

Above It All

by Robert J. Sawyer

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Rhymes with fear.

The words echoed in Colonel Paul Rackham's head as he floated in Discovery's airlock, the bulky Manned Maneuvering Unit clamped to his back. Air was being pumped out; cold vacuum was forming around him.

Rhymes with fear.

He should have said no, should have let McGovern or one of the others take the spacewalk instead. But Houston had suggested that Rackham do it, and to demure he'd have needed to state a reason.

Just a dead body, he told himself. Nothing to be afraid of.

There was a time when a military man couldn't have avoided seeing death -- but Rackham had just been finishing high school during Desert Storm. Sure, as a test pilot, he'd watched colleagues die in crashes, but he'd never actually seen the bodies. And when his mother passed on, she'd had a closed casket. His choice, that, made without hesitation the moment the funeral director had asked him -- his father, still in a nursing home, had been in no condition to make the arrangements.

Rackham was wearing liquid-cooling long johns beneath his spacesuit, tubes circulating water around him to remove excess body heat. He shuddered, and the tubes moved in unison, like a hundred serpents writhing.

He checked the barometer, saw that the lock's pressure had dropped below 0.2 psi -- just a trace of atmosphere left. He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to calm himself, then reached out a gloved hand and turned the actuator that opened the outer circular hatch. "I'm leaving the airlock," he said. He was wearing the standard "Snoopy Ears" communications carrier, which covered most of his head beneath the space helmet. Two thin microphones protruded in front of his mouth.

"Copy that, Paul," said McGovern, up in the shuttle's cockpit. "Good luck."

Rackham pushed the left MMU armrest control forward. Puffs of nitrogen propelled him out into the cargo bay. The long space doors that normally formed the bay's roof were already open, and overhead he saw Earth in all its blue-and-white glory. He adjusted his pitch with his right hand control, then began rising up. As soon as he'd cleared the top of the cargo bay, the Russian space station Mir was visible, hanging a hundred meters away, a giant metal crucifix. Rackham brought his hand up to cross himself.

"I have Mir in sight," he said, fighting to keep his voice calm. "I'm going over."

Rackham remembered when the station had gone up, twenty years ago in 1986. He first saw its name in his hometown newspaper, the Omaha World Herald. Mir, the Russian word for peace -- as if peace had had anything to do with its being built. Reagan had been hemorrhaging money into the Strategic Defense Initiative back then. If the Cold War turned hot, the high ground would be in orbit.

Even then, even in grade eight, Rackham had been dying to go into space. No price was too much. "Whatever it takes," he'd told Dave -- his sometimes friend, sometimes rival -- over lunch. "One of these days, I'll be floating right by that damned Mir. Give the Russians the finger." He'd pronounced Mir as if it rhymed with sir.

Dave had looked at him for a moment, as if he were crazy. Then, dismissing all of it except the way Paul had spoken, he smiled a patronizing smile and said, "It's meer, actually. Rhymes with fear."

Rhymes with fear.

Paul's gaze was still fixed on the giant cross, spikes of sunlight glinting off it. He shut his eyes and let the nitrogen exhaust push against the small of his back, propelling him into the darkness.

"I've got a scalpel," said the voice over the speaker at mission control in Kaliningrad. "I'm going to do it."

Flight controller Dimitri Kovalevsky leaned into his mike. "You're making a mistake, Yuri. You don't want to go through with this." He glanced at the two large wall monitors. The one showing Mir's orbital plot was normal; the other, which usually showed the view inside the space station, was black. "Why don't you turn on your cameras and let us see you?"

The speaker crackled with static. "You know as well as I do that the cameras can't be turned off. That's our way, isn't it? Still -- even after the reforms -- cameras with no off switches."

"He's probably put bags or gloves over the lenses," said Metchnikoff, the engineer seated at the console next to Kovalevsky's.

