

Hung Pui Yin

Two Bottles in Framheim

The night before I left for my new job, my aunt asked if she had done a good job over the years, raising me and all. She seldom drank but she felt this occasion called for a celebration, so we did. I was staring at the bubbles in my bottle, thinking back to the argument we had earlier in the day when she asked the question for the first time. Without looking up, I kept my silence since I expected her to carry on with one of her usual loquacious speeches. But she did not, and we just sat in the quiet of the house.

“It’s hard to say,” I said to her.

And she nodded. The only sound I could hear was the far-off traffic. I thought perhaps she was tired. As I tilted slightly to see her better in the periphery, her eyes were still open and a faint smile showed while she was staring off to outside the window, seemingly deep in thoughts. As soon as the bottles were finished, I went off to bed as she turned on the TV in the dark living room. I left early the next morning.

The ship took off around midnight, and it was the first time I had been nervous about what was to come. Strapped to our seats and shaking violently, I could hear only the sound of the boosters, loud thunderous explosions that were propelling us upward; we were a long white light speeding into the overcast night. This ship was taking me further than I had ever been before. A signal popped up on my helmet and it said my pulse was tittering around ninety-eight. I slowed my breath. There was enough room to lay out my legs as I sank deeper into the foam of the seat, feeling the force pulling me back. The entire cabin came to me as almost a burr as it continued to quake. I counted the five rows of seats ahead and the fuzzy silhouettes that occupied a few of them, all dressed in the white coloured bulky EMU as I

focused on each round bulbous helmet and all the stubby gloved fingers that were tightening their grips on the armrests. There was not a face I could see yet I could suspect that this was a first time for all of us.

After a few more minutes of turbulence, we broke free from gravity, and I watched everyone turn their heads towards each other as they unbuckled and gathered around the windows.

I was looking out when all the yelling and hissing started behind me. But I did not mind that one bit as my eyes were locked on what was ahead, thinking there had been two layers of thick and unnatural glass before Earth could drag me back and retract the great distance of nothingness I had travelled. I chuckled at the sudden thought as a sight out yonder appeared before me. We were told to expect this before the take-off. But not one of us could have imagined how blue it was.

Out there was a spectacle of light.

Beaming from our sun, bouncing and scattering across the curvature, simultaneously in motion and static.

Under our eyes, Earth was a singular beacon within a boundless void.

The sunlight silently passed through each glass, sweeping through the ship's hull. I was caught in a moment of self-contained revelation, which I did not notice then, that I was looking in fondness and reminiscence despite the alienness of this view.

Reading the feedback after my interview, they said I had shown “a tremendous spirit for adventure” while maintaining my “sense and judgement” during a task. That I was a

much-needed optimist and a potential pioneer for mankind. I knew that it was corporate nobbling.

Amongst all the fresh graduates on this ship, I was the only one they picked from my city, not because they thought that I was exceptional or remotely capable enough to patch all the hiccups they had been having up here.

I was chosen, simply because I applied. Most were willing to pay for a trip to the Moon, yet few would want to work there, not after reports of the high mortality rate, and all sorts of nastiness due to long radiation exposure in the last few years. Protests led to the government mandate on lowering the maximum time and soon, the companies would shut down the programme all together, and leave everything to the drones; less lawsuits and much cheaper in the long run. But before that day, the human touch was still needed to test out the “long run” part of their plan.

Strange to see it all go down when I was still in college, preparing for a career in agriculture, especially when it would pay more to be a botanist these days. But I had felt more and more disillusioned with the pipedreams of sustainable development on Earth, and on January 16th, 2042, I saw the recruitment notice and sent an application to Aestus Limited three hours later.

On paper, we were to be astro-engineers. In reality, we would be glorified repairmen in space, running errands for corporations until we reached the contract limit off-world and they replaced us with the next group of graduates. Still, I slept well the night they accepted me into the programme.

Soon enough, I was packing for the next ten months on the Moon. I had left when the cherries blossomed, and by the time I returned, I figured my city would be covered in spreads of snow. And if I looked hard enough for it, everything would be coated in grey and white.

