

Vorliebe

Part I

White: all the colours of the spectrum, combined on a wall; white: falling into the snow on the North face of Mount Kailash, a spring meadow sprinkled with white, the white of a human eye. The hidden brilliance, the painted white of *albedo*, the reflectivity of the earth in the cosmos. White: the seconds in a parabola, flight upon flight, fall upon fall; rotation is white, as something forces its way out of her cranium once more, even though her brain is already outside her skull – it bulges outward again, pushing through the tiniest cracks, down and out, acceleration on the highest setting, white, memories of Peter, a reflection from the horizon, laughter in the centre of the vortex, and deeper, richer, enveloping white.

Seven minutes. They loosened the harness. Harriet's rival applicants had demonstrated just how green a person can turn.

The doctor said, "Open a bottle of bubbly when you get home".

The thought of bubbly made her feel sick, but as soon as she was in the corridor she lit a cigarette. Elaborate tests, international agencies. Did she really want to go into space, which she of all people ought to know was nothing other than... nothing?

She rehearsed some sentences for the selection procedure. "I've always treated men like jet engines". Not good. And it wasn't true anyway.

"Going into space to serve humanity". Clichéd. Useful.

"Because I think I'm suited to it". Not as bad as it seemed at first.

"Because I've always been curious about it." "Because I've got a head for it." "Because I can fly the thing."

And then, to finish, a surprise. She'd played it through in her head a thousand times, advised by a team of psychologists. They said, "just tell the truth, spit it out".

The truth?

The psychologists, a couple, smiled and showed her a diagram of a Soyuz rocket, with the front panels removed; she could see computers and instruments, the seating surrounded by cables and machines. Fasten your harness, plug yourself in, sit back. They would be flown by chips, chips inside her brain. Blood count, hormones, the latest hypotheses. Humans were guinea pigs in space. If the laboratory explodes or burns up, you'll go down with it. Narrow capsules, as small as dog cages.

Harriet's results were much better. Even after the rotation. She wasn't nauseous. She would have to stop smoking. They were actually looking for older candidates in fact. Ovulation, IQ, resting pulse rate. The years of rowing in Norway had paid off. Now everything was coming together. How grotesque.

"Now you're flying."

The static end of the accelerator was fixed to a massive cone which rose up from the floor in the middle of the room. The rest of the machine resembled a long spoon: the test subjects crawled inside the bowl and lay down in something that looked like a body-shaped coffin, wearing a camouflage-grey, vomit-proof suit. They were strapped in, everyone left the room, and the hatch closed.

Anyone with claustrophobia would die on the spot.

Everyone else was filmed by a camera.

The doctor said, "Space! For centuries no-one wanted to go there. Now everyone does. Lemmings, they're like lemmings."

"That's Walt Disney", said Harriet.

Walt Disney's lemmings looked like a cross between a guinea pig, hare and a mouse, and they threw themselves to their death.

The man from the European Astronaut Centre raised his eyes quizzically. He looked like a pirate from an old children's book. He must have seen a lot of astronaut candidates fail before.

It was only in the final seconds, just as the cover was closing, that the camera managed to capture the fear in Harriet's eyes.

She hadn't been afraid. It was her body which had felt the fear. She felt nothing. Three hours later she drove back to the Institute for Extraterrestrial Physics. She had practiced not feeling anything.

After the experiment they showed her the film. From outside the machine looked like an oversized second hand on a clock gone mad. Harriet watched herself crawl into its swollen end. Inside the Watchmaker.

The acceleration began. There was a critical speed above which internal organs would burst. They tried to get as close as possible to that limit. The second hand with her at the end sped round the white-painted, circular room, about 15 cm above the floor, without touching it. It went so fast it didn't even cast a shadow.

"Do you really want to go into space?"

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