

To Take the Plunge; or, Stargazer

I laid my hands on the cold steel hatch, and, with a perturbing fizz tearing the still air, like opening a fresh can of soda on the dimly lit patio where dusk has fallen, the contents that lay behind the threshold revealed themselves to me. What I saw inside of the round opening were thousands of prickled white dots, of varying size and gleam, as carefully placed upon the void as an impressionist painter's life's work. Furthering his paragon, the master drew immense spheres on the foreground, each and every one feeling more alien than the last. One, two, three moons gently orbited the planets, floating serenely. And, finally, for contrast, one big blazing ball of flame dropped like a boulder right front and centre. All of these components danced in a trance, everything worked so perfectly that any experienced artist would instantly deem this masterpiece on another plane. I was frozen stiff, simultaneously terrified and naturally curious. It didn't feel like I was even allowed in this art gallery. Still, not wanting to remain hiding behind my glass shield,

I took the plunge and dived into the canvas, as into a portal. Suddenly, all the magic and beauty of the canvas was erased, replaced by an anguishing pressure. What had I done wrong? Hadn't I depressurised moments before? I was trespassing on foreign ground. My helmet was about to crack, my skull could cave in, my arms twist and coil, and my body would collapse in on itself. My heart, beating, loudly, my head, thumping, screaming, mutely, the space, the stars, the cold, a hand. The hand of Death on my shoulder. Flailing around as a helpless mess, it was like my brain had short-circuited. The grasp tightened. I saw my life flash before my eyes, thousands of thoughts flying by like comets. I felt like sleeping with the starfishes. Why was I here, I thought, why was a human out in the vastness of space? This shouldn't have been, this was not as Nature intended. Had we really needed to build steel giants and meaningless machines, powered by Mother Earth's corpse? Had the outcome justified the means? And even then what was it all for? I should have stuck to my roots, grounded myself, mind body and soul, and ploughed the dirt as we always have.

My conscience was being propelled at extreme speeds towards the abyss, I was trying so desperately to brace myself but to no avail. Caught in a hailstone belt, I was hitting asteroids, debris, crashlanding into uncharted waters, an Aegean ocean, where every light read crimson red. I was like a human blobfish, one moment peacefully drifting deep, the other out of my element, transmogrified into a blobulous mess when hooked into the shadow of sunlight.

All these illusions quickly vanished when I realised just how much oxygen I had consumed, and I regained composure, little by little. I thought about the good things: about the comfort of my suit, the safety of the tethers, the voice of my parents, and the call of ambition. This was all I ever wanted, to be able to drink the beverage of the cosmic ocean, to feel its coolness slide down my neck, past my spine, into my legs, it was invigorating, all-encompassing. Never had I thought how galvanising it would be. It left a milky aftertaste in my mouth that I just could not shake away no matter how much I tried. It reminded me of my childhood. And they said that children weren't allowed alcohol, I snickered. I was glad to be back to my senses.

I recalled a scene of earlier times, my Dad and I both sitting on a bench, under the cold yet comforting weight of night's blanket, somewhere on a hill along Orion park. He had said something about Time's unrelenting cruelty, in a child-friendly way of course, I couldn't have been more than twelve. We hugged, we wished upon a shooting bright light: him aloud, "may you always succeed when shooting for the stars", I to myself, "may I always make you proud".

Now, in that vacuum, I sensed the wishes coming true, an astral genie somewhere, satisfied, vanishing.

I was about to go into a slumber. Pure comfort. The stars formed a hanging chandelier, a mobile cot; my soft silk suit, a cradle. I stretched my hand out just enough to feel my smallish figure in the vastness of the universe. So much to discover, so much to know, still blissfully ignorant and giggling, a smile that would make any parent blush. The droplets around my cornea started to mix with seaside sand, it could have been the smoothest descent into quicksand.

But a familiar voice suddenly reeled me out of the pool.

“Leonov, can you hear me? You blanked out for a second there, everything okay? First spacewalk, huh. Happens to the best of us. I’m gonna need you to fix that delta wing, though. Take your time.

Snapping back to reality, I got my thoughts straight and, with newfound determination, I thrust myself forward.