

Stars

By Gabriel Bergmoser

At the times when he felt the most alone he would think back to the book. It wasn't a book really, more of a magazine or a glorified flier, the sort you could lift out of a newspaper to give to your kids and keep them entertained while you read about whatever was supposed to be of interest at that time, all the while ignoring that the kids got the good stuff.

The book was about space. It was full of various colourful facts and pictures, stories about the history of space travel and all the rest. He had read through it so many times, so many times that the images were ingrained in his head. The sleek shape of the spaceship heading into the darkening blue of a sky reaching for the stars. The figures of astronauts in their bulky suits, who should have looked ridiculous but somehow didn't. Men and women who lived lives and went to places most could scarcely imagine.

That wasn't what had excited him the most. It was the sky and the stars that carried his imagination elsewhere, the idea of everything that was out there to be found and explored. Maybe it was the colour; the dark blue so close to black, at the last moment before the familiar became the unknown. But the unknown didn't scare him. And that was why he knew what he had to do.

He had remembered that book all through his training and even as the realities revealed themselves to be rather different than the image painted by that book, he kept on. Because this, he had known from an early age, was all that mattered. In every other part of his life he was going through the motions; the friends, girlfriends, eventual wife and children. He had pretended they meant a lot to him and maybe on some level they had but they could never compete with the stars. They could never make his breath catch the way it did when he looked at a night sky so brilliant and alive with the tiny lights that each signified something just waiting to be discovered, something so far beyond his imagining. It didn't matter how mundane the instructors tried to make it or how eventually the suits and tech and protocol all started to feel suspiciously like a job. None of that was what had ever excited him. They were just rungs on the ladder he was climbing to eventually reach the stars.

Nobody had believed him when he told them what he wanted to do. But then, so many kids said they were going to be astronauts. He had just lasted a little longer than most, was all. Reality was yet to set in. But then reality never did set in and he kept building that ladder, kept

creeping out of bed at midnight, trying not to wake the wife and kids, so he could stand alone under the blanket of the night and look at it all and hope that one day he could be up there.

His first thought, as he was strapped into the cockpit, had been of the day he had walked into an op shop in his hometown as a teenager only to find his book stuffed in a crate of other half filled in colouring books and dog-eared magazines. He had, to his chagrin, paid for it before storming home to confront his mother, who shrugged and said that he hadn't touched it in years, that he was far too old for that now. He had struggled to find the words to encapsulate the betrayal, so he had just stopped speaking to her for a week.

But then she had watched with the rest of the world as he proved them all wrong.

It didn't feel real, some days. How many times had he been told that dreams changed, and even if they didn't people scarcely achieved them? Of course, the same people who told him that were the ones who had told him in his early years that he could do anything if he put his mind to it, so the conviction of their cynicism was somewhat compromised. But it didn't really matter, in the end, as he heard the roar of engines and felt that powerful rush beneath him as he had been carried away from the planet. There was satisfaction to proving the doubters wrong of course, but it wasn't about them. It never had been. It had only ever been about the stars.

Now, years removed from that moment, with his pot belly and his greying hair, he would crack a beer and sit on the porch, looking up at the night sky that seemed so much duller than it had when he was a kid, but still so much more alive than down here. And he would close his eyes and try to remember those minutes, floating out there among the stars. He would try to feel that feeling again. He would try to see it, to let the images fill his mind's eye. But they were faded and weak now. The lingering memory of a long-gone emotion.

He knew that Fay was starting to hate him. He did his best to seem interested in the things she said over dinner, her problems at work, the fact that the kids hadn't called in months. But all he ever thought about was those minutes in the stars, the minutes he was trying so hard to sear into his memory so they didn't fade more than they already had. That one moment in time when he had been so close. That moment, among the black and the lights of the stars, when he had reached out and imagined he was falling through it all forever, never alone because he had the universe around him, cold and welcoming and beautiful and terrible all at once. He didn't need to own or understand it. He just needed to know he was a part of it. For the stars to know that he saw their significance and beauty, even if nobody else did. Fay's fears about the mortgage, his son calling to complain about his baby acting up, his daughter crying over another breakup; how did any of them truly expect him to care? To the stars it would be over and forgotten in less than the blink of an eye.

