

Star Mother

That night her son was the first star.

She stood motionless in the garden, one hand pressed against her heart, watching him rise above the fields where he had played as a boy, where he had worked as a young man; and she wondered whether he was thinking of those fields now, whether he was thinking of her standing alone in the April night with her memories; whether he was thinking of the verandahed house behind her, with its empty rooms and silent halls, that once upon a time had been his birthplace.

Higher still and higher he rose in the southern sky, and then, when he had reached his zenith, he dropped swiftly down past the dark edge of the Earth and disappeared from sight. A boy grown up too soon, riding round and round the world on a celestial carousel, encased in an airtight metal capsule in an airtight metal chariot ...

Why don't they leave the stars alone? she thought. *Why don't they leave the stars to God?*

The general's second telegram came early the next morning: *Explorer XII doing splendidly. Expect to bring your son down sometime tomorrow.*

She went about her work as usual, collecting the eggs and allocating them in their cardboard boxes, then setting off in the station wagon on her Tuesday morning run. She had expected a deluge of questions from her customers. She was not disappointed. "Is Terry really way up there all alone, Martha?" "Aren't you *scared*, Martha?" "I do hope they can get him back down all right, Martha." She supposed it must have given them quite a turn to have their egg woman change into a star mother overnight.

She hadn't expected the TV interview, though, and she would have avoided it if it had been politely possible. But what could she do when the line of cars and trucks pulled into the drive and the technicians got out and started setting up their equipment in the backyard? What could she say when the suave young man came up to her and said, "We want you to know that we're all very proud of your boy up there, ma'am, and we hope you'll do us the honor of answering a few questions."

Most of the questions concerned Terry, as was fitting. From the way the suave young man asked them, though, she got the impression that he was trying to prove that her son was just like any other average American boy, and such just didn't happen to be the case. But whenever she opened her mouth to mention, say, how he used to study till all hours of the night, or how difficult it had been for him to make friends because of his shyness, or the fact that he had never gone out for football—whenever she started to mention any of these things, the suave young man was in great haste to interrupt her and to twist her words, by questioning, into a different meaning altogether, till Terry's behavior pattern seemed to coincide with the behavior pattern which the suave young man apparently considered the norm, but which, if followed, Martha was sure, would produce not young men bent on exploring space but young men bent on exploring trivia.

A few of the questions concerned herself: Was Terry her only child? ("Yes.") What had happened to her husband? ("He was killed in the Korean War.") What did she think of the new law granting star mothers top priority on any and all information relating to their sons? ("I think it's a fine law ... It's too bad they couldn't have shown similar humanity toward the war mothers of World War II.")

It was late in the afternoon by the time the TV crew got everything repacked into their cars and trucks and made their departure. Martha fixed herself a light supper, then donned an old suede jacket of Terry's and went out into the garden to wait for the sun to go down. According to the time table the general had outlined in his first telegram, Terry's first Tuesday night passage wasn't due to occur till 9:05. But it, seemed only right that she should be outside when the stars started to come out. Presently they did, and she watched them wink on, one by one, in the deepening darkness of the sky. She'd never been much of a one for the stars; most of her life she'd been much too busy on Earth to bother with things celestial. She could remember, when she was much younger and Bill was courting her, looking up at the moon sometimes; and once in a while, when a star fell, making a wish. But this was different. It was different because now she had a personal interest in the sky, a new affinity with its myriad inhabitants.

And how bright they became when you kept looking at them! They seemed to come alive, almost, pulsing brilliantly down out of the blackness of the night ... And they were different colors, too, she noticed with a start. Some of them were blue and some were red, others were yellow . . . green ... orange

It grew cold in the April garden, and she could see her breath. There was a strange crispness, a strange clarity about the night, that she had never known before ... She glanced at her watch, was astonished to see that the hands indicated two minutes after nine. Where had the time gone? Tremulously she faced the southern horizon ... and saw her Terry appear in his shining chariot, riding up the star-pebbled path of his orbit, a star in his own right, dropping swiftly now, down, down, and out of sight beyond the dark wheeling mass of the Earth . . . She took a deep, proud breath, realized that she was wildly waving her hand and let it fall slowly to her side. Make a wish! she thought, like a little girl, and she wished him pleasant dreams and a safe return and wrapped the wish in all her love and cast it starward.

