


## The Other Side of the Starlight



 greet you in the name of the Holy One -

El Shaddai

The One who gives life  
And the One who gives life to those who give life.

I come to you tonight in joy – my first grandchild  
has been born!

A boy. They've called him Jesus. Being a grandmother has....how can I tell you  
.....it has completely turned my world inside out.  
And quite honestly, I come to you as well with some fear...  
What I feel tonight just can't be expressed in words – but I will try. Is anyone here a  
grandmother? Grandfather? Ah.

Never – NEVER in the wildest most scattered imagination of my heart did I expect  
that things would turn out this way.

I remember when my daughter Mary was born.....can it be 14 years already?  
She was a beautiful baby. I love my sons, most certainly I do....but Mary – Mary was  
my first born, and my only daughter. I almost died giving birth....my body was torn,  
broken....for her. For Life. But when I held her for the first time, there was such a  
leaping in my being....my womb clenched, and my breasts ached with a sweet pain,  
and I knew that I would do anything. ANYTHING for this child.

As she grew....she just shone. Such a blessing. My sister Elizabeth always said that  
God has plans for her.  
“I'm telling you Anna”, she'd say “That one will put her mark on the world.”

She always has a heart ...too open for her own good. A keen eye for things that aren't  
fair. As a tiny little thing, she'd stand right up and fight against the odds....like a  
kitten on its hind legs hissing at a jackal. Brave! If one of the younger or weaker  
children was being bullied, there my Mary would be, right in the middle of it, trying  
to pull the bullies off their thrones. Then the next thing I knew she'd be bringing  
home a wounded bird ...I have nursed more animals because of that girl!

Sometimes I scolded her but secretly I was proud. She had a ....a vision of how things  
should be. “the other side of the starlight”, she called it. She loved to be outside at  
night, watching the stars. She told me stories she made up about the constellations,  
and the dream of the Holy One for this world.... “Things will be right some day,  
Mama” she'd say “On the other side of the starlight.”

She learned to read by listening to the older children in the village. There was nothing  
she couldn't do! And so loving – always hugging me. I loved the time we spent  
working together in the garden or the house....we'd talk and talk....and when I'd

insist that she put down her book and help me sweep out the hearth, she'd say "In a minute". Sometimes I'd fret because she'd stay out too late at night looking at the stars....a girl has to be careful, you know? But she'd toss her braids and say "you worry too much mom".

She's a wonder, my girl. And she's still my girl.

One thing I always knew – is that she'd tell me the truth.

When Joseph approached my husband, wanting her as his wife, she had only just come into her womanhood. It was her 12<sup>th</sup> year. I wasn't ready to let her go – she was my baby! But Joachim insisted. "He's a good man, Anna," he said, and I knew it was true. We arranged a meeting of the families, and when we returned to our home, Mary said "I can tell by his eyes, Mama – his eyes are kind. They shine like the stars" And so it was done. A formal betrothal – and I prayed with all my heart that she would be happy.

You know what came next – or part of it anyway.

But I don't know if you can imagine what it felt like to me – perhaps you can. Your child – your precious child – for whom you have had so many dreams and plans....

Comes to you with news like that. It...knocks you to your knees.

It was evening, I'll never forget it. Mary and I were outside picking the evening scented herbs. (Well, I was picking...she was staring at the sky) She had been unusually quiet, as though she were pondering something huge.

"mama, I'm gong to have a baby"

the world stopped.

I don't know how it's possible for so many things to go through your head and heart at once, but I swear that in the time it took me to turn around, a whole galaxy of ....stuff....overwhelmed me.

MY Mary? This can't be true.

Anger, at Joseph – how DARE he betray our trust

Disappointment at her....

Guilt – had I not explained things to her well enough? Did she not understand...the...way of things?

Overwhelming sadness and then

Fear.

The punishment for such a thing among our people – death. By stoning.

All of that flashed, like a falling star, searing a path through my guts. I turned to her.

I expected to see tears...shame....

But instead, what I saw

Was a light shining more fiercely in her than ever it had shone. In that moment, she....shimmered.  
And then she told me her story.

Now – I don't know what to tell you. I am a learned woman. I know the ways of the world, and I am no fool.  
But I know the truth when I hear it  
And I know my daughter.

