

The cosmonaut

The commander ordered to fix the mechanical failure when Yuri was about to open the porthole. Once the cosmonaut had quickly checked the instruments, he took a few deep breaths, and made sure that everything was functional. After a solid push, he threw himself into the inchoate interstellar medium. The big beacons, set lengthwise on the spacecraft, emanated a solid light which had diminished the cold atmosphere of the surrounding emptiness, producing echoes of unheard sounds. That was his fifth mission, and hardly would he have had another. At the age of fifty-one he did not consider himself an old man, and the glory he earned assured him a future in the Agency. Nevertheless, a strange anxiety winded into him for a long time.

He dived into the void with energetic thrust, reaching the temperature stabilizer porthole. Many times had he dived in that enormous ocean of silence, but this time it definitely appeared new to him. Suddenly, a rewarding, peaceful sensation started growing in him, reducing his anxiety.

With a slight movement he grabbed the key which was fluctuating alongside the back rope, and tightened it to the appropriate slot. The dull sound of the mechanisms faded into the galaxy gates and slowly the bulkhead slid, showing an impressive complex of wires. All those thin wires crept into printed circuit

boards whose abstruse mechanisms did not impress him at all. After a couple of simulations, he carefully observed the processor whose surface looked opaque. The Russian smiled and while he was ready to inform the internship, he turned back to observe the firmament. Nothing appeared new to him but he thought he heard a sound.

«How are you getting along?» a voice from the radio suddenly creaked.

«Commander, I can't find the failure.»

«Hurry up, we're running out of time» the voice suddenly concluded breaking down the communication.

A strange grin took place on the cosmonaut's face as he repeatedly stared towards the infinity. Those silent expanses of space brought him a sense of respect. Suddenly, he perceived that echo again, a warm voice that seemed bouncing throughout those timeless expanses. Surprised, he glanced towards those endless spaces, prevailing over them with a mental flight. What would have happened if he had followed that warm voice? This disturbing question gradually broke into him, enthralling him like a siren song. What the heck got into his head? He rapidly looked back at the processor when the sound vibrated again. It grew increasingly clear and the cosmonaut could recognize its tones. It was a sweet music which was fulfilling his heart with peacefulness. With a quick movement he decided to follow it, releasing himself into the sidereal space. In that deep silence he violently stretched his flight, extending the releasing cable. Irritated, he turned back and in a pure moment of foolishness, he unlocked himself and started to fluctuate into the empty space.

«What the heck got into him?» yelled out the commander.

«Vladimir, join two cables and rescue him» he bumbled again through the radio.

After he put his space suit on, the navigator was out of the door and the cosmonaut confidently threw himself towards his fellow. His heart pounded as he saw the spacecraft moving away. Silence grew all around him.

«Can you see it?» anxiously asked the commander.

«Not yet.»

«Damn it.»

«Colonel, I see it» he surprisingly shouted while his fellow's silhouette became clearer.

«Get close to it carefully.»

«Fellow Yuri» the navigator whispered as soon as he got close to him. The cosmonaut confusedly stared at him.

«Vladimir, what's going on?» the commander questioned again.

«I don't know. He's unconscious.»

«Hurry up! Secure him to the cable and go back to the base.»

«Yuri, everything is fine» repeated his fellow getting close to him gently. «I am here.»

«I'll bring you inside» replied the commander with an assuring voice. The distance from the spacecraft slowly diminished while Yuri confusedly scrutinized all around him. For a moment he let his fellow guide him. He approached the porthole, and suddenly squinted his eyes.

«What the hell are you doing?» he grinned with a brutal look.

«Relax, Yuri. It's all over.»

The cosmonaut stared into the infinity twisting his face, and then he violently freed himself from his grasp. Nowhere near discouraged, Vladimir grabbed him again while the commander showed up in front of the cosmonaut himself, using his body as a shield. Defenseless, the Russian yelled out all his desperation and vividly flung at his superior, tumbling him down on the

floor. Instinctively, the navigator tried to close the door but the Russian boxed him and caused him to roll over unconsciously.

