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FIRST BORN

By MARY ARMOCK

*I wonder what dying is. And death.
I listened hard and heard Mother
talking about it, but I guess even
she doesn't know.*

MOTHER talks to me a lot. I'm even getting so I can talk to her a little. I think she likes that. But Mother talks to me even when I don't ask anything. That's how I know I'll be going Outside pretty soon. I'm glad because even though Mother has told me all about it, it's not the same as seeing it for yourself. Of course, I wouldn't tell Mother that. It might make her unhappy and I couldn't do that. Not to anyone. Especially Mother.

I remember a long time ago—anyhow it seems like a long time ago—I woke up and rolled over and touched Mother. That's when she started talking to me. She told me how long she'd been waiting for me to do that and how much she loved me and

wanted me. I felt kind of ashamed. I'd been so busy with other things that I hadn't even thought of her. So I rolled over as close to her as I could to make up for it. The love-feeling grew and grew until we—laughed, I guess. Just because we were happy. At least, Mother laughed and maybe I did, too. I'm not sure. Mother said I just had the hiccups. I was very happy, though.

We were happy for a long time, Mother, Daddy and I. We live on a farm and Daddy is a farmer. He wasn't always a farmer, though. Once he worked in a big white room with all kinds and shapes of bottles sitting on long white tables all over the room. And people went scurrying among the bottles checking and

changing and adding bubbly colored stuff to more bubbly colored stuff and it was all very exciting. At least, that's what Mother says and she should know because that's where she met Daddy. But Daddy says he's sorry he ever knew one chemical from another. So now he's a farmer and goes out in the fields every day or into the woods to hunt and fish and get firewood.

Mother jokes about how Daddy and I will be going off hunting and fishing and leaving her home alone. This gave me a bad worry for awhile but Mother loved it away. That's how I knew she was joking. I didn't really understand but if it makes her happy, it makes me happy, too.

I know it's got something to do with Daddy and I being "pals." Not yet, because I can't even go Outside yet. But they talk about it even now. One day at breakfast, Daddy and Mother were talking about it "over a second cup of coffee." Daddy said he sure wished I could go with him today and Mother said, "Time enough when the time comes."

Daddy's voice was dreaming. "We'd go chop the wood first and load it onto the sledge. I'd let him drive the

team while I loaded the heavy stuff. And then we'd take our poles and nets and catch a mess of fish for you."

Mother laughed. "You'd better clean them, too."

"He'll help me clean them. I'll teach him. Like I'll teach him to hunt and fish and farm. The things you've got to know to live decently these days." He put an arm around us. "It's not a bad life, though, is it? All things considered?"

"No, darling," Mother kissed him, "it's a good life."

She didn't tell him about the alley cat she had shot the day before and how scared she'd been. A big cat—almost as high up as me, with great long teeth and green and white fur. She just kissed him again and said, "It's a good life."

Daddy sounded relieved. "And it'll be even better for David. He won't be able to remember how things were . . . I think that's the worst—seeing how things are—and remembering how they were. And could have been," he added softly.

"If you don't get those fish," Mother laughed too quickly, "you'll have no supper with your remembering."

Daddy laughed too and finished his coffee. Just as he

was going out the door he stopped. "Sure be glad when he can go with me. Not so lonely." He smiled at Mother. "Won't be so lonely for you then, either."

"I'm not lonely now. He's lots of company."

Daddy came back quickly and hugged her, "Good girl." Then he patted me on my behind and laughed, "Be a good boy today." He was still laughing when he left. But Mother wasn't. That was how the worry kept popping up at first.

It was worse when the man came to see us. Daddy calls him the Copdoc. He and Mother would talk for awhile about the farm and how Daddy was and how she was and then how I was. That's when the worry would get real bad. Mother would say, "Oh, just fine" and the Copdoc would say, "Well, now, let's just check and make sure." And then he'd laugh. He has a funny kind of laugh that isn't funny. It makes me shiver. Then he'd listen to my heart and poke and prod around until I felt like kicking him. I tried to once but I missed. He just laughed and said, "Strong little fellow, isn't he?" While he was putting his things away he'd ask Mother some more questions. By this

time the worry would be almost as bad as it is now. Just before he left, he'd say, "Well, I can't detect any mutation. Everything seems to be quite normal." The worry would drain away slow-like and Mother would say, "Thank God." But the man would laugh his funny laugh and say, "Don't let your hopes run too high now. The hospital will have to run a few checks before we're absolutely sure." Then the worry would come back with a rush and Mother would say, "Of course, of course" in a hurry like she didn't want to talk about it anymore. "We have to be absolutely sure," he would say. "Have to keep the race pure, you know." Mother would always agree with him and so would I. Because pure means that there's nothing wrong with it, that it's perfect. Like the water in the new well. After he'd left, Mother would sit down and cry a little. A sort of nice easy crying, not like now.

There were still good times. Sometimes Mother would take Daddy's lunch out to him and they'd have a picnic and in the evenings Daddy would read aloud while Mother did some mending and sometimes they would just sit and talk.

I think Daddy is lonely. It isn't so bad for Mother because I'm with her all the time but Daddy has to go out every day and I think he must be very lonely with no one to talk to or anything. Lots of times he'd tell Mother all the things we're going to do when I can go Outside and all the places we'll go. All sorts of places. Except, of course, the Hot Spots. But when Daddy clears the rest of the trees below the house, we'll be able to sit on the porch at night and see them glowing way off in the distance. Mother says a Big City used to be there but now all that's left is a flat place that glows in the dark. But we'll be together and happy and all the bad and worry will be gone.

