed in the small box. He took the box to the man at the table. Without a word, the man took the box and gave a slight nod.

Giovanni bowed, then opened the door and went over to the register. Without a word, a man wearing white clothes handed him one small silver coin. Giovanni perked up and gave a smart bow.

He picked up his bag under the machine and dashed out to the street. Whistling lively, he made a beeline to the bakery. He bought a loaf of bread, a bag of sugar cubes, and raced out.

Chapter 3: Home

Giovanni was full of life when he returned home, a small house in a back street. Purple kale and asparagus were planted in an open box near the leftmost of three entrances. The sunshades were pulled down over two small windows.

"Mom, I'm home. Are you feeling better?" asked Giovanni, as he removed his shoes.

"Oh, Giovanni, hello. You're probably tired from work. It was cool today. I felt fine all day."

As Giovanni stepped up from the entryway, his mother was resting, covered with a white cloth. Giovanni opened the windows.

"Mom, I bought sugar cubes today. I'll put them in milk for you."

"You should drink some first. I don't want any yet."

"Mom, when did Sis come home?"

"Around three. She made all the food over there."

"No one delivered your milk, did they?"

"No, they didn't."

"I'll go and get it."

"You eat first while I rest. Sis can make anything from tomatoes. She put it over there."

"Then I'll have some."

Giovanni took a plate of tomatoes to a window and gobbled up the tomatoes with bread.

"Hey, Mom. I think Dad's coming home soon."

"So do I. But why do you think so?"

"Well, today's paper said that fishing up north was great this year."

"Yes, but your father probably isn't fishing."

"I'm sure he is. Dad wouldn't do anything bad and get thrown in jail. The giant crab shell and reindeer antlers he gave to the school are stored in the specimen room. The

sixth-grade teachers pass them around in class."

"The sea otter coat from your father came."

"Everyone will say I look nice in it, but they'll be making fun of me."

"They tease you?"

"Yes, but not Campanella. He doesn't say anything mean. Campanella feels bad for me when the others say those kinds of things."

"Campanella's father and your father were friends since they were little, just like you two."

"Oh, so that's why Dad took me to Campanella's house. We had fun that time. Sometimes on the way home from school, I stop by his house."

"He has a train powered by an alcohol lamp. We put the seven tracks together to make a circle. The set also has telegraph poles and signals. The train only passes through when the signal light is green. One time, the alcohol ran out, so we used oil, but the boiler got all sooty."

"Is that so?"

"I deliver their newspaper every morning. Now, it's always quiet at that house."

"Well, it's still early."

"They have a dog named Sauer. His tail is like a broom. When I leave, he comes with me sniffing all the way to the edge of town. Sometimes, he goes even further. Tonight, everybody's going to float gourd lamps on the river. I'm sure that dog will be there, too."

"Oh. The Milky Way festival's tonight."

"Yes, I'm going to have a look when I go get the milk."

"You may go but don't go in the river."

"Okay, I'll only watch from the river bank. I'll be back in an hour."

"Go and have fun. If you're with Campanella, I won't worry."

"Yes, we'll definitely go together. Mom, should I close the window?"

"Yes, please. It's a little chilly."

Giovanni closed the window. After he straightened up the dishes and the bread bag, he nearly jumped into his shoes and flew out the dark doorway.

"I'll be back in an hour and a half."

Chapter 4: Night of the Centaur Festival

Giovanni looked sad. His pouting mouth looked like he was whistling. He left town down a hill covered by the blackness of lines of cypress trees.

At the bottom of the hill, a large street lamp radiated a splendid bluish-white light. As Giovanni slowly approached the street lamp, his long dark shadow stretched behind him like a phantom slowly darkening to jet black. He raised his legs and waved his hands to look like they wrapped around to his side.

Giovanni took big steps past the bottom of the street lamp and imagined, I'm an awesome locomotive speeding down a hill. Now I'm rushing past the street lamp. My shadow is a compass. I'll go around there and end up in front.

His classmate Zanelli wearing a new shirt with a pointed collar popped out of a small dark alley on the other side of the street lamp and brushed passed him.

Giovanni asked, "Zanelli, are you going to float gourds on the river?"

Zanelli yelled back, "Giovanni, did you get that sea otter coat from your father?"

