

Beyond Us



A faint smudge between the Big Dipper and the horizon looked promising. “Is that it?” I asked my husband, Dave, hoping I had spotted the comet, Neowise.

“Yes. Yes, I think it is!” said Dave as he handed me the binoculars. Inwardly, I always sigh at this helpful offering as binoculars present their own challenge: the adjusting of the plastic flipper focus in the middle; the bending of the bulbous tubes that house the lenses; the scanning high, low, and side wise to locate whatever tiny object I am trying to see.

It was late, 11:30 p.m, and Dave had read in the Boston Globe, our Sunday paper, that optimal Neowise-viewing was between 10 p.m. and 1 a.m, so we thought we’d planned well. At home, we had tried to locate the comet’s position using our house’s relation to the Merritt Parkway North, the route of Black Rock Turnpike’s near-stretch to the coast, and the compass on Dave’s phone. The canopy of an ancient silver maple blocked the Northwestern sky, the comet’s reported path, so we’d driven up to Samuel Staples Elementary School to take advantage of the open skies above the playing fields.

One other car was in the parking area, a mom and her children. Given the darkness, I couldn’t see them well, but loved the thought of their memory of a summer night spent searching for a comet. As we gazed skyward, a youthful voice nearby observed, “Mom. I

think it looks more like a cereal bowl and a spoon than a dipper.” I smiled. He had a point, although I would’ve called it a saucepan myself.

Kids out at night after a hot day of camp, games, beach, or swimming! I can feel in my soul that remembered sense of freedom and adventure. Catching fireflies. Sneaking out to meet my friend Edie and spying on neighbors’ parties. Playing Kick-the-Can until darkness obscured even our white shirts and bases. Watching, incredulous, with my sisters and parents as Sputnik, the Russian satellite, a speck of light, flew among the stars. It has been a long time since I felt that elation... but something close was swelling within me as I stared upward.

“We’ve come every night this week,” the mom remarked, “and this is really too late. 9:45 is the best time. When we saw the comet last night, you couldn’t miss it. It was that clear.”

Could Boston time for viewing be that different? Maybe so. “OK!” we said. “We’ll try earlier.”

Two nights later, we arrived at Staples at 9:30 p.m. to join a cluster of cheerful comet hunters. Some had thought to bring folding chairs; others stretched out on the hoods of cars. We climbed from our seats and scanned the sky. “There it is!” Neowise! No doubt this time. And I tried to imagine the light, the spray of gases, the rush of sound, close up as this phenomenon sped through space.

Throughout written history, comets have been seen as omens. Certainly, we are living through a time pivotal to human well-being and the future of the planet. What might this comet portend? And when it returns in 6,800 years, as its orbital period projects, what will be the status of our planet and its creatures?

On this night on Earth, in the elementary school’s parking lot, the mood was neighborly. Conversations ranged from the cosmos to Easton’s 175th anniversary, to children’s

science projects at school. One heard occasional exclamations as Neowise shared the spotlight with other celestial wonders. "Look! A shooting star," "A satellite!" "That's Cassiopeia," and, "The other night I saw the space station!"

Binoculars were shared, and one gracious gentleman, his voice muffled through his mask, offered views of Saturn and Jupiter through his telescope. "Can you see them?" he asked.

My God! I could! I saw Jupiter's bands and Saturn's rings! I saw tiny moons, which the man named, and I quickly forgot. But oh, what a thrill to turn my eyes and thoughts upward, far beyond man's reach. No one spoke of Covid. No one mentioned politics. For the moment, I put down the personal sorrows of recent months. It was a summer's night, and a warm breeze lifted my hair. Around me, as they have for eons, my fellow humans gathered to marvel, in awe, at the heavens.