When we finally touched down after twenty hours of travel, everywhere I looked, the dark was pushing down on this dusty silvery rock, meeting each surface with precision and indifference. This vast absence of light seemed like it was always closing in on us, a gargantuan hand could reach down and propel our bodies until we were no longer tied to the moon's gravity. To me, there was no malice, as it had been its nature to oppress the lives it harboured.

Hopping like fools and weightless like untied balloons, we were led to the living quarters, carrying our luggage but couldn't take our eyes off the sights, which were not unlike the commercials Aestus used to attract tourists; "Enjoy a view like no other while you stayed in our finest resorts!"

Up here, across the stretches of research facilities and commercial malls owned by dozens of institutions, most of the system was automated already. Still, we were sent in from time to time when the bolts needed tightening. And every Monday, we took all the waste to a recycling station, which was some distance away from the moon's orbit. As for the rest of the time, we monitored the performances of the new model drones. It was not the job I wanted, but I couldn't say what else I could have done here.

We didn't get a resort, of course. But it wasn't lousy, either. As I waited in the airlock, I had the oddest sensation when the artificial gravity set in, I was comforted by the weight of home, yet at the same time, I detested the reminder of the small life I had, of how cramped everything was. I heard the clink-clangs of iron behind the sealed door of the workhouse next to the living space. These were the sounds of the routine in the months to follow, where the

broken drones would be my companions. And out there in the expanse, these drones would seek and observe anything new and unreal in our universe before any lives do.

I started unpacking the suitcases and inspected the white and grey walls surrounding me. Though I imagined the room would seem limited to most, I found myself enjoying its modesty, its untempered state. The empty shelves were waiting to be filled up with memories from Earth, to be made of an approving display of who I had been and the joys that I had. But I did not bring much of my life on Earth here, only the essential items. I removed from the stuffed suitcase a few branded blue bottles of shampoo and body soap, which my aunt had bought at a general store the day before I left. They were large in size, and their original content was poured out and refilled with the brand that was used in my house. She labelled each bottle and was insistent on the fact that I would not like the ones they provided.

“They are probably made cheaply, so it’s better to be safe,” she said.

“I don’t think it matters when I’m up there, plus the bags are already full,” I faced away from her and pretended to be checking the suitcases still.

“It’s just two bottles, it’s not much,” she said while holding them out. I couldn’t care less if it was two or twenty, I was compelled to play this game that we had been in ever since I was taken in by her and Grandma.

I knew I was upset with her redundancy and the long-winded explanations to justify it. I saw through the lens of my impatience, these moments were always overblown as her oppressive attempt to undermine any independence I had garnered over the years, the daily clash of egos in that cramped apartment.

There was clutter upon clutter of things that started at the corners and grew like tumours, piles of objects with no meaning or sentiments behind them. I wondered if she had

ever noticed the landfill we lived in and found comfort in its existence, hidden beneath the monotonous routines that kept her occupied throughout the years. Nevertheless, I had no intent to solve the mystery of her life, whether the circumstances that she found herself in were of her own volition, as it would be presumptuous to deem her case miserable and her life narrow when she showed no bitterness towards her past.

She had her fair share of grievances. Yes. Whether they were because of us or the world at large, she never once let these moments turn sour or made herself dwell on them, for better and worse. Especially when my rebellious phase came late in my adolescence and made things particularly difficult for her as I found a certain liberty while I was away from the house. All of a sudden, I had learnt to survive nights in the world outside, and I left for college for the first chance I got.

They found out about my application a week before I went, and they were ecstatic about my future career, until they realised they did not know how long I would be gone or what I would do exactly. And I had repeatedly assured them that the reports of risk were exaggerated, which I admittedly lied about. Still, I saw that the unease they felt was justified as the world above their heads was never something that carried weight.

In the span of a lifetime, they had lived through a chapter of humanity that started and finished the multiple space races while they spent their youth trying to keep a family of eight afloat. My aunt was the oldest of her siblings, and she found several jobs to support all of them until they left to start their own families. In the last few years, I had heard many pint-sized moments of the past that came to her late at night when she was lying awake on the couch, watching soap dramas before she slipped into unconsciousness.

At the end of the day, she sneaked the two bottles into one of the suitcases, and I moved on without much thought.

