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Peer reviewed|Undergraduate

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SKY'S EDGE**



**THE VERNAL POOL
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Sky's Edge

On the orbit of the brown planet, a white cylinder drifted. The cylinder had traveled for less than a thousandth of a galactic unit, the distance from one arm of the Galaxy to its center. Each galactic unit was over 15,000 parsecs, each parsec over 150,000 astronomical units, each astronomical unit over 150,000,000 kilometers. If it had been traveling at the speed of light, the little cylinder would have been drifting for half a century. But of course, the cylinder could only travel at a tiny fraction of the speed of the light, a barely conceivable velocity, and so the cylinder had been drifting for over 2000 years.

Thrusters shot out of the cylinder, steadying its descent onto the growing landmass. The onboard computers performed the meticulous calculations of landing 700,000 kilograms of mass against an object several magnitudes larger. A dozen cryo-sleep pods sat against the inner walls of the cylinder, holding the silhouette of its occupants suspended in time. Inside the occupied pods, microscopic machines called nanosurgeons modified internal organs, optimizing basic human physiology for the brown atmosphere and reanimating the body from its cold slumber. The process of cryo-sleep freezes the body, holding the body in the near absolute absence of energy, suspending the natural processes of life. As a result, the body ceases to truly sleep—to dream. This was the cylinder's 84th landing.

Evan Lang stared into the bulkhead above. Being an insomniac, he had always struggled to sleep, but now he found himself struggling to stay awake. As the cryonics technician, he was awoken first to ensure that the process was successful for everyone else and to minimize complications. This was a redundant duty as the ship's automated systems had less than a thousandth percent chance of failure per reanimation.

Taking his first breath in over twenty-five years, Evan re-

laxed, inhaling and exhaling. He was naked and cold.

He thought about Catherine Young, the crew physician and the mother of two beautiful daughters, at six and seven years old. When the cylinder made its first landing, Catherine joked that she would return to find grandchildren waiting. On the second landing, the joke became that she would return as a great-grandmother. Then on the third landing, Catherine became quiet. On the fourth landing, she was a withered corpse slouched over a chair, holding a still pristine photograph of her children. Her cyro-sleep pod was still awaiting its occupant. Evan had been the last person to see her alive, and he had been the first to discover her, twenty-five years later. They buried her along with all her mementos, her photographs, and told themselves that it was what she would have wanted. That was eighty landings ago. Evan has since made it a point to be the last one to rise from the pods.

A loud clang followed by a boisterous voice interrupted his thoughts. Leaning over him, Kurt Hermann, the engineer, was looking down into his pod.

“You awake yet?” asked Kurt, offering his hand, a tattoo of the sun visible on his forearm. “Get dressed. Captain’s waiting.”

Evan stared blankly at Kurt for a moment before reaching for the hand, raising himself out of the pod. They entered the main chamber.

Captain Tanvi Sen was standing atop a crate. She acknowledged Evan and Kurt, then addressed the crew. Her speech was prompt, functional, and to the point—diagnosis reports, fuel and supply rations, planetary conditions. Then she added, “This is the closest yet. Let’s get to work.”

The crew worked efficiently to prepare the cylinder for launch. Men exited the cylinder carrying various machines—drills, pumps, scanners. They filtered water, mined ore, manufactured replacement parts, and synthesized new rations. In a

different time and place, these tasks would have taken weeks, but automation shrunk the tasks to mere hours. Soon they were waiting on the final stages of the resupplying process in which the crew were powerless to work.

The lull became their greatest enemy. It was the lull that allowed for doubt and anxiety, which gave a sense of scale of time and space, which prompted Catherine Young to make jokes.

Kurt sat on his chair, legs resting on a crate used as a makeshift footstool. He was watching televised recordings from the 20th and 21st century, of fiction where humans effortlessly traveled across the stars. When it became apparent in the 25th century that faster than light travel was unfeasible, beyond the scope of man, the appeal shifted away from most, barring a few like Kurt, who continued to hold an unspoiled optimism for the abilities of mankind. Evan sat behind him, resting his head on his hands. His head felt like a bloated tomato.

“This is Ground Control to Major Tom,” sang Kurt. “Can you hear me Major Tom?”

“Yea?” sighed Evan.

“Join me. This is good stuff,” said Kurt. He waited for a response. “Need something to keep us going.”

“I never liked that stuff.”

“Maybe you’d like them now. We don’t have anything else to do.”

“I didn’t like them when they were hundreds of years old, and the last couple thousand years haven’t changed my opinion on the matter.”

“Come on Lang. It’ll make the time pass.”

