

Dream Space

By Adair Broughton

He was calm, which was surprising considering what had just occurred, what he had done.

His breath and the intermittent, strangely comforting beep of life were the only sound. That soft beep was recognition of the vital responses being checked and re-checked, sent down to earth via one of the many geo-stationary orbiting satellites slowly turning beneath him. It told him he was alive, which was good to know.

The cold metal shimmering below was his last link to humanity, to the billions of people unaware of the speck of life now surfing the heavens above. He was the technological angel who had everything but wings. It appeared eternity didn't actually last that long.

Once the data was relayed there would be a rising pressure in the space centre, concern and then the forlorn realisation that someone else had drifted to places unknown. He knew their hearts would beat faster than his own, but in essence there was nothing they could do. He had little time for despair and only a little more time for thought. They had lots of time for despair but a lot less time for thought.

People would be scratching their heads, interpreting instruments and analysing the preceding events, confused but ultimately never surprised that these things happen and occur. Space was not man's backyard. Eventually they would realise what had happened, but he didn't want anybody else to lead a life of guilt, so he had taken offline some important instruments.

All his life he had dreamt of space, fascinated from an early age. Yet even now it was through a massive amount of hard work and luck that he had gotten into this position, to become an astronaut. Part of him still couldn't believe it. It was meant to be perfect; a sublime realisation that dreams could come true. This was the pinnacle of what he could achieve, what he lived for. It had answered so many of his thoughts but the emptiness of space had not managed to fill the void in his soul, the missing link of what it meant to feel. What could follow that? Does day follow night or does night follow day?

Space was permanent night. Dreams had taken him there and now dreams were taking him away, but not home, not where he could sit outside at night on the swinging chair, listening to the night time orchestra of nature, his arm around his wife, her head resting on his chest, his child asleep in her bed and the dogs muffled sleep, lost to its own dreams, as it lay beneath them, its tail wagging with the pictures of thought.

That small parcel of land, moderate house and people he loved seemed as unreal as the vastness around appeared all too real. He could not comprehend the scale or the size but he had never felt smaller, as open or as humble as at that time.

He had looked up at the night sky in that same garden before he had left. His wife had not said much, expressing what she felt through delicate touch and deep longing in

her eyes, accepting the journey but not ever feeling comfortable with it. Like he had his angels to contend with, she had her demons. She needed him but she never said. She felt alone already. She feared this mission but her role was one of support, she had to have faith in the mission, in the millions of pounds spent to take him there, in the hundreds of support staff and technology to propel him and keep him safe in space. There were hundreds of things that could go wrong and she had to concentrate on the only one she could control, him. Neither of them spoke about the trip. It was as if ignoring it allowed normality to at least be a part of their lives. The silence between them was not a lack of communication but a great understanding. If there was any distance between them it was how close rather than how far.

At least that is what she wanted to believe. Deep down she knew something was going to happen with the mission. This was not prescience or seeing into the future. It was a gut instinct, a hidden sense.

She would lie in bed, listening to him breathing, her hand on his flesh, absorbing the warmth. Had the danger attracted her to him or were they meant to be together? She imagined being alone, alone forever. It was too easy to do and that was what scared her. How could he sleep so peacefully, be content with riding the liquid firework and not fear it. It was not right she was more worried than him. What was it exactly she feared? If anyone had a right to feel lonely it was he.

Yet she hated the attention he received. He would be far away but all eyes would be on him. She would be there with her daughter, people smiling and congratulating her on what he had achieved. It was her that was lonely, that needed some special attention.

The stars were beautiful to her too but they were not her life.

He remembered that last night at home, a week before the mission. His wife had fallen asleep and the night had become his own, already offering comfort. He had felt something strange at that moment. It was as if he had infinite love but was unable ever to show it, be in control of it, knowing that something would always separate the self or even the soul from another person.

He felt it again now, confined to a space suit but liberated from his life, from life on earth. No matter how close you can be to someone, how much you care for and love him or her, you are always alone. Had anyone overcome that? Would it ever be possible?

It was beautiful to know how much you could care but agonisingly unfair to know that the person loved will never be able to comprehend it or recognise it. There is duality in nature as in science but also in love. He tried of ways to show her, spend time with her. They had become parents, had successful careers, everybody was proud. Still they both did not feel completely comfortable. There had always been an unknown quantity missing. How could you explain that feeling to someone you loved without him or her analysing it the wrong way, making them feel they were not loved to the extent they actually were?

It was easy to reflect from the position he was in. Maybe everybody felt that way but could not say every thought because of damage it could do. People were guarding loved ones as well as themselves when they kept some things hidden.

Perspective was everything and he was in the perfect scenario to use it. He was away from noise, from people, from history, from the world and furthest away from all from those closest to him. He looked down upon that pale blue dot its size getting gradually smaller as he drifted further and further away.

The colours had been so vivid, as if living on the earth dulled the senses only for them to come alive, pierce his eyes with green and brown and blue like he could never have imagined, once he was floating above. He had seen photographs, had thought of nothing else since childhood but nothing compared to how glorious and serene that small world had looked. If only it could have taken his breath away.

