

Americans in Space

a novel

MARY E. MITCHELL



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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Americans in Space

Also by Mary E. Mitchell

Starting Out Sideways



In memory of my father, Bartholomeo (Bernie) Fussa,
who once shook hands with an astronaut

And for my mother, Dorothy Fussa,
who kept all of our feet on the ground

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Americans in Space

If You Love Something

He died the way lots of people do. He just went to bed and didn't rise the next morning. He had the thickest head of black hair I've ever seen on a forty-two-year-old male. Had he not died, I'd have had a husband in my old age whose hairline hadn't even receded. Do you know how rare this is? It is a terrible thing to bury a husband who has a full head of hair.

This, of course, is not what the children miss about him. Kyle was one of those perfect daddies, a man whose chest visibly swelled at the sight of his daughter on a soccer field or his infant son chewing on the bumper pad of his crib. My beautiful man, whom I have freely and openly idealized since the day I buried him, knew how to love his children without spoiling them. He did not believe, for example, that Charlotte needed the first-chair violinist from the Boston Symphony Orchestra to teach her violin. But he listened to Charlotte play every week, after every squeaky lesson with Mrs. Otten down the block.

He had had no history of heart trouble. Maybe he was too young for the doctors to go looking. I spent a few months being furious at his doctors, even the podiatrist he'd seen only once, who'd removed his plantar wart. But then I gave it up. There were just too many people to blame. I found it exhausting.

It's been two years since Kyle died, and I have heeded all the advice of the mothers, aunts, friends, and grief counselors not to make major life changes during those first two years, not to sell

the house, for instance, or remarry on the rebound, or dye my wild red hair a surreal shade of silver-blond. There has been some progress. I have more energy and less depression. My children no longer eat microwavable instant dinners. I buy Christmas gifts for others again. That first year, when I'd suddenly discovered on Christmas Day that I hadn't bought my mother a gift, I'd hastily rewrapped an unopened set of honeysuckle soaps I'd found lying around the house. When my mother ripped off the reindeer wrapping, Charlotte was perched on the armrest of her love seat, ready to disclose my sin. I have a clear memory of the smirk on my twelve-year-old's face as she ratted me out.

"Nice one, Mom," she had said. "Regifting your own mother on Christmas."

It hasn't been easy raising the children without Kyle. He left me with a daughter poised on the slippery slope of adolescence, her anger erupting as violently as her complexion, her favorite word, on her best days, *no*. The eye-rolling. The fury. The agony of losing her handsome father, the soccer coach, and being stuck with lame old me. Hunter, Kyle's and my love child, recklessly conceived at a time when sensible parents knew better, was only two when his daddy died. He was born ten years after Charlotte, but I guess we thought we'd still have plenty of time to raise him. He was not a particularly verbal two-year-old, but he showed signs of his loss in other ways.

From the day the ambulance left with his daddy's body in it, Hunter developed a deep attachment to ketchup bottles. Empty or full, their undulating shape and smoothness, the colorful labels, their nice narrow necks, so perfect for the grasp of little hands, drew him to them. Our house empty of the sound of a man's voice, Hunter began toddling around with Heinz as his closest companion, the bottle braced against his heart, as though he were protecting it from something. I thought, perhaps, he'd lose interest in time, but when he'd acquired two or three more plastic squeeze bottles from the bowels of our unattended kitchen cupboard, he began stashing them in an empty Huggies carton, left beside his changing table in his sad yellow-walled nursery. One day Charlotte fixed him up with a handle for his box, cutting a slot in the side and sliding through one of Kyle's belts. After

that Hunter pulled his cache of ketchup bottle behind him wherever he went. He'd stop and settle the carton beside me when I was doing the dishes or on the phone. He'd stand there until he had my attention. His eyes were tired for a two-year-old's.

Now here I am, waiting in the Guidance Office of the Alan B. Shepard High School, an embarrassing place to find myself, as I work here as a guidance counselor. It would be fine to be seeing Mr. Johnson if Charlotte and I were going over some PSAT scores. But it's only September, and we're seeing Tom Johnson because Charlotte, a mere ninth-grader, has been skipping school. Three times already. Plus, she's had her tongue pierced—not that this is against school policy. It's just further evidence that I'm a lousy mother of a fourteen-year-old girl. I don't even know how or where she accomplished her mutilation. Who would send their own child to me to devise a scheme for getting into Harvard?

The counseling offices at Alan Shepard High orbit a small waiting room designed by some genius architect who thought it would be fun to gather all the distraught and embarrassed parents in one space while they waited for appointments to discuss their incorrigible children. Although it's not necessary to wait on the slippery faux-leather chairs in the full glare of Gladys Panella, our ancient guidance secretary, I have chosen to sit here rather than spend another moment in my own office avoiding phone calls. Gladys nods curtly, looking puzzled. I nod back professionally, but offer nothing. I am restless with my work these days. I find it hard to execute my duties pleasantly.

I cannot stand my job, if the truth be told. I cannot, in good conscience, speak with one more overachieving parent who wants a letter from the Dalai Lama to put in his son's college admissions packet, one more clueless mother who has not caught on to the fact that the SAT sign-up ended last week. I am deeply resentful of these parents of malleable, compliant children, students who dutifully build latrines in Mexico during their summer vacations in order to boast about it on their college applications, although they do not like poor people and abhor outhouses, even on camping trips.