«Yuriii!» the shocked commander shouted.

«Earth to Mir, Earth to Mir...» broke through the radio while the Russian threw himself into space again.

«Earth to Mir, Earth to Mir: answer.»

«Mir to Earth» the shocked commander replied.

«Finally!» came out of the radio. «“What the hell is going on?”»

«I have a wounded man and I'm about to rescue another one. I ask for your permission to get the spacecraft started and to attempt the rescue operation.»

«Permission denied. It has not been repaired yet.»

«I just need a few minutes.»

«It's too risky and you might compromise the mission.»

«I can't leave this man to his fate.»

«Colonel, this is not a personal matter.»

«I am in control and I have responsibilities towards my crew» he ended cutting down the communication. Rapidly he went into the spacecraft and, after having completed all the checkups, he pushed the starting commands. A powerful rumble shook the space probe thrusting it into space. After a few moments the commander reached Yuri, following him in this foolish flight. The cosmonaut stared at him and opened his arms as if looking for help. After a moment of hesitation, the official let the small hatch slide, allowing his fellow to get back inside.

«Commander, bring me back to the station» he exclaimed removing his helmet.

«Yuri, what got into you?»

«I don't know. I don't feel good at all.» Turning around slowly, the commander hooked himself to the station and after a few

minutes he was back inside.

«You need a break now» he said charging the medical gun. The Russian imperceptibly smiled. He was considerably confused and he was not able to understand what had just happened. His mind was weak and that strange music kept humming in his head.

«You need some rest» said the commander moving the needle close to him. Yuri slowly stretched out his arm, but just a moment before the medical gun touched his skin, he moved the commander's hand inwards, and he pushed the needle on his abdomen. A brief thud injected the sedative in the commander, who bent down fluctuating in the gravity-less environment.

Restoring an attentive look, the Russian stepped into the spacecraft and after he left the station, he pushed it forward into the void. He felt happy for what he had done to the commander. After all, he thought he never sympathized for him. The damned Georgian always preceded him; to the military academy, to the university, to the specialization, even to the numerous training courses. It was unfair, he thought. Damn! He was the only Soviet cosmonaut who can count on five space missions and the Agency never let him lead one. How could he possibly care about returning home and showing new accolades, considering that this was his last mission? He was better off following the music, losing himself to an appealing run against Time, looking for moments that no other man would ever have lived.

Quietly, he powered the generators, and then he brought them to a stop. Silence descended upon him once again. Free was he to follow the melody. A never-experienced peaceful sensation grew increasingly in him, followed by a chorus of arches and wind instruments. Disbelieved, he profoundly inhaled and lowered his eyelids. He extended that moment of incredible liberty to the ex-

treme. Finally he was doing what he always wanted to do.

He never felt this happy before, not even on his tenth birthday, when his father, a modest teacher in Leningrad, gave him an American car model as a present. Many were the times he polished that car; many were the times he simulated wild races in his brief childhood, and dreamt of owning a real one. He could still remember his proud attitude, when he wandered in Moscow with a brand new *Chaika*¹. Those memories vividly appeared to him, rewarding him with a vibrant nostalgia.

Confidently, he raised his eyes to the majestic and transparent porthole, scrutinizing the universe. Satisfied by those sensations, he reactivated the power supply generators. He wandered for over four hours throughout the celestial highways until the overheated generator led the spacecraft into silence. A strange disquiet made its way, increasing to the diminuendo of the melody. The empty silence caused him to roll in himself and finally he understood. He was running away from his memories, from a life in which he never decided anything. Who knows, if he only could have chosen he might have become a teacher as well, or maybe a fisher, the famous Yuri Karniekov, the space hero.