We received regular messages from family or friends when we were up here. A usual boost to the morale of those missing home, but there had been an issue with transmissions to Earth, which they simply credited to the “unforeseen development of space exploration”.

Sometimes, the cut-off would last from a day to a week. About two months before our return, the signal was gone for five days and counting.

On the sixth day, I returned to my room earlier than usual on account that I took little time to finish the tasks. Hoping to give myself some time to wind down, I turned on the hot shower. Between the curtain and the walls, the space was rapidly shrouded in a foggy white, and I could feel the hardened pressure of water shooting down onto my head and dripping down my eyes.

During my time up here, this cubicle had made itself familiar to me as a place of comfort and reflection to wash off the grime, yet my time there was brief as the supply of hot water each day lasted precisely for ten minutes. Granted, it was an arbitrary race against time since I often had a few minutes to spare despite the tendency to become lost in my thoughts. Nevertheless, it was a slice of excitement within an uninspired routine of sweat and exhaustion. These handwritten labels on two bottles of blue became the signs that guided me through this meditative sprint...

“Lift-off in t-minus five... four... three... two... and you are clear to go, Amundsen-One,” said the voice on the radio as I held tight to the controls.

“Copy, Framheim.”

The cockpit was no larger than the bed in my old room as I headed towards the waste recycling facility, which took around forty minutes round trip to complete. I was told that drones were not used in this instance since it was an invaluable learning experience for engineers to not lose focus and understand the unpredictability of space exploration and development...

I pulled up my tablet to see if the signal was on... and nothing. The last message I received was right before the cut-off, and I didn't bother to watch it then.

It was not clear what had stopped me.

"The radio's gonna go dark for a bit here, Amundsen-One. We'll see you when you are in orbit," said the disembodied voice.

"Copy, Framheim. I'll see you later."

I saw the flashing red lights coming off the recycling facility, a hollowed ring-like structure suspended in the shivering void. A silent eye, awaiting its feast of waste. It was an imposing machine that demanded all my attention as it opened its gaping maw. I unlocked the hatch and exited the ship before tossing out the waste bags as they quickly vanished. Not a sound but my own grunts were heard. As I drifted weightlessly, I suddenly recalled how I felt that night, before I left on the ship and came here.

I felt sorry for leaving. Yet I couldn't stand staying there either, after all these years.

I took out two empty blue bottles from the saddlebag and threw them into space. I watched as they rotated slowly and steadily away, heading to an undefined destination and never returning...

The drifting continued as I walked to my seat and realised I had been holding my breath. As the control panel lit up, I heard a ping from the tablet, and there was an unread message. I reached for the device and watched as a sudden blast from the recycling facility impacted the ship. In rapid force, the entire vehicle began to spiral as I felt a hard hit to the back of my head.

I was woken up by a sharp gnarly pain in my head as the blaring sound of alarms cut in and out, the belts had bound me to my chair as the entire ship spun violently, and the surface of the windshield was completely cracked and ready to shatter at any moment. Out of instinct, my hands held on to the control and pulled it down hard as the whirling ship stopped with a sudden tug.

I let go of my breath as the siren's pitch began to die. The lights flickered as I dragged myself over in the direction of the generator. Under my fogged-up helmet, a shrill rang in my ears as my body tensed up. Hovering, I saw sparks shooting out from the last light above me before the machine wound down. Shrapnel, presumably from the blast, had penetrated the hull, releasing the oxygen on board. I checked the watch.

The ship had been drifting for more than an hour away from orbit, and it would be a little more than an hour before I suffocated.

Help could come anytime, only if I repaired the dead batteries in the generator. If not, I would be heading towards another undefined destination, but I supposed nothing else was breaking. I slowly pulled myself over to the back.

There were two glimmers of light in this drifting can, the flash on the helmet and the dimming spots of light blue from the tablet. I began to wonder what the message was, probably asking how I was doing, which would be an irony so crude that I couldn't help but

laugh. Still, the priority was to save my breath. I was preserving the body so the spirit could live later. Grabbing hold of the tangled-up wires under the metal panel, I looked for the exposed coppers and twisted them. If it worked, I needed only to flip the switch.

I waited and thought of the blue bottles. How they could make a great distance in this nothingness, in each other's company. It was nothing short of extraordinary, I believed.