"It's not worth it, Yuri," said Kovalevsky into the mike, while nodding acknowledgement at Metchnikoff. "You want to come on home? Climb into the Soyuz and come on down. I've got a team here working on the re-entry parameters."

"Nyet," said Yuri. "It won't let me leave."

"What won't let you leave?"

"I've got a knife," repeated Yuri, ignoring Kovalevsky's question. "I'm going to do it."

Kovalevsky slammed the mike's off switch. "Dammit, I'm no expert on this. Where's that bloody psychologist?"

"She's on her way," said Pasternak, the scrawny orbital-dynamics officer. "Another fifteen minutes, tops."

Kovalevsky opened the mike again. "Yuri, are you still there?"

No response.

"Yuri?"

"They took the food," said the voice over the radio, sounding even farther away than he really was, "right out of my mouth."

Kovalevsky exhaled noisily. It had been an international embarrassment the first time it had happened. Back in 1994, an unmanned Progress rocket had been launched to bring food up to the two cosmonauts then aboard Mir. But when it docked with the station, those cosmonauts had found its cargo hold empty -- looted by ground-support technicians desperate to feed their own starving families. The same thing had happened again just a few weeks ago. This time the thieves had been even more clever -- they'd replaced the stolen food with sacks full of dirt to avoid any difference in the rocket's pre-launch weight.

"We got food to you eventually," said Kovalevsky.

"Oh, yes," said Yuri. "We reached in, grabbed the food back -- just like we always do."

"I know things haven't been going well," said Kovalevsky, "but --"

"I'm all alone up here," said Yuri. He was quiet for a time, but then he lowered his voice conspiratorially. "Except I discover I'm not alone."

Kovalevsky tried to dissuade the cosmonaut from his delusion.

"That's right, Yuri -- we're here. We're always here for you. Look down, and

you'll see us."

"No," said Yuri. "No -- I've done enough of that. It's time. I'm going to do it."

Kovalevsky covered the mike and spoke desperately. "What do I say to him? Suggestions? Anyone? Dammit, what do I say?"

"I'm doing it," said Yuri's voice. There was a grunting sound. "A stream of red globules ... floating in the air. Red -- that was our color, wasn't it? What did the Americans call us? The Red Menace. Better dead than Red ... But they're no better, really. They wanted it just as badly."

Kovalevsky leaned forward. "Apply pressure to the cut, Yuri. We can still save you. Come on, Yuri -- you don't want to die! Yuri!"

Up ahead, Mir was growing to fill Rackham's view. The vertical shaft of the crucifix consisted of the Soyuz that had brought Yuri to the space station sixteen months ago, the multiport docking adapter, the core habitat, and the Kvant-1 science module, with a green Progress cargo transport docked to its aft end.

The two arms of the cross stuck out of the docking adapter. To the left was the Kvant-2 biological research center, which contained the EVA airlock through which Rackham would enter. To the right was the Kristall space-production lab. Kristall had a docking port that a properly equipped American shuttle could hook up to -- but Discovery wasn't properly equipped; the Mir adapter collar was housed aboard Atlantis, which wasn't scheduled to fly again for three months.

Rackham's heart continued to race. He wanted to swing around, return to the shuttle. Perhaps he could claim nausea. That was reason enough to abort an EVA; vomiting into a space helmet in zero-g was a sure way to choke to death.

But he couldn't go back. He'd fought to get up here, clawed, competed, cheated, left his parents behind in that nursing home. He'd never married, never had kids, never found time for anything but this. He couldn't turn around -- not now, not here.

Rackham had to fly around to the Kvant-2's backside to reach the EVA hatch. Doing so gave him a clear view of Discovery. He saw it from the rear, its three large and two small engine cones looking back at him like a spider's cluster of eyes.

