

GROUND CONTROL

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It began one cold night in November, one year before Tom's launch date. Tom had been out on his walk longer than usual that night. I was starting to get worried when I heard the backdoor creak open. The cold ocean wind slipped through, bringing the scent of the primrose that grew along the dunes.

I waited, but didn't hear him enter the house.

"Tom?" I said. He didn't answer.

I placed my pen on the pile of medical texts covering the sofa, and walked toward the back hallway. He stood framed in the doorway, the moonlight silvering the dunes behind him. When I got closer, I saw that he was trembling.

"Are you all right?" I asked. "What happened?"

"You wouldn't believe--" he stopped himself. He frowned, as if trying to remember something important.

I pushed sweat-dampened curls off his forehead. I could feel his breath on my face, coming fast.

"We were speeding between the stars," he said. "They were burning gold and blue and red. More colors than you can imagine, brighter than I've ever seen before. It was so beautiful."

I studied his face carefully, but there was no hint of humor in his expression. His eyes were wide, the pupils dilated. Drugs, I thought, then immediately rejected the thought. Tom rarely even drank. The upcoming mission was too important to him.

I pulled him into the kitchen where it was lighter. His pupils contracted to a normal size. He blinked, then focused on me as if noticing me for the first time since he came in.

He shook his head. "I must have fallen asleep," he said.

"Outside?" I said. I checked his pulse. It was high, but slowing. "I'm going to call a doctor."

"No," he said. "I'm fine now. Really."

His color had come back, and along with it his ready smile. He did look fine. Happy, even. He started to fill the kettle with water. "Would you like some tea?"

"Tom," I said. "What happened?"

He put the kettle on the cooktop without looking at me. "Nothing. I was just standing outside."

I felt the draft from the backdoor, still open.

I went to close it, glancing into the yard. An earlier wind had smoothed the sand to a fine surface, like polished glass. The sand was undisturbed except for Tom's footprints, which led away from the house. I saw Tom's returning prints as well, a steady line to and from the middle of the yard.

What he had told me was true. He hadn't gone anywhere.

When I returned to the kitchen, Tom was humming contentedly to himself, sipping his tea.

I watched him carefully the rest of the evening. I told myself he had experienced a small memory lapse. I had read about that happening to people, especially as a precursor of epilepsy. I was in my third year of medical school, and was just beginning to study neurophysiological disorders. But Tom had none of the other indicators for epilepsy, and of course he had been through extensive testing at the training center.

I thought about calling a psychiatrist, then reconsidered. Nothing had happened. One visit to a psychiatrist, and he would be quietly taken off of MM16, the first manned mission to Mars. He had been training for the mission for four years now. I couldn't do that to him. I convinced myself it had been the stress of the last few months, the relentless training. I wouldn't destroy his dream because of one strange little lapse.

Later, I regretted my decision more than any other in my life.

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It was a beautiful day. A few wisps of clouds floated in a brilliantly blue sky. The breeze off the water was warm, rustling the new spring growth along the edge of the ocean.

I had almost forgotten about Tom's memory lapse of last November.

I leaned on my shovel and watched him dig, the muscles in his back moving under his t-shirt. He shoveled dirt carefully into the planter around the little orange tree. The leaves of the tree were still furled, little nubs against thin branches.

"It should have fruit by the time you return," I said. He would be gone five years. We would both be in our forties when he returned. I would have my medical degree.

Tom looked at the tree for a moment, then over at me. His expression grew troubled. "It's a dangerous mission," he said.

"You'll be fine," I said. Teams of scientists had planned for a decade for this mission. There were backup plans, and backups for the backups. The crew had been through thousands of simulations. I had to believe he would be all right.

He set his shovel down and came over to me, drawing me into an embrace. I smelled soap and his after-shave, and underneath that, the musky scent of his skin. It would be hard to go through all those days knowing he wouldn't be lying close to me at night, that I wouldn't smell those scents for five years.

"If I didn't return--" he began.

I cut him off. "Don't think that way," I said. "You'll return."

He pulled back. "But if I didn't," he insisted. "I want to know you'd be okay."

I watched him for a moment. The sunlight reflected brown-gold from his irises. His eyebrows were drawn together and he was frowning the way he did when he puzzled through one of his physics calculations. Of course I would not be fine. The man I had chosen to spend my life with would be gone forever. But I didn't say that to him. He needed reassurance, for his own peace of mind.

"I would survive," I said.

"You're my only regret," he said. His frown deepened. "I'll miss you so much."

"Stop it," I said. I swatted him playfully, and he pretended to fall down. His smile returned as I chased him past the orange tree and onto the beach.

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"You're leaving in five months," I said.

It made absolutely no sense to have the skylight installed. He wouldn't be able to enjoy it for years. But Tom was insistent.

