

Outliers – Stories from the edge of history

Season Two, Episode Seven

Pinpricks of Light

By Eli Barraza

Caroline:

Late morning light persisted through a crack in the curtains as I sat down at my desk, rubbing away a poor night's sleep from my eyes. The evening sweep had held little of interest though perhaps it had been the cold seeping into my bones that froze my typical delight at the heavens.

No matter. The post had arrived, papers pressed with wax that my weary fingers carefully broke open. I pored over the letters, yawning.

Miss Caroline Herschel,

I hope this letter finds you in the most flawless of health. I've taken to looking over your extraordinary work, I was particularly drawn to your breath-taking discovery of--

Flattery. Hm. Not in the mood.

Dear Miss Herschel,-

I wanted to inquire if I may visit yourself and Sir William regarding some questions of mine surrounding the Georgian



satellites. Unfortunately, my inquiries to your brother have gone unanswered and my--

Entitlement. Also another one for later.

Caroline,

James and I must thank you again for your stay with us. Your patience in showing us the splendor of the night sky gave us but a taste of what it must be like to conduct your work on the-

Gratitude. Heat rose in my cheeks. The lady and her husband were lovely people but they did try my patience, the same patience that she spoke so highly of. So many tedious questions with answers I had to repeat time and again for either she or her husband had been distracted. Coupled with my headache during the evening, the whole experience was less than ideal.

I leaned back in my chair, body still sore from sitting the long hours in the cold. I was tired and hadn't eaten yet. I shouldn't condemn the curious couple because of my own foul mood. I set it aside to read again later, perhaps once I'd manage to make my way to a late breakfast.

The fourth letter gave me pause. It held the royal seal and I was surprised I hadn't noticed it immediately. I truly am tired. Letters from King George and Queen Charlotte weren't uncommon given my brother's work as his majesty's private astronomer, but I wasn't used to seeing these letters addressed to me, his assistant. I opened it.



An invitation to dinner with the Queen at Kew Palace. A kind and curious woman, I rather liked her. I responded straight away, my fatigue be damned.

With the day wearing on, I poured back over the earlier letters and dutifully set to answering each one. A small smile played on my lips despite my annoyance for the task. I had hardly expected to reach such a position while growing up under the strict guidance of my mother. She thought marriage unlikely for a girl whose growth was stunted by typhus and thus relegated me solely to household chores. I wondered if these men of science had any idea they were writing to a woman who had once been destined for a far humbler lot in life.

Sir,-

You do me much kindness in your words and if I may ever be of service despite my own status as one still in training...

Sir,-

It is my utmost pleasure to furnish you with the papers you requested. Please find them along with this letter and as ever, know that the society is at your disposal should my papers lack the level of clarity and detail you're accustomed to. I only hope that....

Managing the delicate pride of certain men who deigned write to me about my work wasn't necessarily difficult but it did waste a lot of time that could be spent corresponding with those who didn't need such level of care. Oh, for all such men



to be like Dr. Maskelyne and Sir Joseph Banks! All the same, it did bring some small satisfaction that so many minds had taken an interest in my work in addition to my brother's.

Amidst the hustle and bustle of the day, I set about making preparations for dinner with the Queen at Kew. I arranged for a carriage and accommodations for I had no desire to go there and back again so quickly. It wasn't ideal to steal nights away from assisting William as well as my own sweeps of the skies but there was nothing that could be done about it.

The typical parade of visitors came calling, pressing with questions so that it became difficult for me to get my own work done. I had hoped that my small stature would allow me to pass the hallways undetected but there was always some booming voice calling out to me, demanding me to explain some matter of the heavens or inquire as to where dear William was. I was grateful that he was away as it shut down these earnest men quickly and I could be on my way.