But if there was one thing he had learnt, it was that people didn't change. They couldn't, really, after a certain point. Human beings were like clay; malleable and full of potential until they dried and hardened and any attempt at change would only break them. There was no point in being angry at the fact. He couldn't hate Fay for her spite, her drinking or the times she hadn't come home after staff parties with handsome Gerald. He felt something about all that, he supposed, but it didn't matter really. Because the realisation he knew he had been holding at bay was coming home with every passing year and before long he would not have the ability to do anything about it.

Maybe, when he had been younger and naive, part of him had really believed that Fay and the children and all the rest could make him happy. He had always been good at pretending, enough so as to make even himself believe it. But on the doorstep of old age, the stupidity of the pretence was too clear to ignore, and in the face of that there was only one option left to him.

He was too old to get in another ship. There wasn't much call for astronauts past thirty, and thirty was well and truly in his rear-view mirror. And while he had heard talk of commercial flights, he knew they could never satisfy him. Seeing the stars from behind the windows of a glorified plane was scarcely any better than watching from down here.

He knew the science and his calculations were reliable. So he started buying. His pension would cover all he needed. He made sure to keep it all secure and never buy too much too many days in a row. Fay wouldn't understand and besides, he didn't want to hurt her. Ignorance wasn't her fault.

He could be patient, but not lax. Time was not on his side. So he kept to a schedule; two days sitting on the porch, drinking beer, making small talk with Fay, reading a book, then the third day out and buying more of what he needed. He allowed himself every one of those third nights in the shed, preparing. Sometimes, when Fay was asleep, he would go out there just to look and smile and remind himself of how soon it would all be over. Soon he would be home.

When everything was ready, he marked a date in his calendar. He made sure to give himself time beforehand to do what he had to do. He visited all his children. He asked them about their lives and listened to their woes with a sympathetic expression. He saw friends, promised to catch up with them more, and laughed about the good old days. He cooked Fay dinner, told jokes and tried to ignore the mingled concern and suspicion on her face.

He waited until midnight before he walked out to the shed. He waited until Fay's breathing steadied beside him, then he kissed her on the cheek, stroked her face one more time, then stood and got dressed. He walked into the living room and removed from below the cushion on their

couch, the battered, faded old book. He walked out to the porch and sat there, flicking through it, reading and occasionally glancing up to the stars. Remembering that feeling. The feeling he would soon have again.

Then he crossed the yard, through the cool breeze, to the shed.

He still could not be sure it was ready, but he supposed there was always something he could have done differently. In the end, he just had to trust that he knew what he was doing, that all those years of training would not let him down. He took a moment to check everything, then he climbed slowly into his suit and zipped it up. He pulled on his helmet and secured the pack. In theory, it should all work. There had been no real option for a test flight.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath inside the helmet, then walked out to the yard. He couldn't feel the breeze anymore. The minutes before had been the last time. There was no breeze in space. He looked to the sky.

'What the hell are you doing?'

Fay was standing on the porch, wrapped in her dressing gown, staring at him.

He opened his mouth to explain, but the words didn't come.

'David, take that off,' she said.

He shook his head.

'David...' she took a few steps forward, then stopped. There were tears in her eyes. 'David, you need help.'

'I don't,' he said. 'Fay, I need to do this.'

She was crying now. 'David, please. I've tried but enough is enough. You can't... you need to see someone. This can't go on.'

'That's why I'm going Fay,' he said. 'I'm sorry. It's not your fault. But I...' He paused. He had never said this out loud before. 'I need to be up there again. Up with the stars.'

Something crossed her face. Something that made his heart race and stomach twist. 'David... stop. You've never been up there. You're a mechanic. Always have been. You can't keep doing this to us.'

He was shaking his head now. She didn't understand. He hadn't expected her to, but even so. 'You won't take this away from me,' he said. 'I'm going back and I'm staying this time. They can't pull me down again.'

'Nobody ever pulled you down.' Her voice was cracking. 'You *never went up*. David, I know this life wasn't what you wanted, but there are people here who love you. Who want to help you. You have to stop.' She was walking towards him now. 'Look at yourself. You're wearing a hazmat suit with fireworks strapped to your back. You're going to hurt yourself.'

‘SHUT UP!’ he screamed. ‘SHUT THE HELL UP.’

‘David—’

Enough was enough. He fumbled for the lighter, pulling up the extended wick that led to all the rockets.

‘David!’ Fay cried. ‘Please—’

He lit it.

Fay stepped back. Her face was pale. Her eyes were wide.

David smiled. She understood. She finally understood.

And then.

And then the heat and the rush of force beneath him and the roar in his ears and then—

And then the stars.