There was still so much greenery in the landmass. The concrete lawns and slick city heights had not yet encroached on the timeless landscape so that the overpowering belief in the grey world that city life gave was not the harsh reality. The planet was still not mans to dominate, and it probably never would be. Mankind was ubiquitous but it was all-relative.

How could he bemoan progress when he was directly involved at the forefront of science, space itself. The environmental satellite jettisoned earlier in the mission his get out clause of guilt's forgiveness.

There was so much life below. Life was everywhere, astounding proliferation, from smallest to largest, hottest to coldest, filling every crevice or niche. It was billions of years old, all descended from the same source, whether a hot vent in the sea bed, a pond of nutrients or even from the meteors that had once so frequently bombarded the earth. He looked at the atmosphere surrounding the disappearing earth. He was like the ancient mariner with neither water all around nor any drop to drink. He looked at that atmosphere with envy, a sea of blue electron scattering and the oxygen contained within.

He felt warm in the suit, the thinning air forcing deeper breath.

He could group all that life together and see it as one thing. Why couldn't people realise they were just one small part of every species that had ever existed or will exist. Mankind was a moment in time, the briefest glimmer in a star's life. Yet so much had been done in such a small human timescale that he could understand why it felt like the present was a golden age, which things had deliberately led up to. The belief of design, of importance, was still strong in some.

Everyone should be in this position, to see life as a dot. The earth was less magnificent now, he almost felt sorry for it, for the billions below. He was looking at unity, colours merging. From his viewpoint he could not see everyday life, hiding away all the high rise towers that soared like vultures to the city streets, the concrete rivers and the wars fought behind desks.

As mankind progressed, understood nature as well as space and time it found it to be more and more insignificant, transient and precarious in its position. It was for that reason they were special not from any false belief in absolute reason.

He had wanted to find God up there but all he felt was intense beauty. He had faith in something, in his longing to be outside the atmosphere, and he had prayed to no one that it would come to fruition. There was no connection to anything other than the spirit of existence. Out of six billion people it was him who was in space now. All his ancestors had survived and replicated. The odds of all these things were phenomenal, insurmountable to comprehend. Maybe that was enough. Chance was the real instigator. Life was everything.

If he had not found God had he found anything in its place? Was there a purpose to any of this? Perspective was also a highlighting tool. The more deeply you believed in something the quicker it could fade. Everything had led up to this, so what was after?

He remembered how safe his wife had made him feel. With entwined arms and embrace he had felt secure. He wanted to embrace the earth, the rock that he saw below. It looked so precarious, so small against the backdrop of emptiness. If only everyone could see this, feel what he felt. People would forget their hubris and arrogance. They would appreciate all life and time, care for the planet. He was becoming sentimental, losing the strict control of his thoughts.

So why had she never mentioned about his dream, his wish. Why could he feel her love but at the same time know something was missing, as if she couldn't fully commit herself because she believed he would never always be there. He saw this in her eyes as much as her eyes reminded him of the stars. She had been a mystery to him, an enigma. There was a depth to her that he could not fathom. She had seen something of him he had only just known about himself.

His own doubts had been swept away in the sea of radiation he was basking in. He had come as close to God as anyone could be and the silence of God was louder still. Nothing spoke back except a belonging to nature. That one planet looked as small and as vulnerable as he had felt when he had seen his wife kiss that other man.

His world had fallen apart and from that time he had given himself a belief. He would find God and if God didn't respond he would know what to do.

But now, on reflection he had questioned things, about what part he played in that event. He had known she wasn't getting close to him, feeling a part of what he felt. Had he forced into the arms of another man because of the distance he had wanted to keep until he had achieved his life's ambition.

It had hurt him to the core, burnt as hot as the glowing photon pit that held the planets in space, the invisible warping of space to create orbits. Just because her dreams were closer to home, it didn't mean he should have ignored them. How strong could he expect a person to be?

So he had begun to think, losing his thoughts even deeper, the inner space turmoil to the outer space recoil that had separated him from his module. It was too late now, but choices were like that.

What was in a kiss? Could he really do something so profound as this over something as simple and meaningless as two lips kissing? Was it the fact that he felt above nature and longings and humanity because he was unique in what was to happen? He was realising his own arrogance while visualising and commenting on mankind's own. He wasn't separate, he knew that now and his actions had patronised the whole human race.

He was the flotsam of jetsam of space, driftwood that would never find a beach. He had thrown himself overboard, had walked the plank, had tied iron to his legs and immersed himself in deep water. He had given himself to the void because the void had consumed him with letdown.

It was so warm; he wanted to sleep, to find peace.

Occasionally flashes would hit his retina, he closed his eyes and they still occurred knowing they must be cosmic rays or just his senses beginning to fail. An old philosophy lesson came back to him, how it was possible to imagine nothing in space but impossible to imagine space as nothing. There was something similar to her. He could not clear his mind of her. He wished he had been better at love, rather than excelling at the false pretence of it.

His daughter would have a beautiful mother no matter what.