He cycled through the space station's airlock. The main lights were dark inside the biology module, but some violet-white fluorescents were on over a bed of plants. Shoots were growing in strange circular patterns in the microgravity. Rackham disengaged the Manned Maneuvering Unit and left it floating near the airlock, like a small refrigerator with arms. Just as the Russians had promised, a large pressure bag was clipped to the wall next to Yuri's own empty spacesuit. Rackham wouldn't be able to get the body, now undoubtedly stiff with rigor mortis, into the suit, but it would fit easily into the pressure bag, used for emergency equipment transfers.

Mir's interior was like everything in the Russian space program -- rough, metallic, ramshackle, looking more like a Victorian steamworks than space-age technology. Heart thundering in his ears, he pushed his way down Kvant-2's long axis toward the central docking adapter to which all the other parts of the station were attached.

Countless small objects floated around the cabin. He reached out with his gloved hand and swept a few up in his palm. They were six or seven millimeters across and wrinkled like dried peas. But their color was a dark rusty brown.

Droplets of dried blood. Jesus Christ. Rackham let go of them, but they continued to float in midair in front of him. He used the back of his glove to flick them away, and continued on deeper into the station.

"Discovery, this is Houston."

"Rackham here, Houston. Go ahead."

"We -- ah -- have an errand for you to run."

Rackham chuckled. "Your wish is our command, Houston."

"We've had a request from the Russians. They, ah, ask that you swing by Mir for a pickup."

Rackham turned to his right and looked at McGovern, the pilot.

McGovern was already consulting a computer display. He gave Rackham a thumbs-up signal.

"Can do," said Rackham into his mike. "What sort of pick up?"

"It's a body."

"Say again, Houston."

"A body. A dead body."

"My God. Was there an accident?"

"No accident, Discovery. Yuri Vereshchagin has killed himself."

"Killed ..."

"That's right. The Russians can't afford to send another manned mission up to get him." A pause. "Yuri was one of us. Let's bring him back where he belongs."

Rackham squeezed through the docking adapter and made a right turn, heading down into Mir's core habitat. It was dark except for a few glowing LEDs, a shaft of earthlight coming in through one window, and one of sunlight coming in through the other. Rackham found the light switch and turned it on. The interior lit up, revealing beige cylindrical walls. Looking down the module's thirteen-meter length, he could see the main control console, with two strap-in chairs in front of it, storage lockers, the exercise bicycle, the dining table, the closet-like sleeping compartments, and, at the far end, the round door leading into Kvant-1, where Yuri's body was supposedly floating.

He pushed off the wall and headed down the chamber. It widened out near the eating table. He noticed that the ceiling there had writing on it. Rackham looked at the cameras, one fore, one aft, both covered over with spacesuit gloves, and realized that even if they were uncovered, that part of the ceiling was perpetually out of their view. Each person who had visited the station had apparently written his or her name there in bold Magic Marker strokes: Romanenko, Leveykin, Viktorenko, Krikalev, dozens more. Foreign astronauts names' appeared, too, in Chinese characters, and Arabic, and English.

But Yuri Vereshchagin's name was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps the custom was to sign off just before leaving the station. Rackham easily found the Magic Marker, held in place on the bulkhead with Velcro. His Cyrillic wasn't very good -- he had to carefully copy certain letters from the samples already on the walls -- but he soon had Vereshchagin's name printed neatly across the ceiling.

Rackham thought about writing his own name, too. He touched the marker to the curving metal, but stopped, pulling the pen back, leaving only a black dot where it had made contact. Vereshchagin's name should be here -- a reminder that he had existed. Rackham remembered all the old photographs that came to light after the fall of the Soviet Union: the original versions, before those who had fallen out of favor had been airbrushed out. Surely no cosmonaut would ever remove Vereshchagin's name, but there was no need to remind those who might come later that an American had stopped by to bring his body home.

The dried spheres of blood were more numerous in here. They bounced off Rackham's faceplate with little pinging sounds as he continued down the core module through the circular hatch into Kvant-1.