Abruptly a vigorous anguish tormented him, and he fell into despair. He had killed his fellow, caused the failure of his mission, and led himself into the unknown. Haunted by remorse, slowly he fell asleep relaxing with sweet moments of drowsiness. Suddenly he got back to reality. The air began to rarefy and the cold inexorably sneaked into the space probe. Instinctively, he turned on the radio and a creaking noise amplified his isolation. He felt out-of-place as he kept observing the space, when suddenly a voice broke through the silence.

¹ Luxury car manufactured in the Soviet Union.

«Mir to space probe, Mir to space probe...» The Russian was petrified.

«Commander!»

«Yuri» shouted the other man in bewilderment. «What happened to you?»

«It doesn't matter anymore...»

«Bullshit, give me your coordinates.»

«The generator is gone. I am not in a position to provide you with this information.»

«It doesn't matter: from Earth I can always locate you.»

«What for? Too much time has gone by in order to rescue me.»

«Listen to me.»

«Commander, I just wanted you to know that I am sorry for Vladimir. I loved that man.»

«I know that, you bastard of a Russian» surprisingly he heard from the radio.

«Vladimir!?» he shouted with a voice torn up by emotion. «I thought you were dead.»

«I was so close to it...»

«I am sorry. I don't know what got into me. I felt strangely euphoric. I could hear that music, an irresistible call that took hold of me.»

«Music?!»

«I swear, commander, even if it sounds absurd. I could hear it for real.»

«Unfortunately the truth is not as poetic as you imagine.»

«What do you mean?»

«I've just been informed that the mixture in your tank was dirty.»

«What!?»

«It came from a defective stock. Hypoxia hit straight to your brain.»

«Holy Mother Russia.»

«Yuri, listen carefully to me: we're running out of time.»

«Forget it: I know I have no chance at all.»

«Bullshit: the Shuttle is in orbit.»

«Americans? The Agency will never give you the authorization.»

«I'm working on it.»

«And even if it were so? I am moving away.»

«You must stabilize your position.»

«How on earth could I? I have no power left.»

«You should try with the micro vectors. They have an autonomous command.»

«They are too powerful; I'd just push myself into another axis.»

«Why don't you try to deactivate a couple? Do not leave no stone unturned.»

«Sure. What about the oxygen? I'm running out of oxygen in here.»

«Use your space suit tanks.»

«Eight hours left...»

«It's your only chance. Try it out!» Yuri stared at the radio as he felt indebted to his little uranium battery. While the space probe light faded away the metal box was shining like a little Christmas tree. Those bright lights, the optimism of the commander, the unexpected redemption from the commander himself made the cosmonaut's face flood with tears.

«Holy Mother Russia!» he shouted and vigorously lifted up the stowage container, placing the tanks in their spots. Accurately he put on the first tank and threw himself looking for the mi-

cro vectors. Frantically he opened the panels and his eyes followed miles of twisted cables, then, like an oasis in the desert, a small control unit with dozens of colored cables appeared to him. He slowly stripped some cables off, twisting a couple of them at the top and vigorously removed the control processor. Suddenly all the lights went off and the cabin turned into a frightening, gloomy darkness.

The cosmonaut approached the command position solely led by the dazzling lights of the radio. Suddenly, numerous questions overwhelmed his mind tormenting him as flies would do.

What if the vector hadn't worked, what if he had remained in space, what if the oxygen wasn't enough? If, if, if all these *ifs* fluttered in his mind whipping it violently. It seemed like he tried to get rid of those flies by moving his hand, and impulsively he pressed the power button. A massive rumble shook the space probe, then, suddenly, silence fell.

Uncertain, he gave a look at the porthole following a small star with his eyes. Infinite moments passed by, his body not animated by a single movement. Amazed, he pointed at that star, and only then he understood. The counterthrust stabilized his position and he stood still like a buoy well anchored in space. Suddenly he reached the radio shaking his hands frantically.

«Commander, I succeeded to get stabilized» he shouted with a trembling voice. «Commander» he repeated, vainly waiting for an answer. «Commander...» he whispered and the probe space walls echoed. The apparent stillness of the cosmos seemed expanding extraordinarily every minute, flowing in an increasing pessimism. The oxygen started to replenish his lungs, and after a couple of intense breathes, he turned again waiting for a radio signal.