Giovanni, ears ringing like he was punched, yelled back, "What did you say, Zanelli?"

Unfortunately, he had already disappeared into the house with *himoki* plants across the street.

He wondered, Why does Zanelli say things like that to me when I haven't done anything to him? He always runs away like a rat, out of habit. He's just a jerk for saying things like that to me when I haven't done anything.

Giovanni walked down the street decorated with lamps and tree branches. Many thoughts raced through his head. The clock shop had bright neon lights. The red eyes of an owl made of stone spun around each second. Various jewels were set on a thick glass plate colored like the ocean and rotated slowly like stars, and a copper man and horse slowly inched around from the far side.

A black planisphere at the center was decorated with blue asparagus leaves. Giovanni was lost in thought as he gazed at this map of the constellations. It was a very

small copy of the map he had seen that day in school.

The plate is turned to match a particular date and time. The sky matching destined to emerge at that time appears to move in an ellipse. As expected, running vertically down the center, the Milky Way appears as a dim, fuzzy belt that looks as if faint explosions were billowing up from the bottom.

Behind it, a small telescope on a tripod stood in yellowish light. A large chart pinned to the back wall depicted the constellations in the sky in the shapes of a beast, a snake, a fish, and a jar.

Giovanni daydreamed about whether the scorpion, the hero, and all the others were really so close in the sky, and wanted to see how far he could walk among them. He suddenly remembered the milk for his mother and left the store.

The slight tightness around his coat's shoulders bothered him, but Giovanni stood tall and passed through town swinging his arms like he was on a mission.

Crisp, clear air flowed like water through the streets and into the stores. The street lamps were wrapped with decorative branches of fir and oak trees. Many small lights hung from the six sycamore trees in front of the electric company. It was the image of a mermaid city.

Children in their new creased kimonos delighted in playing the song *Hoshi Meguri, The Star Journey*, on their whistles, chanting "Centaurus, send us dewdrops" in a plea for life-giving water, and lighting up blue magnesia sparklers. Burdened by thoughts far from the spirited fun and games, Giovanni's head hung low in his rush to the milk dealer.

A little while later, Giovanni came to a part of town where poplar trees floated high in the starry sky. He entered the black gate of the dairy and stood in front of a dark kitchen surrounded by the weak aroma of cows. He removed his hat and said, "Good evening."

The house was quiet. No one seemed to be there.

Giovanni stood up straight and again said, "Good evening. Is anybody here?"

A few moments later, a sickly-looking old woman, slowly shuffled in and asked what he wanted.

Giovanni earnestly said, "Hello, no one delivered my milk today. Could I get it now?"

"No one is here who can help you. Come back tomorrow," she said while rubbing her reddened eyes.

Giovanni lowered his eyes.

"My mother is sick. So if it wouldn't be too much trouble, could I get it tonight?"

"Come back a little later, please," she said and walked away.

"Oh, okay. Thank you," said Giovanni, then he bowed and left the kitchen.

Giovanni turned the corner of an intersection in town and saw a jumble of black shadows and blurry white shirts of six or seven students in front of the general store across the bridge. They were coming toward him blowing whistles and laughing. Everyone was carrying a gourd lamp.

Those laughing voices and whistles sounded familiar. They were his classmates. Giovanni almost turned back automatically but changed his mind and walked toward them with a spring in his step.

Giovanni was about to ask if they were going to the river but after a little thought, choked up. Then he heard Zanelli shout, "Giovanni, you got your sea otter coat."

Everyone immediately joined in and also yelled, "Giovanni, you got your sea otter coat."

Giovanni turned bright red, tried to look like he didn't hear them, and quickly walked by. Campanella was in the group but said nothing. He laughed a little but looked miserable and glanced at Giovanni to see if he was mad.

Giovanni avoided his gaze. Soon Campanella's tall figure passed by and everyone was again blowing a simple song on their whistles.

At the corner, he turned around to look back and caught Zanelli looking back at him. Campanella was blowing a loud whistle and walking toward the dim, distant bridge. Words could not describe Giovanni sorrow and loneliness.

He sprinted off. Small children were skipping on one leg, giggling, and covering their ears with their hands. They thought Giovanni was funny and squealed with joy.

Giovanni dashed off and came to a black hill in no time.