Eventually, the sun sank on the horizon, bringing a crisp twilight. While the activity in so many other homes quieted around this hour, ours tended to buzz when William was around. His frenetic energy reached a crescendo when he was at his work studying the sky. Given the earth's rotation, his telescope often needed adjustment to track whatever he'd set his sights on in the heavens. Its great size meant I or any men around would carefully move it while William shouted for us to hurry. I was also all too often running back and forth to check the catalogues or get tea as he called down from his perch.

Without him, things were much quieter and the promise of a solitary night called me to a nearby hilltop.



My little Newtonian sweeper was not nearly as large as William's telescopes that I worked on but it had served me well, helping me find nebulas and comets previously unrecorded. I couldn't help but be fond of our partnership in scanning the skies. It was painstaking work, requiring a sharp eye and a penchant for precision. I may not be the most impressive student of science but I am certainly diligent.

A yawn escaped my lips. By no means the first of the night but still, a short break was in order. I leaned back, looking at the sky with my naked eye. For a moment, I pretended I knew nothing of the stars and planets, seeing only the perfect pinpricks of light high above me. A peace sank into me as I sat, bundled up in shawls and blankets against the chill. This moment was my own, mine and the heavens.

I tried to carry that peace with me over the following days. I do not have the strongest of constitutions, and tire easily despite what my late night hours of work may imply otherwise. Travelling sets me on edge as it disrupts my usual routine and makes me feel frivolous, even when traveling with a purpose. Still, this time, I'd be able to call on some of the Royal Astronomical Society members during my visit and a few of them would be at dinner with Queen Charlotte. I kept reminding myself of that during the arduous carriage ride, holding onto my shred of good humour.

Time passed quickly, and I was uncommonly grateful for it. I arrived at Kew Palace, glad to see it standing amidst the greenery. While it was grander than my own home, it was far more modest and intimate than the other royal residences. An aspect that rather endeared it to me. It didn't seem to want to



intimidate visitors but rather invite them inside to warm themselves by the fire on a cold day.

I was relieved that the first people I saw were Sir William and Lady Watson. They tend to match my sensibilities and when travel weary, I find it difficult to muster the fanfare that others usually require. Sir William was straightforward and discerning, as was his wife, so we got on well. I asked if he knew why my brother hadn't been invited and he confessed he was somewhat surprised to see me by myself.

We chatted briefly until Queen Charlotte arrived. She carried much the same composure as her dear home. Once formalities were done, she put her guests at ease with a kindly charm. Her questions of the Royal Society members were insightful and she constantly brought me into the conversation. Sir William Watson was there as promised along with Sir Joseph Banks, Dr. Maskelyne, and various other society members and ladies. Dr. Maskelyne was wrapping up regaling the table with his exploits on the mountain Schiehallion - a tale I had already heard several times before and I suspected the rest of the table had as well - when the Queen interrupted with a question for my own person.

“Do you expect to find another comet soon, Miss Herschel?”

Her tone suggested this was intended as an aside to me but nevertheless, Dr. Maskelyne quieted and cleared his throat. One of the ladies arched an eyebrow at him and he shrugged, good-naturedly.

“If the sky wills it, perhaps. There are also a great many astronomers who may snap them up before I do.”



“Well, I hope you get there first” said the Queen. She smiled at me.

I thanked her and the dinner moved on, few of those attending in the mood to dwell too long on any one subject. I suppose many of these scholars saved their focus for their work and let their mind jump from subject to subject when in such company. It was much the same at home when William took his visitors.

After dinner, we women all stood and filed out to continue chatting in another room. As we made our way, I walked past two of the younger society men. I didn’t care for their hushed tones as they bent their heads together while walking.

“Miss Herschel is much like her comets.” said one to the other.

“Incredibly small and not much to look at?”

I looked down and pretended not to hear them.

“And yet she’s captured your attention just like any other heavenly body.” One of the ladies walking beside me interjected. Both of them turned back, startled. Fortunately, I kept my face composed as did the lady, never breaking stride. Once we passed them, a sly turn of my mouth escaped and I marveled at this woman.