She would never know her dad as a coward. He would be a hero, always watching down upon her. How many other children had a father who could roam the stars and always protect them because they would always be looking down.

He wanted his wife to know, but she knew anyway. He could sense it. He didn't want his daughter to find out the truth.

You take everything with you and it accentuates it when you enter space. You have the weight of soul and the baggage of humanity, not knowing if you should be carrying both. If he had jettisoned his life why couldn't he reject these two things also?

Life seemed different in space. Things are understood once you are separated from them. He was the only person with that view now. It was unfair he would have no chance to explain it or show anyone. It was unfair that he still had to think. He knew the decision he was going to make depended on what he did or didn't find. It had disappointed him but somehow, like his wife knew, he also knew this was always going to happen. Did she know he knew about that kiss?

Kisses were silent emblems of passion but they could say so much, destroy truth. He was surrounded by the universe and all he could think of was the seven his wife had spent with another man, not the seven years with him.

Nobody had ever been given a better time to think, and he had made his choice, so what was the slight feeling of regret that gravitated around him.

And however vulnerable he felt, he knew earth was more so.

He closed his eyes, hoping he could remember his wife and family in a different way, before he had seen his wife in the arms of another. Why hadn't he just told her he knew instead of pretending everything was ok? She may have surprised him, he wouldn't know now. He had felt let down that she couldn't tell him. She deserved happiness too, so why did he feel it was only him who could have provided it. Like he reached for the stars, she needed her own warmth.

The earth in its magnificence was too much even for him. Only moments before he had physically reached out. How could something so big and so close suddenly seem so far away, like he had never really belonged there? He was just a small passing moment in its history. Was he reaching out to the whole world or just to her?

Space was far too big for an apology.

A tear fell from his eye but he was unable to rub it. His memory faded into hers. Once again he was back in that garden.

She had woken up after falling asleep next to him, rubbed her eyes and yawned, all things that now gave him a gentle smile. She had asked him to go to bed, she was tired, wanted the warmth of his skin, to hold him one last time. All he had said was give me a minute. The stars winked, knowing they had won his heart and he stared at them for a further hour. How he longed for that hour now, to once again be with his wife, instead of feeling closer to the stars.

She had offered him every chance to be close. In subtle ways he had destroyed that, making her feel insignificant while going through the motions of love. He was as guilty for not showing feelings as he was at needing them. It was ok to hold, to kiss, and to be close but if the mind is still separated a universe already exists between them.

Stars were no longer jewels of the night that he had wished upon as a young boy. They had been everything to him. Those wishes were lost to the reality of the burning furnaces that became mocking candles of times limit. Beauty surrounded him and peace beckoned. He hadn't been able to close his eyes for long.

He held is breath instead, could hear himself blink in between the persistent beeps. They would know he was still alive, probably even have his last location and know more than him how much air he had left.

It wasn't much. His lungs were beginning to burn, his thoughts less distinct. It was so hot, the modulated air temperature circuits failing due to cutting off the main feedback sensors.

His daughter would be fast asleep and wake up without a father. He tortured himself thinking how his wife would tell her. She had come home crying from school because

they had tormented her after she told them her daddy was a spaceman. She had been so proud but not realising the significance or importance of it. They had told her he would be eaten by aliens and a small part of her that could believe that, had concentrated itself into worry and tears.

He had spent that night calming her fears, all the while wondering why he had none of his own. Not even now. Was it something he had been born to do? He did not believe in fate but the long accumulation of events seemed to coerce him into that belief.

Even though she was far away, receding further every second, she was paying back his kindness, comforting him in final moments.

Often it is the things that you love that kill you in the end.

Sometimes he wished there really was a god so he could look at how magnificent nature was too. It was disappointing but did it make everything meaningless not to have a purpose?

There was no time for questions. His mind had slowed right down.

It was a shame he hadn't felt it. It should not have changed anything but it was something else to make the answer clearer. Life was even more special because there wasn't a god. Or maybe god had known of his thoughts and thought him a coward too and was keeping his distance. He had a whole universe of finite visible distance and time to play hide and go seek. If only his wife could have hidden things better or maybe not at all. This wasn't a game now.

His last moments were neither sadness nor a realisation of something so profound that he became one with the universe. Instead he became warm, struggling for breath.

Each moment was taking him further than anyone had ever been.

There were stars all around and a small lump of rock, a little rock of consciousness. He turned the beeps off as nonchalantly as he would turn the bedside light off. There was more than enough light here. Strange it was still so dark. He was too tired to think now; glad of the small time he had been given.

It was just another night but not just another sleep He fell asleep to the immutable dream.

His daughter woke up to a bad dream, slowly walked into her mother's room rubbing sleep from her eyes. She nudged her mother awake.

A tired response asked what was wrong.

"I miss daddy. Is daddy ok?"

There was a moment's silence, as quiet as the void and the relentless space above.

"Your daddy is asleep. You should go back to bed."

There was another pause. The young girl dropped her teddy bear.

"Sweetie. It's ok. Daddy is just dreaming too."