

# Futures

## Light years

There's no place like home. **By Lynette Mejía**



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

### **T-minus 10 years**

We met in the library, of all places. She was sitting at a study desk with only a notebook, staring out the window. As usual, I wasn't looking where I was going and I tripped, dropping my stack of books all over her. One of them hit her on the head as it fell and she screamed at the sudden pain, jumping up and yelling at me. I just stood there, rendered speechless by her beautiful, righteous indignation. That was the beginning.

### **T-minus 10 months**

How do you know when you've made the right decision? How do you know which path to take when the snow is new and crisp, with nary a footprint to be seen in any direction? Today's updated psych profile probably lists mild anxiety about the coming launch. That's an understatement.

### **T-minus 10 days**

"You could still call it off," she said to me. "You could change your mind up to the last second

of the countdown. You could hit that red button and it would all be over. You could come home and be with us."

"You know I can't do that."

"Can't?"

My eyes slid past hers. Jared was on the floor of the visiting room, playing with a toy on a little blanket Stacey had made for him. He had her hair, the exact shade, and I couldn't tear my gaze away as the sunlight, streaming through the window, caught in those bright copper curls.

"Amy!"

"I'm sorry," I said, as if those words could cover a multitude of sins.

As they left she kissed me, long and hard, while Jared wriggled in her arms. There were tears on her cheeks.

"Come home," she said, again.

### **T-minus 10 hours**

She promised to come and bring Jared so that I could see them one last time. I watched out of the window until the parking lot emptied

and shadows overtook the light. I can't even be angry; deep down I knew she wouldn't show.

She's always hated goodbyes.

### **T-minus 10 minutes**

I think about her last words, and stare at the big red button on the console in front of me. By the time I get back, Stacey will be long gone, and Jared will be an old man who never knew a world with both parents in it. I'll be a stranger to him, some younger woman with his eyes who could pass for his daughter. I'll have seen another sun, another planet; memorized the shapes of other, alien constellations. What could we possibly have to say to one another?

### **T-minus 10 seconds**

Stacey's voice rings in my ears, louder than the roar of the engines. I'm riding an explosion, the high of adrenaline strong enough to pull me from Earth's gravity. *You could call it off*, she says in my ears as the clock flips, running through zero, travelling the invisible distance from the negative to the positive. *You could*

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come home.

In a few minutes, the solid booster ejects, and I watch as it falls away.

### T-plus 10 months

Let's be honest here. There's no impending disaster. Earth isn't in danger from an asteroid or a plague. I'm not some noble sacrifice; I'm here of my own free will.

People asked me in the pre-flight media interviews why I was going, and I told them the truth: because I am human.

### T-plus 10 years

There's still such a long way to go, but I awaken for brief periods, stretch and run through the checklists. Clarity comes with distance.

The truth is I was scared. Scared I would screw it all up. What we had, Stacey and I, was perfect – a flawless diamond life. How could I maintain that perfection over the long term? How could I be the wife and mother she needed me to be? Over coffee, I watch the

transmissions that have piled up while I've slept, and I know I made the right choice. Jared is healthy, happy, well adjusted. Out here, I can watch them, see them shine without me.

I'm OK with that.

Am I OK with that?

### T-plus 100 years

What did we learn, in the end? That there's no place like home? That we're all part of Earth, and it, in turn, is part of us? The crew is nearly gone, our ship as worn out and tired as those of us who remain. I've slept my life away, mostly, and although I've seen glass raindrops and watched liquid iron waves crash on ruby sand beaches, I can't recall the touch of my love's hand or the way it feels to be held in her embrace.

Here is what I know now: there is nothing to see out here that is better than getting lost in her eyes. There is nothing to discover but my own sense of loss – a raw, aching thing that long ago forgot how to heal.

Leaving did not keep them perfect. The sadness in Stacey's eyes did not go away. Permanently inscribed, it was there in every video message. The hurt in her voice eased, but was never erased, and, after she died, that hurt is the only thing that I had to hold on to.

Our son is an old man now, with no memories of hugs, or laughter, or tears wiped away. I'm considered a hero back home, I'm told, but do I mean anything to him? Does he hate me as I've come to hate myself?

I pull out my tablet to record the message that I'm coming home. I hope he will agree to see me. I hope he can forgive my many imperfections. I hope we will have time to get to know one another again.

I hope the years have been kind.

**Lynette Mejia** writes science fiction, fantasy, and horror prose and poetry from the middle of a deep, dark forest in the wilds of southern Louisiana. You can find her online at [www.lynettemejia.com](http://www.lynettemejia.com).

## THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Lynette Mejia reveals the inspiration behind *Light years*

The idea for *Light years* started with the countdown. It's a meditation on how we, as humans, perceive and measure time. People like to imagine time as an objective thing, to be measured and calculated, but the truth is, time is relative, both in science (via general relativity) and in our hearts and minds. We've all experienced minutes that seemed to stretch into hours, and an enjoyable weekend that felt as if it flew by. I wanted to explore how that might play out on an interstellar scale, but I also wanted to include a gentle reminder: that it's never too late to forgive ourselves and the ones we love.