I hate the suburbs, too, although here I am, living a slow death in one of the fanciest ones outside of Boston. I remain here both for work and for personal reasons, such as access to the schools I want my own children to attend and the pension plan and benefits the Appleton Public Schools provide. I try to hide my loathing for my work by walking into school with a happy smile each morning. No one suspects a woman with wild red hair and a happy smile to be anything but a positive person. Only my children and my neighbor Marge know what a miserable human being I really am, and possibly Jack, the driver's ed teacher, who says I look demented.

Tom Johnson's office door opens and he walks toward me with his sheepish fifty-year-old's smile tucked somewhere between his mustache and goatee. It's embarrassing for him to be speaking to one of his colleagues about what a disaster her kid is. I feel for Tom, but have always thought he should be more embarrassed about his mustache and goatee.

"Kate," he says, squeezing my shoulder before I rise. "Come on in."

Gladys frowns at a stack of something on her desk as I head toward Tom's office. I pass by the poster on his open door, following his long lean back inside. He dresses like the guidance counselors in the *Mad* magazines I once read as a kid. He wears sweater vests and corduroy pants with shiny spots on the butt and the knees.

If you love something, set it free . . . , the poster on his door airily begins. *If it comes back, it's yours. If it doesn't, it never was.*

Half the poem is enclosed in the cheesy graphic of an open birdcage. I have always wanted to draw a mustache and goatee on the bird who sits smugly in the cage.

If you love something, lock it up, I invariably think. *If it gets away, yell at it when it comes back.*

Now, there's a poster I could warm up to. Tom is stirring a cup of instant coffee for us both, so sure he knows me after eleven years of working beside me.

"Where's Charlotte?" I ask him, plunking down on one of the two conference chairs opposite his desk. "Weren't you going to pull her out of class for this meeting?"

Tom sighs like a guidance counselor and gives me one of his significant looks. He has a long narrow face. My mother has a set of glass Christmas ornaments that are exactly this same shape. "I would've pulled her out of class," he says, speaking slowly, in case I am on anti-anxiety drugs, "if she were *in* class today." He rests my coffee gently on the front end of his desk, as if it might be a volatile liquid.

"Shit," I mutter, and there goes the last semblance of professional behavior.

"Kate," Tom begins gently. "This is not necessarily the end of the world. The kid's been through a lot and she's just acting out a little. It might be a good time to find her a really good therapist, though, and—"

"And have her skip those appointments too?" I feel anger at Charlotte surging up and down my arms, beneath the sleeves of my cardigan sweater. "And then come home with pierced nipples and an invoice for a hundred fifty bucks?"

Tom struggles between a smile and frown. Is he my friend or my child's counselor? He is trying to decide, tugging at his whiskers as he does so.

"Sorry," I say, rubbing the plastic arms of the conference chair.

"Kate . . .," Tom repeats. Then his voice wanders off, as if there is so much more to say to me. *Stop being a poor widow. Give your kid a break. Smile, for God's sake.*

I can't do any of these things. Somewhere in the cocoon of sadness of the last two years, I misplaced all of my niceness. I used to be popular with the students and faculty. I used to be popular with my children. But all that is gone now, vanished as completely as Kyle.

"Look," I say, rising from the uncomfortable chair. "I know you're trying to help. And I know I'm being unreasonable, but let's just reschedule this thing for when we can actually get Charlotte in the same room with us."

I turn and leave his office. The nasty smell of the instant coffee follows me out. I feel terrible, of course, because Tom is one of the nicest, most caring human beings on the planet. I vow to tell him this the next time I see him. Gladys waves some form when

she sees me coming, but I pretend not to see, ducking into my own office for my jacket and handbag.

"I've got an appointment," I tell her, a total lie, on my way out.

I can almost feel Gladys shaking her head in disapproval, her steel-gray permanent wave undulating the slightest bit in my wake.

A bell goes off in the corridor and kids pour out of classrooms, laughing and cuffing one another around the neck. A thousand iPods go by, hundreds of thousands of dollars spent by parents on kids who don't like their parents. You can almost smell the hormones. The kids act like I'm invisible, but this suits me fine. Coming toward me, a football-player-type guy guffaws good-naturedly. *You dick!* he cries out. A brace of chaste girls clutching books to their bosoms glance down at their feet. I think of my own daughter in her awful cutoff, navel-baring T-shirts, the one that says *These ain't silicone!* right across her perfect little round-as-chestnuts breasts. She used to love books. She used to love her violin. Once I watched her playing a simple Bach piece for her girlfriends on a perfect summer's night on our back deck.

I lock myself into my car, warding off principals, parents, possibly truant officers. An image comes back to me from the night Kyle died, of how, in the middle of the night, I awoke briefly to discover that he had hogged the top sheet, as usual. I remember with clarity the way I'd registered a twinge of irritation with him before yanking the sheet back. There'd been no resistance or response from Kyle. Was this because he was sleeping or because he was dead?

I suddenly have a deep desire to pick Hunter up early from the Bright Lights Early Learning Center. I long to hold my little Bright Light in my arms, which he still allows me to do at four, to smell his scalp, which still holds a faint trace of the baby scent, and to reassure myself that I know my child. By the time I reach the end of the school parking lot, my decision is made to head over there instead of home. Traffic flows by, impeding my escape. I idle beside the school's sign, a giant stone monument that looks like a gravestone. ALAN B. SHEPARD, the engraved lettering announces, FIRST AMERICAN TO JOURNEY INTO SPACE. I glide my car into an

opening between two trucks, wondering where my other child is, my raven-haired firstborn, the spitting image of her father, the girl who doesn't seem to like me, or school, or her life anymore. My Charlotte, just another American journeying into space.

