

MOTHERSHIP

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The train is a haunting. Silver-plated millipede that it is, it screeches like a banshee careening around the curve down into the station across from our condo—metal chafing metal until something's got to give. That give is the racket, mechanical energy converted into sound waves produced from the friction. Most days, the howling begins around four A.M. and stretches till after midnight. Mac likes the noise. He finds it soothing. For me, it plucks every last nerve, like someone's punched down all the wrong notes on an out-of-tune piano at the exact same time.

I look at the clock and it winks over to 4:29, the second time the train's gone by this morning. Sixteen hours from now, I'm giving the keynote speech at tonight's annual gala for the observatory, but to say that I'm not one for public speaking is a gross understatement. A wave of nausea washes over me at the thought of another podium, seeping into every crevice of my consciousness like a kind of radiation. More sleep would help, but my heart rate is matched only by my rapid, shallow breathing. I reset my mental stopwatch to about

twenty minutes and try to drift off before the next one passes.

It's been several months since the height of the NTSB hearings and still every time the train veers by I wake up with that awful line from *Gravity's Rainbow* seared into my mind:

"A screaming comes across the sky."

I've never even read the book, don't even know what it's about. I assume people die. But I know this line by heart; it's been quoted to me way too many times.

The bed shudders, and though I've never lived in earthquake country until now, I'm sure that's what's going on. In truth, it's only the train rumbling through the tunnels underground, but I check the local seismic activity from my phone anyway. Who needs more than four hours of sleep? Now that I've been demoted to head of this minor observatory, I direct the positions of telescopes rather than spacecraft, coordinate children on school fieldtrips rather than astronauts on spacewalks. It's a kind of planned obsolescence that's worse than getting fired. Sleep is now subsidiary. It's no longer crucial to the safety of anyone but me.

I launch out of bed and navigate around the columns of unopened boxes lining the hallway to reach the living room and hoist out the rowing machine from under the sofa, the one thing I was quick to unpack. The move from Texas to the San Francisco Bay has been nothing but peachy for Mac. Former astronauts are few and far between out in this neck of the woods, so he's soaking up the scrutiny the way he's always done, maybe even more so because it's not part of the culture out here; it's shiny and new. He's relishing retirement and already has a contract for the children's picture book he's writing about the unintended propulsive side-effects of farting in zero-gravity. Meanwhile, I've cut and died my hair since the end of the hearings and only introduce myself these days using my first name. Even that, I've shortened from Samantha to Sam, though I'd never permitted anyone to call me that before.

"You're up early," Mac mumbles through a yawn, massaging his eyes with the butt of both hands. I keep on rowing.

"Still on Texas time, I guess."

When asked what I do for a living, I tell folks now that I work in education. Often, the accident will come up in conversation anyway without people realizing who I am just because of Mac's connection to space and the fact that it's still topical. When that happens, I have to vacate the immediate premises, gulp down a fresh glass of wine, and hunt for a Xanax in my purse while contemplating the exits. *Eject, eject, eject!*—my body seems to say at every dinner party or cocktail hour we attend. I'm thinking of taking up smoking for the first time at 48 years old just so I'll have an excuse to abruptly go outside, but for now, the constant exercise is all that helps.

"Do you have to start with the rowing machine though? Couldn't you just put on some coffee and read the paper like normal people? Some of us have adjusted to the new time zone. It's been two months after all." His hair is a jet-black helmet streaked with robust highlights of stainless steel. He's seven years older, but I've already been dying mine for years. I doubt he ever will.

"I don't read the paper anymore, remember? Besides, I thought you boys are supposed to be able to sleep anywhere and through anything."

"Yeah, but that was back in the day. I'm retired now. I was looking forward to sleeping in every now and again. With you."

We've argued about the noise from the train before so I don't bring it up this time. He'd wanted to be right in the heart of things in the city, to not be car-dependent for a change. I wanted to live in the hills cocooned among the redwoods and eucalyptus trees, but I got vetoed. He moved out here for me, so our deal was that he got to pick the place. He also stuck with me through the worst of the last six months and never once complained, so I don't either.

"Listen," I say, still rowing, "not to change the subject, but you should probably know that I've decided to go by my maiden name professionally now. I didn't want you to be caught off guard. They're going to introduce me at the gala tonight as 'Sam Boyden.' I needed a fresh start."

He rubs his nose and sniffs a little to clear out the night's gunk, and those old flyboy muscles of his that I love flex unintentionally as he does. I wonder if and when they will atrophy now that all that mandatory training is in the past.