«I misjudged that man» he mumbled to himself. «The com-

mander is the best astronaut in the world» he repeated while he mentally traced back those last, hopeless hours. «Father, if you're there, somewhere, please help me.» A dense multitude of thoughts pounded his mind, keeping it vigil and frenzied. Suddenly he looked at his watch: another hour went by. Nervously, he was dazing stunned in the infinity and then he reattempted with the radio. Nothing seemed to work; there was nothing but hopeless silence. Where did that surrounding music go, those fugue-leading calls go, that vibrant frustration? «Damned sensations, vanished at the top of their triumph» he burred to himself opening the tank's tap. His breathing accompanied him for the next five hours until the oxygen began to run out.

Discouraged, he replaced the tank and started breathing again. The fresh air seemed changing his perspectives. Several things he never cared about had become incredibly precious: the air, time, this dissolving life was tightly and furiously grasped to the cosmonaut himself. His heart beat recklessly, nourishing his thoughts with wild lifeblood. What could he have done differently in that ocean of silence? The almost empty oxygen tank shook him from his stillness getting him dramatically back to reality. «Damn, it's over!» he exclaimed ill-fated when he used his last tank. Instinctively, he slowed down his breathing trying to make it last longer. Promptly, time looked as if it stopped going backward in a spiral-like movement. He had a vision of his father while he was reading a book loudly; he saw the little house by the river, and he saw his grandfather's exhausted and slow pace. Every moment of his past emerged from his memory encircling him with a vibrant nostalgia.

Tears of magnificent joy purged his conscience instilling it with courage. He had to resist, not giving up, squeezing every air bubble and hoping, keep on hoping desperately. He imagined

Leningrad, the snow that copiously encircled the city in its rigid winter. It seemed to him as if he almost touched the soft, impalpable snow, now that the temperature inexorably dropped. With all his strength he tried to throw his anguish away, until, within a moment of weakness, he consulted his watch again. The last hour was almost over and the cold started numbing his fingers. Inconsolable, he took a look out of the porthole while an imperceptible fog slowly took place on his head protection visor. Instinctively, he tried to push it away, but his warm breathing had increasingly thickened that fog. Invariably blind, he looked back at his past. He felt the stinging wavelets of the Neva River² furiously assaulting his body; he felt his mother screaming desperately when the ice unexpectedly broke down, and the incredible feeling when he was saved.

«You have to look at you future» suddenly mumbled his father.

«I don't want to go to the Academia» he reluctantly responded.

«It's your only way to become an engineer.»

«But, father...» he puffed grinding his teeth to the cold.

«Mend your thoughts; you could start a carrier in Aerospace.»

«You're well aware that I hate soldiers.»

«No more words. Your mother and I have already decided.»

«Lieutenant Karnienkov, you have been selected for your first mission.» His look was stupefied when he turned himself staring at his father, who could not hide his profound commotion.

«My son!» exclaimed his mother hugging him vigorously.

«Don't worry mother. You will be proud of me» he replied just before joining his mission.

The countdown was almost over and instinctively he turned to salute her again, then he stepped in the spacecraft taking the assigned position. The spacecraft started trembling while a voice slowly pronounced the seconds. «*Chetyre, tri, dva, a'deen...* (Four, three, two, one...)» A huge blast shook the spacecraft which, in an escalation of smoke puff, took off blinding him with light.

«Holy Mother Russia!» he exclaimed astonished.

«Hey fellow» a barely recognizable silhouette replied, «is get along ok?» Yuri grasped its movement and after a moment of bewilderment, he felt dragged into the void. The American tethered him to a cable, pushing him slowly into the Shuttle.

His father, moved by all this, greeted him for the last time.

From Fabio Lentini's "Night Tales"

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Internet navigators only can read it.

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² River that passes through the city of Leningrad, today known as San Petersburg.