“This is Major Tom to Ground Control,” responded Evan. “Please, shut up!”

Kurt was silent.

Evan stood up. “I’m sorry.”

He exited the room.

The main chamber was dimly lit. A lamp illuminated a chart in the center of the room, while stacks of boxes laid around the perimeter of the chamber. This was the lowest section of the cylinder, beyond which laid the brown planet.

Tanvi stood over the star chart. She gave him a brief glance, made a note, then looked up. "Did you need something?"

Evan looked at the chart. "How close are we are?"

"Well," began Tanvi. She paused. "Our capsule must make periodic stops. Where and when we make these stops are beyond what we can predict at this moment. But our ship has managed to find where it needs to stop so far. It seems to know where to go."

She resumed her work, making notes, occasionally erasing figures on the already worn paper.

Tanvi was the most senior member present when the cylinder had detached itself from the mining rig stationed on the Kuiper Belt, that last ring of orbital bodies demarcating the Solar System from the rest of space. A catastrophic collision between a stray comet and the mining rig had forced the crew to evacuate. They were not explorers, at least not by intent.

Setting aside her pencil, Tanvi sat on a crate opposite to Evan. "When I was a little girl, I grew up in a city so saturated with lights that the stars never made themselves evident."

"Was that why you signed up for this, to leave Earth and see what lies beyond it?" asked Evan.

"No, that was never a thought. I suppose I had grown up never knowing the sky." She squeezed his shoulder. "I heard that you can get a clear view of the stars tonight. If you look, perhaps on the very edge of the sky, you can find our Sun."

When Evan returned to his station Kurt was absent, and the televised recordings had been switched off. In the silence, he became aware of the metallic austerity of the chamber. He felt as if he was sitting in a tin can, and the idea of returning to his sta-

tion became claustrophobic. Feeling restless, he collected a radio, a canteen of water, and a pistol. This last item, the pistol, he left behind on second thought. It was the only gun onboard the cylinder. When he had exited he was sure that Tanvi had given up work on the star chart, but now he could not recall.

Each step away took Evan further away from the cylinder. He left behind two pairs of dark imprints crossing the dunes. Each imprint was an empty space on the brown sand, a fleeting reminder of something living. The brown planet seemed to be barren of life, a landscape devoid of any sense of beauty or ugliness, indifferent to the lone, bipedal creature that walked across its unremarkable surface. This lonely creature traversed the land until it fell—slipped through a crevice on the brown mass.

Evan clutched his knee, trying to suppress the pain. When the pain subsided, he laid in the darkness, his heart still pounding with adrenaline and his palms slick with sweat. His hands reached for his equipment, but they had been lost on the tumultuous descent.

He began touching the walls, the floor, the small, stone juts scattered throughout and guided himself with them until his hands found the familiar form of the radio, shattered and rendered useless. Exhausted, he laid against the wall to rest.

Evan felt weightless, floating on the planet's orbit; he was no longer on its surface. He did not see any stars, only a great illuminating ring encompassing a void seemingly posed to devour him. As if suddenly awakened from slumber, he stirred about restlessly, helpless but full of intent. He could not turn—could not rotate about the central axis of his body, his limbs flailing about as if he were a madman. Drifting out from under the planet's protective shadow, his right arm became engulfed in sheer light soon followed by his torsal and head. He tried desperately to cover his eyes, but the light passed through his fingers. He felt the uncompromising nature of a star's existence, of the billion

years act of nuclear fusion, now flaying him alive.

Evan awoke, shivering from the cold sweat. A beam of light had pierced the darkness through an opening in the cavern, reflecting off a metallic object, his canteen. He groaned as he attempted to lift his legs, the muscles in his body burning, refusing all but the smallest movements. Reorienting himself, Evan began crawling towards the beam of light.

On reaching the canteen, he drank greedily, droplets of water feeding the ground, when the thought suddenly came to him, and he began laughing. *I am a character in one of Kurt's videos, stranded and looking for a way back to the spaceship.*

The laughter warmed his body. Picking himself up, he crept towards the beam of light as it illuminated the path. He pulled himself through an opening in the ground, surfacing to a blinding light, noon. The cylinder would be launching soon.

He scouted the area, found his trail, and began retracing his steps. He wasn't sure how long the crew would wait for him, if at all, but he knew they were anxious to leave. As the sky darkened, he climbed a ridge overlooking the landing site. His eyes scanned the landscape, looking for the white cylinder against the brown backdrop.

Then as he looked across the horizon, on the edge of the sky, he could see the cylinder. Evan watched the cylinder as it stood in silence, then as it lifted off into the dark sky above, and as it became nothing but a shimmering star, returning home.