"Huh. Okay. Are you getting it legally changed, or just informally?"

"I don't know."

He looks a little dazed, still half asleep. He's told me he dreams in zero-G, so what a disappointment it must be to wake up in the world.

"Well, if you think it'll help..." he trails off and bends down to kiss me on the head, which I slow down to receive. "I'm going to find some earplugs and go back to bed."

"Wait," I call before he gets to the bedroom. He stops and turns around, a little hopefully it seems. "Do you know whether it's pronounced GAL-uh or GAY-luh? Everyone around me is saying it a different way and I don't want to come across as a boob."

He turns around again and answers on his way back to bed. "Both are correct."

Language, I huff to myself as I resume my regimen. *So imprecise*. More than anything in the universe, I hate being wrong.

What I don't tell Mac is that I already tried to change my name legally back when we were still in Texas, but I wasn't able to. Not that I wasn't able to go through with it, but that I literally couldn't change my name. When I went to file the paperwork at the county clerk's office, the guy at the counter said I needed notarized written permission from my spouse to change my name if I was still married.

"How is that legal?" I was dumbfounded. "Did we become Saudi Arabia overnight and no one told me? Is this a hidden-camera version of *The Handmaid's Tale*?" I made a show of looking around for said cameras for emphasis.

"It's not so much a law as a procedural rule. It's to prevent people from changing their identities and kidnapping the children." The guy was perhaps in his thirties but had the pimples of a thirteen-year-old.

"But I don't *have* any children." I waved around at the empty space surrounding my body as if in evidence of my childlessness.

"Isn't that what someone trying to kidnap their own children would say?" He reached up to register a row of whiteheads on his chin but thankfully thought better of it and put his hand back down. "Can you prove it?"

"Prove that I don't have children? How do you propose I do

that? Do you want to examine my cervix? Do I need a notarized letter from a gynecologist? I mean, come *on*.” I was aware then that people in line were staring at me, and I wondered consciously whether it was because I was making a scene about something related to gynecology or because I was regularly on both the local and national evening news at the time.

“Nope, just the one from your husband. Unless you’re gay married, and then you need one from your wife. If it makes you feel any better, the same rules apply to men.”

I squinted at the man—hard—the better to block out his blackheads in the blur.

“In all your time here, have you ever had a married man apply to change his name back to what it was before the wedding?” I pictured a hypothetical white guy with a meticulous five-day beard wearing a “*This is what a feminist looks like*” t-shirt who’d initially hyphenated his name with his wife’s but then had second thoughts ‘for career reasons.’

“No, ma’am.”

I heaved an overly dramatic sigh and left without saying another word.

In the end, I couldn’t bring myself to ask Mac’s permission to change my name back to what it had always been on my birth certificate and social security card, though he would’ve gladly given it. It was the principle of it that I couldn’t stomach. But when I showed up for my first day at the observatory after our move, it was the nameplate announcing me as *Samantha O’Hara, Director* that they’d preemptively installed on the door of my office which made me queasy. Director of Flight Operations had been my title longer than any other I’ve ever held, and this paltry, generic designation might as well have been *Director of Je ne sais quoi*.

As she was showing me to my office, my administrative assistant Lisa—a godsend—said, “Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help you get settled in—coffee, masseuse, you name it. The board can be a real pain in the ass.”

“Actually, I’m going to need to have that changed,” I said, a little sheepishly, gesturing to the door. “I don’t go by that name anymore.” I scrawled *Sam Boyden* on the Post-it pad on my new desk and handed

it to her. “It’s my maiden name,” I explained. “But I’m still married. You understand.”

“Of course,” she said, nodding once. Of course she understood. There were no illusions regarding why I was there. She slid the nameplate out of the slot on her way out.

“And you can leave the director bit off,” I called as she closed the door behind her. “I prefer a more team-oriented approach.”

I *did*, or at least I thought I did, though that’s not what my colleagues ultimately testified during the hearings, even the ones who’d long identified as my friends. According to the transcripts, I had a “brusque management style,” and “discouraged dissent” in meetings—though no one had ever complained during my tenure. And anyway, when my predecessor Keith had behaved that way they called it decisive leadership, but with me I suppose it was just bitchy, though only in hindsight, only after the fact.

I think it made it worse that I was blonde. But not anymore! No more Heather Locklear hair for me. They used to call me that behind my back in Houston, and I never knew whether to take it as a compliment (babe) or insult (bimbo). It was probably both, now that I think of it. I went through three hairstylists out here before landing on one who was willing to shear it off into the sexless, Angela Merkel bob that I requested. It’ll be boring brown from now on out. I know, haters gonna hate and whatnot, but they can also get you fired, so...