Yuri's body was indeed there, floating in a semi-fetal position. His skin was as white as candle wax, bled dry. He'd obviously rotated slowly as his opened wrist had emptied out -- there was a ring of dark brown blood stains all around the circumference of the science module. Many pieces of equipment also

had blood splatters on them where drops had impacted before they'd desiccated. Rackham could taste his lunch at the back of his throat. He desperately fought it down.

And yet he couldn't take his eyes off Yuri. A corpse, a body without a soul in it. It was mesmerizing, terrifying, revolting. The very face of death.

He'd met Yuri once, in passing, years ago at an IAU conference in Montreal. Rackham had never known anyone before who had committed suicide. How could Yuri have killed himself? Sure, his country was in ruins. But billions of -- of rubles -- had been spent building this station and getting him up here. Didn't he understand how special that made him? How, quite literally, he was above it all?

As he drifted closer, Rackham saw that Yuri's eyes were open. The pupils were dilated to their maximum extent, and a pale gray film had spread over the orbs. Rackham thought that the decent thing to do would be to reach over and close the eyes. His gloves had textured rubber fingertips, to allow as much feedback as possible without compromising his suit's thermal insulation, but even if he could work up the nerve, he didn't trust them for something as delicate as moving eyelids.

His breathing was growing calmer. He was facing death -- facing it directly. He regretted now not having seen his mother one last time, and --

There was something here. Something else, inside Kvant-1 with him. He grabbed hold of a projection from the bulkhead and wheeled around. He couldn't see it. Couldn't hear any sound conducted through the helmet of his suit. But he felt its presence, knew it was there.

There was no way to get out; Kvant-1's rear docking port was blocked by the Progress ferry, and the exit to the core module was blocked by the invisible presence.

Get a grip on yourself, Rackham thought. There's nothing here. But there was. He could feel it. "What do you want?" he said, a quaver in his tones.

"Say again, Paul." McGovern's voice, over the headset.

Rackham reached down, switched his suit radio from VOX to OFF. "What do you want?" he said again.

There was no answer. He waved his arms, batting around hundreds of dried drops of blood. They flew all over the cabin -- except for an area, up ahead, the size of a man. In that area, they deflected before reaching the walls. Something was there -- something unseen. Paul's stomach contracted. He felt panic about to overtake him, when --

A hand on his shoulder, barely detectable through the bulky suit.

His heart jumped, and he swung around. He'd been floating backwards, moving away from the unseen presence, and had bumped into the corpse. He stopped dead -- revolted by the prospect of touching the body again, terrified of moving in the other direction toward whatever was up ahead.

But he had to get out -- somebody else could come back for Yuri. He'd find some way to explain it all later, but for now he had to escape. He grabbed hold of a handle on the wall and pushed off the bulkhead, trying to fly past the presence up ahead. He made it through into the core module. But something cold as space reached out and stopped him directly in front of the small window that looked down on the planet.

Look below, said a voice in Rackham's head. What do you see?

He looked outside, saw the planet of his birth. "Africa."

Millions of children starving to death.

Rackham moved his head left and right. "Not my fault."

The view changed, faster than any orbital mechanics would allow.

Look below, said the voice again. What do you see?

"China."

A billion people living without freedom.

"Nothing I can do."

Again, the world spun. Look below.

"The west coast of America. There's San Francisco."

The plague is everywhere, but nowhere is it worse than there.

"Someday they'll find a cure."

What else do you see?

"Los Angeles."

The inner city. Slums. Poverty. They haven't abandoned hope, those who live there ... Hope has abandoned them.

"They can get out. They just need help."

Whose help? Where will the money come from?

"I don't know."

Don't you? Look below.

"No."

Look. Your eyes have been closed too long. Open them. What do you see?

"Russia. Ah, now -- Russia! Free! We defeated the Evil Empire. We defeated the Communist menace."

The people are starving.

"But they're free."

They have nothing to eat. Twice now they've taken food destined for this station.

"I read about that. Terrible, unthinkable. Like committing murder."

To take food from the mouths of the hungry. It is like committing murder, isn't it?