And when she finished telling me, I gathered her into my arms  
And there, in that garden, with the smell of the mint leaves perfuming the night air, I decided.  
Whatever this is, is it from God  
And I will stand by my daughter no matter what.

Let them come with stones if they must.  
It will be MY body they will have to break.

Her father? That's another story.  
He was SO HURT – at first he was going to go to Joseph and do who knows what to him....but when Mary insisted on her story he simply fell silent. Turned away from both of us.

Joseph, that dear, dear man.....really DOES have stars in his eyes. He is standing by her with a trust born of dreams that somehow – some way, God will work through this.

I arranged for the trip to visit my sister Elizabeth. She and Zachariah live in the hill country, and after all these years and several miscarriages, Elizabeth too is carrying life within her. Mary, I told the neighbours, went to help my sister until the baby is born. Well, she had!

And so my daughter began her first journey – little did we all realize that there would be yet another before this child was born.

When news of the census came, Mary, so heavy with this child, had not lost any of her fighting spirit. She was so angry at the Romans – “counting us like sheep! An in a way that militates against the poor! How are those without means supposed to travel? They have to take time away from the fields when they just scrape by day to day , forced to use hard earned money to travel when they need it to feed their children! O yes it's fine for the rich to travel to their hometowns, for them it's a holiday. For the poor it is misery! AND FOR WHAT? So Rome will know how many of us there are to exact more taxes? Some day.....the mighty will be pulled down from those thrones and the rich sent empty away!”

On and on she went. And she insisted that she go with Joseph... “We may be able to help along the way,” she said. “Poor old Sarah is barely able to walk. I can help.”  
And so, expecting a baby any day, feet and legs swollen, my Mary set out on the journey to Bethlehem. I watched them leave, and prayed that the Holy One and Mary knew what they were doing.

Would they make it back in time for her to have her baby here with all of us with her in the birthing house?

Every night that they were gone I would go outside after dark, look into the sky, the same stars shining down on her so far away....and I'd think about Mary's dream that someday on the other side of the starlight, things would be made right.

One night – how to explain – I just knew. It was the sound of the night wind...almost like singing....and the look of the sky....and the tightness in my chest....I knew that the baby had been born.

It seemed forever until they returned.

But return they did – Mary looking exhausted –

And what a story they had to tell! The whole company of travelers, full of such tales...they were all talking at once! Something about angels, and shepherds, And also about old Sarah, for whom the journey had been too much in the end...they buried her with her relatives in Bethlehem.

I couldn't make it all out, and honestly I wasn't really trying to. I only had eyes for my daughter....and my grandson.

She held him out to me and I took him in my arms....

He was so tiny – had my own babies really been that small?

He smelled like....a baby.

And I swear that he opened his eyes and looked into my soul. He has old eyes, that little one....when you look at him it's as though those eyes have seen.....everything.

Jesus. They've called him Jesus.

Some say that the angels said he will change the world.

I know he's changed mine.

And my husband – Joachim – has become the most doting grandfather there ever could be. Yes – this child – like all newborns – turns the world upside down.

The strangest thing happened not long ago....

Three strangers, foreigners – came to our town. One of them was from Egypt – I'm not sure about the other man, or the woman....they asked in the marketplace and Abraham directed them to our home. Apparently they had been to Bethlehem and had been told to come here - they had limited use of our language, and we had none of theirs, but they wanted to see Jesus. They knelt, and presented gifts – strange, confusing almost frightening gifts.

They talked with Mary and Joseph as best they could and then they left.

Joseph told me that they had warned him about Herod – the man is mad.

Told him of a safe and little-known road to Egypt, and a safe place to stay there if they ever need sanctuary. It disturbed Joseph, my instinct told me that we should protect Mary from that information but he said no – she needs to know. And he was right.

So he's gone to tell her, right now.

I'm afraid this is going to mean another journey for my daughter and this little one

How much more can they all endure?

That baby's birth has changed me, and in ways I cannot explain, has made me – whole.

What will become of him? It seems I can't protect him the way a grandmother should.

Where is he going this time and will people care for him? Be kind to a tiny stranger?

He took my world and turned it inside out

So that the farthest stars are now as close - as the eyes of my neighbours.

Where is he going? If he should travel into your life – will you welcome him?

I leave it now in the hands of the Holy One who has brought these strange and shimmering moments into being.

And I leave it to you my friends.

And some day I will see you again

On the other side of the starlight.