I was fortunate to rarely experience such comments in person but I was aware that my accomplishments in the field weren’t met with enthusiasm in every corner of the scientific



community. I typically ignored them so it was thrilling to have a companion so ready to bite back.

The atmosphere was livelier than at dinner. Women standing or sitting, milling around, catching onto threads of conversation that most interested them. I looked about the room, trying to spot Lady Watson when the Queen motioned for me to sit beside her. I was delighted to take the seat as other women surrounded us, eager to ask questions about the sky. Many of them were familiar with astronomy, some of them being married to members of the Royal Society themselves. But rarely did they get to speak to a woman who had dedicated her life to it. I tried to defer attention to the accomplishments of my brother, as was my custom, but I soon found that I had no need to do so amongst these ladies.

However, I wasn't used to being the gravitational anchor for the orbits of such a significant group. I was pleasantly surprised to find I excelled at telling them tales of my life amongst the stars. Grinding lenses, running back and forth to check the catalogues, moving the telescope. I even briefly mentioned my foray into music to highlight how pleasantly bewildering it was to do such work in astronomy.

As I described my solitary nights on the hilltops around Slough, I noted the longing expression of the young woman who had defended me earlier. My words had painted quite a lovely picture and I was glad that she and the other ladies seemed to take to it.

The men rejoined us as I recounted the night I fell on one of the hooks that held William's telescope in place.



“Indeed my leg was stuck but I thought to myself, Caroline, you’ve already had a life in music and astronomy, why not add surgery to the list?”

Laughter caused the men to take note that I had ensnared the attention of most of the ladies in the room including the Queen. Many of them leaned over to listen. By that point, I was quite tired and feared what little energy I had left was about to run out, especially under the additional attention. Sir Joseph Banks leapt in at that point, sensing my troubles.

“Isn’t she marvellous? I’ve always found myself stunned speechless whenever she entertains us with stories of her many exploits. Miss Herschel, I must beg your pardon for though I adore your brother dearly, I’m even more impressed by your own contributions to our little society.”

His words caught me off guard and my eyes couldn’t help but glance at the faces of the two men from earlier. They both smirked.

“Sir Joseph, you’ve cast me in a most flattering light that doesn’t quite suit me.”

“But it does Miss Herschel.” This time it was Queen Charlotte who spoke, filling the silence. “We can expect a man such as William to make extraordinary discoveries but for you to not only serve as his assistant but to also make discoveries of your own? You and your comets are truly remarkable.”

I believe I stuttered out a thanks in response. My mind fluttered. I had only begun to tell stories because the ladies seemed



intrigued but now these people had cornered me, singing my praises. I merely looked through some lenses and wrote things down!

The room was too stuffy. I wanted to be on my hilltop, cold biting at my nose. Alone with my telescope and my heavenly objects.

Voices brought me back to the present. Sir William smiling at me in congratulations as the ladies buzzed among themselves in response to the Queen's words. The two men had lost their smirks.

Queen Charlotte bent in close and said.

"I've spoken with the King. He agreed that it was absolutely necessary that you receive some financial reward, independent of your brother. From now on, you shall receive fifty pounds a year for your invaluable work."

She smiled at me and I smiled in return, nodding, expressing my thanks. At least I hope I did. I was shocked, to be sure. I had never even heard of a woman receiving a yearly pension from the crown for scientific studies. My heart swelled but the Queen wasn't finished.

"And thank you, for your comets. The ladies' comets. It's lovely to know we have something up there in the heavens too."

The rest of the evening was a parade of gratitude and congratulations that slowly transitioned into demonstrations



with the various telescopes people had brought and that the Queen provided. There were delighted gasps and laughter as the men and even myself showed everyone the hidden treasures of the night.

The cold wasn't as biting as on my usual hilltop back home and I was by no means alone, but I was happy. Happy to be with these people looking up at the heavens where those beautiful comets travelled. My beautiful comets.

