

STAR'S NEW SON

In her prime, Star was stunning, her celestial body stretching five glorious tips across the cosmos. Gods and mortals alike would gaze upon her sparkling eyes, her stellar smile, and make an array of wishes: job promotions, summers to arrive, world peace, a hangnail to grow. But after dazzling the galaxy for eons by herself, Star felt lonely and wanted another bright, caring soul to raise a few galaxies with...and they would live happily ever after.

Star searched far and wide and met her match. His name: Sun. He was well rounded, bold. Beautiful, passionate.

In other words, he was a cheater.

“She means nothing to me!” Sun yelled, confirming the affair.

“What’s her name?” Star fired back. “Tell me now!”

“Her name is...Moon.”

“She’s not even a planet?” Star said. “How low of you!”

Sun set his gaze to the side and shrugged, admitting he had a thing for poets.

Still he begged and pleaded, so Star gave him a chance. Yet within the same light year, Star caught the pale poetess positioned directly atop Sun, her slim fingers squeezing his broad shoulders, eclipsing him into the night.

Heartbroken, Star bid Sun farewell and wandered into deep space alone. She skipped meals and slowly lost her shine.

Millenniums later, she has shriveled into a tiny mass and will soon disperse into motes of space dust. Sensing her final shred of light dissolving, her dim eyes close.

Instead of passing into eternity, Star plummets through dark clouds and crashes into a mound of cold sand. A wave breaks and she curls into a tight ball. Water submerges her lower half.

“No!” she screams, pounding the packed surface. “Not here!”

Another wave crashes and the tide slides in a fizzy rush. Star stands, stiff joints aching, and hops away on a single point.

“Of all the crummy places,” she complains.

Spitting granules off her tongue, Star treks down the shoreline. Freezing winds numb her body. In her feeble condition, the divots in the sand prove nearly impossible to traverse— to make matters worse, the salty breeze reminds Star of holidays with Sun, his flaming arms squeezing her tightly. She shivers uncontrollably as silver sparks shoot from her eyes. The dark ocean singses.

“Part, now!” she hears from above. The voice is familiar.

Clouds separate and Moon spotlights the pier. She dapples miles of ocean water, running her light toward Star. “*Star light, star bright,*” Moon taunts. “*First Star I see tonight, gets struck by my might!*”

Lightning strikes the choppy horizon.

“*When I’m done with you,*” Moon singsongs, “*you’ll be bloated on the ocean floor.*”

Where Sun cannot find you, never again no more. Your new friends the sea stars, will scream for your help. But they'll never be heard, beneath miles of long kelp."

The stockiest cloud chases Star. His electric bolts miss her and scorch patches of sand. She leaps inside a fire pit where charred wood fills the hearth. The floor is sooty, wet.

"Sta-a-a-r. Oh, Sta-a-a-r!" Moon thunders. *"Come out, come out, wherever you are."*

Shaking, Star presses her back against jagged stone, her eyes abuzz with electric glitter. The sky rumbles and wind chimes clank from a wild gust while she hides under a long box of bottle rockets. A flash of lightning reveals its words: *TNT, Pow!*

Star decides to make a run for the closest home. She counts five seconds between the thunder and lightning and hops out of the fire pit. In a cartwheel sprint, she zips through the moist air onto a wooden deck with soaked lounge chairs and a covered barbeque pit. In a final burst of energy, she leaps inside a window yet her lower points land on the bumper of a toy jeep and the plastic vehicle flips. On its descent, the front license plate—US*ARMY—targets her.

Star spins up the wall, reaching the ceiling, panting for breath. A foghorn sounds in the distance as her eyes adjust. She gazes down at a nightstand covered with filled vases and discerns the outline of a bed. A boy sits on it.

Star whispers, "He should be asleep."

"Hey, sister!" a new voice says.

Star can't believe who greets her—a cheap stick-on imitation of herself. The replica is grungy and paper-thin, missing one point. More counterfeits surround Star.

"You new?" the duplicate asks.

“Yes,” says Star. “No...I mean, I’m not one of you.”

“Denial is common when fresh out the package,” the fake Star announces, but she loses her grip and flutters to the carpet, destined to be sucked inside a vacuum of lost marbles and stale potato chips.

Before the boy looks up, the other wannabes scramble to their dusty outlines. Star freezes as his tired red eyes scan the ceiling. He wipes his wet cheeks and returns to his camera. Star can’t see the small screen but she sees him shaking his head. She watches the boy turn to the window. He rocks in place and emits a high pitch wail.

Star demands, “What’s wrong with him?”

Her replicas mumble ignorance.

He falls onto his side and tugs a Superman comforter over his head.

Star looks toward the door. “His parents? Where are they?”

No one replies.

“I said, ‘*Where are his parents?*’”

The eldest sticker—wan, wrinkly—hobbles forward. Her words drowned by the boy’s sobbing prompt Star to lean toward the withered lips. “The poor boy,” the old one mutters, “only has a—”

The door swings open and a man rushes inside, his bathrobe fanning out behind him like the superhero’s cape on the bed. The man’s dark hair, thinner than the boy’s, smells of cigars, a scent reminiscent to the fire pit. The man closes the window. “It’s like ice cubes in here,” he says, and sits on the bed. He reaches for the boy. “Darren, come out. Dad’s here.”

The son emerges with the camera. The dad's bulky size doubles his son's small frame. The screen glows their faces as they sit by side by side.