Once I reach the office, I’m the first one to arrive as usual, which means I don’t have to say hello to anyone as I make my way to my desk. I review my speech and immerse myself in the handbook to drill the names and faces of people I might have to introduce or thank in the audience. I long to blame my poor recognition of faces on my terrible eyesight the way it once prevented me from advancing in astronaut candidacy, but my corrected vision with contacts is 20/20, so that’s a non-starter. I have been adamant that two months in is far too soon for me to be giving the keynote speech at an annual gala, but it’s tradition, and I am learning that West Coasters have so few of these that they cling to the ones they do have with fierce tenacity.

“Don’t worry about it,” Lisa had tried to reassure me. She’d palmed the soft buzz of her under-cut then adjusted the pile of curls on top of her head. I often wondered whether she identified as edgy

or merely queer and lamented that I had become too old or too Texan to tell. “They know you’re new. They’ll cut you some slack.”

“Respectfully, they will not be cutting me any slack, Lisa.” It wasn’t a rebuke; she was a rare ally in a world chock full of blanket animosity, and I wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize that. It was merely a gentle statement of fact, and by the silent shrug of her reply, I knew that she concurred.

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I lay the copy of my speech down on my desk and mull over the order in my mind. *Thank the board. Thank the donors. No, reverse that. Thank the donors first.* But in imagining myself at a podium again with that snakehead of a microphone hovering in front of my mouth like a cobra about to strike, I suddenly lose the ability to swallow, and shortly thereafter, to inhale. I clutch my chest, and my mouth apes at the air like a fresh-caught fish. For a moment I think, *Good, I’m having a coronary and can get out of the gala*, but my knowledge of physiology soon convinces me otherwise. It’s not a heart attack, it’s a classic panic attack, and my inability to breathe is merely an illusion, though the heart palpitations are all too real. It’s the kind experienced by occasional recruits during their first simulation of malfunctions in the Neutral Buoyancy Lab. They sometimes come up panting, beet red. The rare one ascends way too quickly and gets the bends—never a good sign for how they’d manage a leaky spacesuit in a vacuum. Back when I was flight director, I went through all the tests and training myself just so I could have a feel for the on-the-ground (or, in-the-sky, as it were) conditions, and I never failed a one, except for the vision tests, of course, which either you were born with or you weren’t. Some folks just aren’t cut out for the stresses of the job.

I reach for a Xanax, ever at the ready these days, and crunch it up in my mouth to make sure it passes with the water I swig to wash it down. I don’t want to die from choking on an anxiety pill—what a way to go. Is there a good way to go, though? For a moment, I truly wonder. Then, even here up in the hills, I hear the train down below scraping around a bend somewhere—another track, another station—but still that same goddamned noise.

A screaming comes across the sky.

They blamed me because I was highly competent but unlikeable. They blamed arrogance, overconfidence, a breakdown in the chain of command. But it was none of those things. It was an unavoidable, tragic accident. There was nothing that anybody could’ve done. I knew they would blow up on re-entry three days before it happened when the manager underneath me, Li, showed me the enhanced picture of the damage from takeoff, and I have to live with that. Can you imagine the burden of that knowledge? And I think I have sleep problems *now*—that week I was awake for 72 hours without one iota of shuteye. Li tried to take it over my head, and I nipped it in the bud. Now he has my old job. They blamed me because I knew and let it happen anyway.

Everyone at the hearings asked the same question. Why? Why didn’t you let them alert the crew? Because the damage was irreparable. It was. The best engineers will tell you that—mine did—though not the crackpot idealistic ones the government called as witnesses, with their science-fiction scenarios involving magical pixie duct-tape that doesn’t even exist yet. That was all bullshit. I told them what I tell everyone: wouldn’t you rather go out happy with a bang than run out of oxygen and fuel with the full knowledge and grief of what was to come? Wouldn’t you? Nobody answers that one, but everyone knows it’s true.

Those hearings were the most publicity spaceflight has received since we landed on the moon. My favorite take on them was the cover of *The New Yorker*, a caricatured sketch of me in a flight suit—though not technically accurate—with the red logo drawn all out of proportion so that it looked like NASA. I kept that one. She really got me. Everyone loves the spectacle of a lone woman on trial.