"I have to do this," he said. "I have to be able to see the stars."

You'll see them every day on your mission, I almost said, but stopped myself. I didn't want to spend the rest of our short time together arguing.

We had to sleep in the guest bedroom for the week it took the contractors to build the skylight into the roof of our bedroom.

When we moved back in, Tom spent every night before sleep gazing up through that skylight. No matter the state of the sky--moonless, overcast, or clear starlit night--he would gaze upward like a man staring at a lover. His look was so full of longing it made my heart ache for him, even as an irrational jealousy swept through me. I wouldn't have believed anyone if they told me I would marry a man and not be jealous of any woman in his life, just the stars.

One night I woke to see him sitting straight up in bed, his head craned upward.

"Would you leave the earth if you could?" he asked.

I reached up and gently tugged him back until he was lying against my side. "You'll get a crick in your neck," I said.

I threw my arm over his chest, trying to will him back to sleep, but he was too keyed up.

"Suppose you were offered the opportunity to tour the universe," Tom said. "Would you do it?"

I yawned. "We don't have that sort of technology," I said. "We can barely get a person to the next planet."

"But suppose you could somehow. Would you give up your life here to do it?"

I didn't have to think about that very long. "No way."

"But think of what you would see! All those worlds to explore. All those amazing sights. Dying suns, new suns, supernovas up close. Did you know that Beta Kai has two earth-type planets in orbit?"

"Isn't Mars far enough for you?" I said.

He didn't say anything for a while. Then finally, just as I was drifting off again, he said, "The problem is, how would you prove you wanted to go? You, out of all the other people on earth?"

I opened my eyes again. I could see his profile in the starlight, the shadows hiding his eyes, settling in the hollow of his cheeks. I turned his face to mine, away from the skylight. His chin was scratchy under my fingers.

"Let's go to sleep," I said. "You can send an application to NASA in the morning."

He smiled. I thought that was the last of it.

#

The closer we got to the launch date, the more Tom was in the news. Being interviewed by the media was part of his job. One of the reasons he was chosen was because he looked good in front of the camera, because he spoke articulately and with passion about the mission. He was desperate to get to the stars, more than any of the other crew members. You could see it in his eyes even through the filter of the camera lens.

During the last few months before the launch he had to stay at the training center fulltime. I visited every day, and we would walk through the grounds on his lunch breaks. The perfectly trimmed lawns and asphalt pathways led between white-painted concrete buildings. Everything was cheery and predictable, hiding the fact that the whole place was designed to toss men and women into the black night sky, into the dangerous unknown.

Tom seemed more and more distracted every time I saw him, and at the same time, happier, almost manic.

Secretly, I hoped something would go wrong, that he would be diagnosed with a disease. Something like Hepatitis E would be perfect: incurable, mild, and wildly contagious. I had even planned how to comfort him when they replaced him with one of the other astronauts on the Mars mission team. Losing your big dream is a terrible thing, I would say, but think of this: you still have me, your home and everyone who loves you here on earth. How could that not comfort him? Once the sting of it was past, he would see that he was happier here with me.

But he seemed healthier than ever. Nothing had gone wrong in the training and testing.

"I wish you weren't going," I said to him one day.

"This is my last chance," he said. "Next mission, I'll be too old."

"I miss you at home," I said.

"I miss you, too," he said, more automatic than heart-felt. He looked up at the sky, a pale light blue. "And I miss lying in bed, looking up at the stars. We don't have any skylights here."

"What's so great about the stars?" I said.

He gave me a puzzled look.

"You'll get sick of watching them on the mission."

"Of course," he said. He put his arm around me.

But I couldn't shake the feeling that I was losing him to something I couldn't understand. Something big and mysterious.

I went home and rummaged through Tom's tools until I found the staple gun. Then I stapled a blanket tight over that damn skylight.

#

I never watched the launches or hung out at mission control, the way the other spouses did. It made me too nervous. I was always expecting something to go wrong.

Instead, I embarked on an anxious cleaning binge. I unplugged the TV so I wouldn't be tempted to watch the launch, and instead turned the house upside-down. That's when I found the books.

Alien Abduction, They Have Come For Us, The Truth About Them. The books were jammed in the back corner of the closet adjoining the garage, behind Tom's old guitar that he hadn't played in years.

They were new books. One had a receipt still stuck in the middle as a bookmark. The date was mid-November.

I called the training center immediately, but of course it was too late. Tom was gone. The launch had gone well, they informed me. I should be proud of Tom and the five other astronauts, now well on their way out of Earth's orbit.

It would be all right, I told myself. The books didn't mean anything.

But when Latimer called later that afternoon, I had that sick feeling of recognition, like I should have seen it coming. I knew immediately from the sound of his voice that something had gone wrong.