It's been real bad ever since the last time the Copdoc visited us. Daddy came home early and found Mother crying. Only it wasn't the nice easy crying. It made me shiver and Daddy sounded real worried when he asked her what was the matter. Mother just cried harder so Daddy took us both on his lap and made little quiet noises until the crying was all gone. Then we got out of Daddy's lap and he went into the kitchen to get some coffee. Mother told me to go

to sleep because she had to talk to Daddy about grown-up things. I tried to go to sleep, really I did, but I couldn't. I curled up and pretended I was, though, so Mother wouldn't worry. I heard all they said but I didn't understand most of it.

Daddy handed Mother her coffee and said, "Well, now, what's wrong here?" He sounded as if he were laughing with just his mouth. His whole heart wasn't in it.

I thought Mother was going to start crying again but she didn't. She just sat very tight and still and when she answered it was as if she had to tell every little muscle what to do. "He was here. This afternoon."

"The Copdoc?"

Mother nodded a queer stiff little nod. "He said David and I will have to go to the hospital."

"Yes," Daddy urged her gently.

"Next week."

Daddy took her hand. "Are you afraid of going to the hospital?"

"Do we have to go?" Mother's voice lit up. "Do we? Couldn't we go away somewhere—"

Daddy sounded puzzled, "But you know there isn't anyplace we could go, even if

they would let us. Besides, at the hospital—”

“Hospital!” Mother said it as if she were scraping maggots off her tongue.

“Honey,” the words were slow, “just why are you so afraid? If you’re holding back something, as my wife you should tell me. And as a responsible citizen, you should—”

“Responsible citizen!” Mother’s voice rose and crackled. “Why am I afraid? Because David is a mutant. Do you understand? A mutant, *mutant*, MUTANT!”

Daddy’s voice cut across the shrill echoes of the word. “Be quiet!”

Mother just stood there, gasping for breath. There was so much pain in the silence that I wanted to move and cry but I couldn’t because I’d promised Mother I’d go to sleep.

“Oh, yes.” Her words hissed into the pain. “It’s different now, isn’t it? It isn’t someone else’s child now. It’s yours. It makes you wonder, doesn’t it, if mutant actually does equal monster. And if it doesn’t—?” She smashed her cup into the fireplace. “*Responsible citizens!* We know what *that* means!”

“How can you be sure he’s a . . .?” Daddy’s voice was

shaky. “You’re just upset. You—”

“Yes, I’m upset! Aren’t you?” Mother gripped the back of the sofa. “Sure? I’m not just *sure*. I *know*. At first I thought it was my imagination. Delusions. Anything but what it was. But the last few months I gave up hoping.” She reached down and touched the little curled up ball that was me. “I loved him and watched him grow and learn and—” she swallowed hard “—and now he’s going to die —because he’s a mutant. He’s going to die before he’s really lived.” A tear tickled the corner of her mouth. “So now you know. David is a mutant and David must die.” She nudged the broken cup with her toe. “We nearly blew the whole world into this many pieces. Now we’ve settled on individual worlds.”

Daddy came up behind her and stroked her hair like a kitten. “Honey, honey—we can try again. There’ll be others . . .”

“Not unless we adopt one. And who would give up their child when there are so few left?”

“But—”

“Darling,” the words were quiet and gentle. “Have you ever known a woman who had

a mutant child ever to have another child?"

"No . . . but we're so isolated. We know so few—"

"They're sterilized," she said simply.

Daddy stared at her a few seconds and then sort of folded up and put his head in his hands. "Good God." And they weren't words really, just hurt noises. Mother looked at him the same way she'd looked at the puppy we'd had to kill because it got so hurt. She sat down beside him and looked at him.

He found her hand and held it. "There must be some way out. After all, if the Copdoc didn't find anything, maybe the hospital won't either."

"Maybe." Mother put her head on his shoulder and they sat in front of the fire all night. I couldn't sleep but I kept on pretending.

Yesterday Mother and I came to the hospital. The worry was real bad and when I tried to tell her it was all right that just made her more worried and frightened, so I stopped. I was very still, not even moving at all, so she could tell everything was all right, that I wasn't worried or frightened. But that seemed to make it worse so I

started to play, even turned a somersault. After that she seemed to feel a little better. I played as hard as I could until Mother started to talk to someone. But just as I stopped to listen, Mother screamed and started to run. We were jostled around quite a bit and then Mother fainted, I guess. After that they brought us here and left us alone. Mother says we are locked in. Then she cried and cried for a long time even though I tried everything I know to make her feel better. Finally I just curled up in a little ball and cried, too. This time Mother didn't even tell me it was just hiccups.

A man comes in to see us quite often and Mother talks and talks to him. She talks about the things I don't understand at all. It frightens me. After the man goes away I try to ask her about them but she's always crying so hard she can't hear me. And talking the terrible, sad talk that's all mixed up. The last time he came, Mother started crying right away and making little hurting sounds. Her hurt and unhappy was so bad that I started to shake all over. I curled into a littlest ball and rolled back and forth and back and forth but it wouldn't stop. I cried and

called to her that I loved her too and to please stop crying and that it was all right but her hurt just got worse. As soon as I'm Outside, I'll try very hard to make her laugh again and maybe her hurt will go away.

It should be soon now. Mother stopped talking a little while ago and went to sleep. It isn't an ordinary sleep. I can tell because I

can't reach her at all. All there is is a little bubble way down deep in her mind that keeps saying, "No . . . no . . .". Just like crying, only worse. I wish I could talk to Mother just once more before I'm born so she could love away this frightened thing that's shaking inside me.

Mother . . .? What is a mutant . . .? Mother, *why* can't an X-ray show love?

THE END