Star gazes at the picture and clamps the ceiling. Standing before an oak tree, a thin woman flexes what's left of her biceps while her slipping bandana reveals a clean scalp. Still, her long eyelids emphasize dark, hopeful eyes. Star wants to look away but can't pull her sights from the other family photos: the three wearing orange vests on a rafting trip, eating bacon-wrapped hotdogs at a skateboard competition, screaming aboard a spiraling rollercoaster.

"What's this one?" his dad questions. "Oh, yeah! I remember those frogs. From the reptile museum! What did she call them again?"

"The Fat Boogers."

"That's right," the dad says. *"Fat Booger One and Fat Booger Two."*

Darren snuffles and the man wipes his bathrobe on his wet nose. Star feels like she's spying but there's no escaping the room. When the camera shuts off, Darren lays his ear on his dad's stomach.

"I hear things," the boy says. "Sounds like a universe in there."

"Maybe there is."

"You think Mom can see us right now?"

"Bet she can."

"But how do you know? Like, really-really know?"

"Tell you the truth, I don't know how everything works, but I'll tell you this much. I can *feel* Mom's eyes on us."

“Me too.”

“That’s good.”

“But it makes me sad.”

“Me too.” The man sighs. “ Me too.”

Star chokes down the hard lump in her throat as the dad motions for his son to roll over.

He rubs his back.

“Remember this song?” the dad says, clearing his throat. “I used to sing it when you were a baby. ‘My Umi says, *Shine your light on the world. Shine your light, for the world to see...*’”

Star closes her eyes and, unable to leave, listens to the dad’s voice—deep, rhythmic.

She falls asleep.

Star awakens to a steady beep. Darren is reviewing more photos from his camera. Down the hall, she overhears his dad talking in hushed tones on the phone; the ashes will be spread at dusk from the mother’s favorite bench on the pier. Star decides to escape through the mail slot after they leave.

Darren places the camera down. He leans back, his fingers behind his head. “I miss you, momma. If you came back, I’d never get mad at you. Promise.”

Star’s chest squeezes and she averts her eyes. If she cries, her tears will singe Darren. Yet she can’t help but to gaze back down. Darren’s head is slumped between his raised knees and his body is quaking.

“Momma, I *need* you.”

Star's eyes burn. She squeezes her lids but there's no stopping the inevitable. She tries to excuse herself past her replicas but she can't move. As a last resort, Star dangles to cover her face but before she showers the entire room with her tears, the electric bits behind her eyes reverse direction. They spread internally and revitalize her inner-beam. Phosphorescence energy discharges through her veins, expanding her five points. Her chest thumps and for the first time in millenniums, Star realizes she has found love, a true love, but of a different type.

Darren squints. "What is that?" He stands on the bed with his tippy toes. Unable to reach Star, he bends his knees, preparing to jump.

Star shoots to a corner.

"Dad!" Darren yells.

"Hush now," Star says.

"You talk?"

Star listens for footsteps. Her voice drops. "Darren, shhh."

"You said my name!"

Star thinks of something to say. "Darren, your mom talks about you all the time."

"You know mom?"

"I sure do. She told me about these slimy frogs you once held at the reptile museum.

Booger One and—"

"—*Booger Two*," Darren says under his breath.

Star's axis has extended to the width of the boy's chest. Soon enough, her broadened mass will not fit inside the room. Nor the house. Nor the block.

“Darren, listen to me. My time is limited. First and foremost, you cannot touch my skin because it will burn yours. Second, I am your mother’s guardian.”

“Guardian?”

“Yes, her guardian. That means I protect her.”

“Protect her? Is she hurt?”

“No, no, she’s perfectly safe.” Star returns over the bed and lets go of the ceiling. She floats above Darren to the amazement of her replica. “She lives in space right above me and it’s my duty to catch her if she falls.”

“What if she slips right now?”

Star courses the ceiling’s perimeter and returns in an instant. Darren does a slow turn, following the trail of her afterglow.

“Now sit down because I need to tell you something. C’mon, quick. Chop chop.”

Star’s limbs continue to lengthen. Her pulsing light beads sweat across Darren’s forehead. He lies flat on his back mesmerized.

“Your mother misses you dearly,” Star says.

“I miss her, too.”

“Which is why I’m here.”

Her glimmering tips draw a neon map above Darren complete with Venus, the Big Dipper, and Orion’s belt.

“Anytime you want to talk to your Mom, look for me right here.” She circles an empty section of space. “Say whatever your heart pleases and I will relay the message. Wait a few

minutes then because when you see me twinkle, that means she heard you loud and clear.”

Star's golden form reflects in Darren's eyes.

“Anytime?” he says.

She nods but realizes her body now covers half the ceiling.

“Open the window,” she says.

“But you just got here!”

“Please, I must return to my important job.”

The posters of athletes on the wall curl at the edges. The water level in the fish tank drops. The flowers in the vases wilt.

“C'mon, Darren!” Star says. “Hurry.”

Darren opens the window but shadows his eyes from her brilliance. “Tell her I miss her. Promise?”

“Who are you talking to?” his dad, coming down the hall, says.

“I love you,” Star tells her new son. “I mean, your mom loves you.”

Darren smiles into the crook of his arm and Star winks.

Before the door opens, she folds in half and squeezes out the window, leaving a burn mark on the sill.