"Yes. No. No, wait -- that's not what I meant."

Isn't it? The people need food.

"No. The space program provides jobs. And don't forget the spinoffs -- advanced plastics and pharmaceuticals and ... and ..."

Microwave ovens.

"Yes, and --"

And dehydrated ice cream.

"No, important stuff. Medical equipment. And all kinds of new electronic devices."

That's why you go into space, then? To make life better on Earth?

"Yes. Yes. Exactly."

Look below.

"No. No, dammit, I won't."

Yuri looked below.

"Yuri was a cosmonaut -- a Russian. Maybe -- maybe Russia shouldn't be spending all this money on space. But I'm an American. My country is rich."

Los Angeles, said the voice that wasn't a voice. San Francisco. And don't forget New York. Slums, plague, a populace at war with itself.

Rackham felt his gloved fists clenching. He ground his teeth. "Damn you!"

Or you.

He closed his eyes, tried to think. Any price, he'd said -- and now it was time to pay. For the good of everyone, he said -- but the road was always paved with good intentions.

Starvation. Enslavement. Poverty. War.

He couldn't go back to Discovery -- he had no choice in the matter.

It wouldn't let him leave. But he'd be damned if he'd end up like Yuri, bait for yet another spacefarer.

He slipped into the control station just below the entrance portal that led from the docking adapter. He looked at the cameras fore and aft, the bulky white gloves covering them like beckoning hands. An ending, yes -- and with the coffin closed. He scanned the controls, consulted the onboard computer, made his preparations. He couldn't see the entity, couldn't see its grin -- but he knew they both were there.

"-- in the hell, Paul?" McGovern's voice, as Rackham turned his suit radio back on. "Why are you firing the ACS jets?"

"It -- it must be a malfunction," Rackham said, his finger still firmly on the red activation switch.

"Then get out of there. Get out before the delta-V gets too high. We

can still pick you up if you get out now."

"I can't get out," said Rackham. "The -- the way to the EVA airlock is blocked."

"Then get into the Soyuz and cast off. God's sake, man, you're accelerating down toward the atmosphere."

"I -- I don't know how to fly a Soyuz."

"We'll get Kaliningrad to talk you through the separation sequence."

"No -- no, that won't work."

"Sure it will. We can bring the Soyuz descent capsule into our cargo bay, if need be -- but hurry, man, hurry!"

"Goodbye, Charlie."

"What do you mean, `Goodbye'? Jesus Christ, Paul --"

Rackham's brow was slick with sweat. "Goodbye."

The temperature continued to rise. Rackham reached down and undogged his helmet, the abrupt increase in air pressure hurting his ears. He lifted the great fishbowl off his head, letting it fly across the cabin. He then took off the Snoopy-eared headset array. It undulated up and away, a fabric bat in the shaft of earthlight, ending up pinned by acceleration to the ceiling.

Paint started peeling off the walls, and the plastic piping had a soft, unfocused look to it. The air was so hot it hurt to breathe. Yuri's body was heating up, too. The smell from that direction was overpowering.

Rackham was close to one of the circular windows. Earth had swollen hugely beneath him. He couldn't make out the geography for all the clouds -- was that China or Africa, America or Russia below? It was all a blur. And all the same.

An orange glow began licking at the port as paint on the station's hull burned up in the mesosphere. The water in the reticulum of tubes running over his body soon began to boil.

Flames were everywhere now. Atmospheric turbulence was tearing the station apart. The winglike solar panels flapped away, crisping into nothingness. Rackham felt his own flesh blistering.

The roar from outside the station was like a billion screams. Screams of the starving. Screams of the poor. Screams of the shackled. Through the port, he saw the Kristall module sheer clean off the docking adapter and go tumbling away.

Look below, the voice had said. Look below.

And he had.

Into space, at any price.

Into space -- above it all.

The station disintegrated around him, metal shimmering and tearing away. Soon nothing was left except the flames. And they never stopped.

THE END

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