The Xanax hits my bloodstream and my pulse peters out back to barely noticeable. How fucked up can I get and still deliver a coherent speech tonight? And not get fired? I’ve already tarnished Mac’s name. I don’t really want to smear my father’s as well.

A sharp rap on the door pulls me back to the present.

“Sorry to interrupt. Would you mind taking a final look at the seating arrangements?—oh honey, you do not look well.” Lisa puts the chart down by her side and looks up to evaluate my face.

"I'm fine," I manage to croak. "Just got something down the wrong pipe is all. Am I red?"

She shakes her head, "No, honey, you're grey. Did you get the chicken salad from the cafeteria? Jalani said it tasted off today."

"No. I don't think I ate lunch today. What time is it?" I look outside through the fluttering fringe of the redwoods to a ruthless blue October sky.

"Oh, well, there's your problem. It's three o'clock. Want me to get you a smoothie from the juice bar?"

"Could you?" I want to be alone more than I want the smoothie, but the latter will achieve the former.

"Sure thing. Anything else? Rum maybe?" She is joking/not-joking.

I manage a feeble snicker that comes out as more of a snort. "I can't start this early or I won't be able to walk on stage. How many stairs did you say there were?"

"Thirteen, I'm afraid. It's a weird venue."

"Lucky number thirteen."

Experience has taught me that no one is more superstitious than the atheist, ultra-logical, super-sciencey types who work in the space program. Go figure. I reach into my suit pocket for my ratty-old, dyed-purple rabbit's foot and breathe easier on contact. The ones that are clichés are the most comforting talismans to have, though we never throw them out when they don't work. We are never disloyal in that way. We just thank them for all the times that they did work and chalk it up to bad luck, bad karma, bad juju, when something goes wrong. Blame it on someone else's bum token.

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We're leaving the condo for the venue, and I've already tripped twice. I don't ever wear heels, certainly not pointy ones. Also, I'm two drinks in.

"Can I bring you up on stage with me?" I ask Mac as he hauls me back up. "I could hide behind you while *you* give the speech. Everyone loves an astronaut."

"That's true," he concedes, "but no, I cannot. Regrettably. You

know I'd love to help."

"You would, wouldn't you."

He's always loved the spotlight, which isn't necessarily a bad thing. It's just that the light can sometimes be brutal, blinding even.

"Maybe we should go back for flats," I suggest, wanting to delay the inevitable.

"You only have loafers. This is not a loafer occasion. Even for me." He gestures down to his dress shoes.

"I hate it when you're right."

"It happens so frequently, though." I punch him nominally in the arm, right into those famous biceps of his. These days I work out more than he does, but still I have recently developed that flapping chicken-arm thing whenever I wave to someone or whisk eggs, so I've decided to stop doing either of those things. All whisking and waving is now entirely Mac's responsibility.

We have a signed portrait of the crew up in the office at home, for appearances—not because we don't actually care but because we are aware of the need to actively appear to care in an overt way. That our grief is no longer allowed to be a private thing. The office was supposed to have been both of ours but now it's just Mac's, which is fine—I have one at work. I don't go in there at all, not even to vacuum. He does the vacuuming now.

The venue is a ballroom in a hotel, and the stairs to the stage are actually risers that squeak and shudder alarmingly when someone's climbing them. The whole contraption sinks several inches when Lisa steps up to test the microphone. I am reminded of a middle school choir performance on a similar structure during which I once faked passing out to avoid the embarrassment of being on stage in front of the whole school. As I recall, it backfired. My mother dragged me to the doctor after school, where I was required to pee in a cup and parade it back out in front of everyone in the waiting room, which was even more humiliating than singing on stage in front of an audience of thirteen-year-olds, not least of which because I was on my period at the time.

I pop another Xanax and toss back a glass of Pinot Grigio that I coaxed from the bartender while he was still setting up. I've lost track of how many I've had of both and consider having Lisa ask around

discreetly for a Valium, but I know that everyone will assume it's for me.

When it's my turn to go up to run through adjusting the microphone to my height, I emerge onstage from the side. The ballroom is walled with windows overlooking the hills down to the bay, and the night is so clear you can see all the way to San Francisco. The lights in the ballroom are wicked-bright and hot to boot, and I almost hurl at the sudden shock of an actual spotlight glancing my brow. I wave down to Lisa, or to a figure whom I think is Lisa, and slice my hand across my throat in the universal appeal to please make that thing stop. I brush my hand against the pendant around my neck that Mac once made for me out of concrete which had fused into glass from the heat of a launch, and usually I find it cooling, relaxing, but the weight of it now feels like it's pulling me downward. It feels like a choker that's actually choking me, but I can't take it off. I don't want to hurt his feelings.