"We lost communication with him when he went out for his spacewalk," Latimer said.

Latimer was NASA's top PR person. He was an expert at sounding sympathetic and assured all at once. "We're working on reestablishing the link right now," he said. "There's nothing to worry about."

They hadn't lost communication. I knew better.

"Where is he?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"He's moving away from the ship," Latimer said. "They can see him from the port-side window."

So there was still hope.

"Would you like to come down to mission control?" he asked. "We can send a car."

"Yes," I said. "No. I mean, I'll drive myself." I hung up.

I stood still for a moment, watching the play of sunlight across the granite counters in the kitchen.

Through the row of windows I could see the backyard gently sloping down to the beach. The new orange tree in the planter bisected the view, its leaves now unfurled and a healthy green. It was still on course to bear fruit around the time Tom returned from his mission.

But Tom would never return from the mission. I suddenly knew it like I knew the curve of the beach beyond our little fence.

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The large room at mission control was filled with a hushed tension, fingers tapping rapidly against computer keyboards, groups of engineers speaking in low, tense, tones.

Latimer led me to a console at the back, where Alice and few of the other mission specialists were debating something. From the raised platform, I could see across the three rows of monitors to the large screen on the far wall. It blinked an incomprehensible pattern of lights and words. On the other side of the room I saw Alan Hemsley, the husband of one of the other astronauts.

"Tara Hemsley's going out to retrieve him," Latimer said. "She's suited up and ready to go out."

Alice spoke with another engineer, a man I didn't recognize. "We've triple-checked it," he said. "There's nothing wrong with his radio."

"Oxygen?" she asked.

"Oxygen level is fine. Suit pressure is 15 psi. All normal."

"Maybe he's unconscious."

The man shook his head.

"Let me talk to him," I said.

They both turned to me.

"He's not responding to anything you say, right?" I said.

Alice shrugged. She indicated a microphone set into the front of the main console. "Hook her up," she said.

The other engineer tapped a few commands into the keyboard.

"Can I see him?"

"Visual feed," Alice called to someone. A small window popped up on the screen in front of me.

Tom's bright white suit hung suspended against the black of space. It grew smaller even as I watched, as he moved away from the ship.

Another suited figure was just emerging from the airlock.

I flipped the switch on the base of the microphone. "Tom?" I said. "Can you hear me?"

I listened for a moment. A low hum was all I got in response.

"What was his last transmission?" I said.

Alice looked embarrassed. She lifted a sheet from the desk, indicating the lines. I looked past the rows of numbers to the transcribed conversations.

Tom's last words were, 'Tell my wife I love her very much.'

And then I realized what he was doing. He had finally figured out how he would prove to 'them' that he wanted to go tour the universe.

"That bastard," I said.

Alice and Latimer gave me a look.

On screen, Tara Hemsley adjusted a knob on her suit. A flare, and she started to move away from the ship, toward Tom.

I stared, unable to turn away from the scene. Tara's figure grew smaller, making Tom's look suddenly bigger. Or had he stopped moving?

"He's coming back!" Tara's static-filled transmission filled the air.

It was true. Tom was approaching the ship, blotting out more stars.

Cheers erupted around the room.

I was the only one not smiling. It was too late for Tom, though no one else knew it yet.

The two figures filled the screen, Tara reaching out and attaching a tether to the clip at Tom's waist once he was close enough.

"They've got him," Latimer said. "He'll be all right."

Tara tugged on Tom's arm, pulling him toward the airlock. Abruptly, she stopped.

"What's the matter?" Alice spoke into the microphone. "Give us a report, Hemsley."

Tara leaned forward until her faceplate was almost touching Tom's, and she flipped a switch on his chestpanel. A faint light emerged from his helmet.

"Oh my god," she said.

"What?" Alice said. Her voice went low. "Tell us what you see."

Tara reached behind and pulled herself back toward the airlock.

"He's not in there," she said.

#

The media story was simple: a tiny speck of high-velocity interstellar dust had penetrated his suit. A one in a million chance, hitting at just the right time and in just the right spot. Tom had fired his jettison packs, trying to reach the capsule before he lost all his air. He miscalculated, and went spinning off into space, irretrievable. Latimer did a good job explaining it all to the media with his perpetually sympathetic expression.

I like that explanation, and sometimes I almost believe it. It is marred only by the fact that they still have his suit on board the MM16.

Other times I imagine him slipping from the suit somehow, jettisoning himself away from the capsule in the last five seconds of his life, instantly freezing in the vacuum of space. I imagine him floating somewhere between Earth and Mars, frozen, his blood long since boiled away. It makes me angry that he would do such a thing, leaving me in his death.

But usually, I imagine him alive and jubilant, touring the universe, or dancing under the warm light of Beta Kai on a planet far away. And that makes me the most angry of all.