Sometime tomorrow, the general's telegram had said—

That meant sometime today!

She rose with the sun and fed the chickens, fixed and ate her breakfast, collected the eggs and put them in their cardboard boxes, then started out on her Wednesday morning run. "My land, Martha, I don't see how you stand it with him way up there! Doesn't it get on your *nerves*?" ("Yes ... Yes, it does.") "Martha, when are they bringing him back down?" ("Today . . . *Today!*") "It must be wonderful being a star mother, Martha." ("Yes, it is—in a way.")

Wonderful ... and terrible.

If only he can last it out for a few more hours, she thought. If only they can bring him down safe and sound. Then the vigil will be over, and some other mother can take over the awesome responsibility of having a son become a star

If only ...

The general's third telegram arrived that afternoon: *Regret to inform you that meteorite impact on satellite hull severely damaged capsule-detachment mechanism, making ejection impossible. Will make every effort to find another means of accomplishing your son's return.*

Terry!—

See the little boy playing beneath the maple tree, moving his tiny cars up and down the tiny streets of his make-believe village; the little boy, his fuzz of hair gold in the sunlight, his cherub-cheeks pink in the summer wind

Terry!—

Up the lane the blue-denimed young man walks, swinging his thin tanned arms, his long legs making near-grownup strides over the sun-seared grass; the sky blue and bright behind him, the song of cicada rising and falling in the hazy September air

Terry . . .

—*probably won't get a chance to write you again before take-off, but don't worry, Ma. The Explorer XII is the greatest bird they ever built. Nothing short of a direct meteorite hit can hurt it, and the odds are a million to one ...*

Why don't they leave the stars alone? Why don't they leave the stars to God?

The afternoon shadows lengthened on the lawn, and the sun grew red and swollen over the western hills. Martha fixed supper, tried to eat, and couldn't. After awhile, when the light began to fade, she slipped into Terry's jacket and went outside.

Slowly the sky darkened and the stars began to appear. At length *her* star appeared, but its swift passage blurred before her eyes. Tires crunched on the gravel then, and headlights washed the darkness from the drive. A car door slammed.

Martha did not move. *Please God*, she thought, *let it be Terry*, even though she knew that it couldn't possibly be Terry. Footsteps sounded behind her, paused. Someone coughed softly. She turned then

"Good evening, ma'am."

She saw the circlet of stars on the gray epaulet; she saw the stern handsome face; she saw the dark

tired eyes. And she knew. Even before he spoke again, she knew

"The same meteorite that damaged the ejection mechanism, ma'am. It penetrated the capsule, too. We didn't find out till just a while ago—but there was nothing we could have done anyway ... Are you all right, ma'am?"

"Yes. I'm all right."

"I wanted to express my regrets personally. I know how you must feel."

"It's all right."

"We will, of course, make every effort to bring back his ... remains . . . so that he can have a fitting burial on Earth."

"No," she said.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am?"

She raised her eyes to the patch of sky where her son had passed in his shining metal sarcophagus. Sirius blossomed there, blue-white and beautiful. She raised her eyes still higher—and beheld the vast parterre of Orion with its central motif of vivid forget-me-nots, its far-flung blooms of Betelgeuse and Rigel, of Bellatrix and Saiph ... And higher yet—and there flamed the exquisite flower beds of Taurus and Gemini, there burgeoned the riotous wreath of the Crab; there lay the pulsing petals of the Pleiades ... And down the ecliptic garden path, wafted by a stellar breeze, drifted the ocher rose of Mars.

"No," she said again.

The general had raised his eyes, too; now, slowly, he lowered them. "I think I understand, ma'am. And I'm glad that's the way you want it . . . The stars *are* beautiful tonight, aren't they."

"More beautiful than they've ever been," she said.

After the general had gone, she looked up once more at the vast and variegated garden of the sky where her son lay buried, then she turned and walked slowly back to the memoried house.