The evening rushes by with me barely registering what's taking place, like the parts of a freeway you don't even recall having passed and forgotten. Throughout the bulk of the gala I plaster a practiced smile over my face and let Mac do most of the talking. Mac has always been the public face of our relationship, but now I've shrunk to some abstract, traditional wifely figure I wouldn't have recognized previously, standing literally behind him at least a hand's width in conversations with others. How long will he continue to be my shield until he starts to forget that I am even there?

No matter. I don't need to be noticed. It is enough to exist.

When it is time for the keynote, I take cautious, deliberate steps toward the risers up to the podium as the sounds of scattered applause dwindle in the background. This sound is quickly replaced by several loud pops, bangs, and a piercing whistling sound that I usually associate with rockets. I freeze in place and my mind races to evaluate whether I am hallucinating or if someone is perpetrating a horrible prank. I lose the ability to swallow my own spit.

Ooos and aaahs abound in the audience and I turn like a robot in fits and starts to see bursts of light arcing across the sky out the wall-to-wall windows. Lisa, who introduced me and who is still at the microphone, leans in to say, "Looks like Cal won!"—which elicits

even more genuine applause.

I neglected to wear waterproof mascara this evening—why would I?—I hardly ever cry, but this is turning out to be a grave mistake. As I watch out the windows, I feel tears streaming down my face in what I assume is much the same fallout pattern as the luminescent arcs of gasses from the fireworks outside, though the streaks running off my chin onto my chest are black and bleak. I turn back to the stairs and determine to make it all the way up without stumbling, though I am feeling my chest constrict once more. I wipe my cheeks with the backs of my hands and smile a crazy fool's grin at Lisa, who is momentarily speechless upon my approach.

I reach the mike and clutch my chest as if I am touched by some sort of precious welcome that hasn't taken place and manage to say, "You guys are too kind!" Then, "Don't you just love football?"—which buys me a little more time as everyone cheers and applauds some more. Someone has called up the fight song on their cell phone and plays it at full volume and people begin to clap in rhythm with the song. I know they are not clapping for me, but they don't for the moment appear to viscerally hate me, and that's new.

I'm supposed to thank everybody, then talk about the mission of the observatory, which partly involves inspiring the next generation of space scientists, but I can't see what I've written on my index cards with the mascara/tears concoction clouding my view—maybe my contacts are out of whack too. Will crying in front of a crowd humanize me or diminish me to the roll of nut-job? But crying only helps women who are already well-liked. *Suck it up, Sam.* My mind is blank, and I look over to Mac for support, but he's looking down at his phone. It reminds me of the recent call I received from Jeff, the husband of one of the fallen astronauts—Judy's husband. He said, through what sounded like whiskey-soaked tears, that he didn't blame me for Judy's death; he understood that it was not my fault, nor was it preventable.

"But you robbed me of saying goodbye, Samantha. You robbed me of the right to hear her live voice one last time. Of being by her proverbial bedside. Goddammit, it wasn't your call to make."

Jeff and Mac had long been close pals, but I was still surprised he'd called me at home to express such a thing. I told Mac it had

shaken me, but he'd brushed it off.

"The guy's just been made a widower—cut him some slack." It was more abrupt than he'd been in awhile.

I take the microphone out of its holster and walk to the front of the stage to buy more time before I have to think of something to say. The fight song and the applause have now completely died down, and all is quiet until I hear a collective gasp rush through the room. My heel has caught in the space between the risers and I see myself lurch forward in the video projection of me mirrored on a giant screen at the back of the ballroom. This all seems fitting to me at the time. I vow to throw my rabbit's foot away when I get home.

Then in the long moment as I tilt and fall—made longer by the fact that I am at the edge of the stage and am falling head-first all the way to the ground—the speakers wail a shrill and deafening feedback from the flailing of the microphone and everybody's hands fly up to their ears. I see all their faces before me. One is holding her hand to her mouth as if to stifle an amused grin. One's eyebrows are raised in either skepticism or a look of concern, it's hard to say. Mac looks up from his cell phone and I see in his eyes the recognition of what is about to go down. But nobody makes a move to catch me, not even him, and it's then that I realize—how did I miss it before?—that he blames me too. The shrieking from the speakers pierces my ear drums, my whole body, reverberates throughout the room—the screaming, the screaming—and my face hits the floor.

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