

'I Am, Seagull'

Sunday, June 16th 1963: I am ten days old and I lie on my back in a Silver Cross pram in the garden of a newly built 'Bett' house in an Aberdeenshire village. It's a sunny, warm day and the sky is clear and blue except for three, white, cigar-shaped clouds. Newly turned soil sprouts baby green, softening the look of recently constructed concrete and wet lime harl.

The garden is growing. All is quiet.

My new, black-blue eyes push high in their sockets, attempting to focus on a vague, overhead orbit. Dancing glitter stops over the place where I am and dangles from the darkness that shades me: a mobile of twelve stars, one of them, lower than the rest, with a brightly burning tail, a yellow, crescent moon, a turquoise Saturn, and, most distant, a rose-pink spacecraft, like a jewel, with fins.

The constellation twinkles. It's night time in the sun.

I want to reach out and touch. But I don't work like that yet. It's beyond me and the heavens are still far off. Instead, my short arm jerks and my chubby finger pokes the fleece of my toy lamb tucked between flannel sheet and wool blanket and I hear, as if it is in my head and somewhere else both at the same time:

'Ya Chaika, ya Chaika! Ya Chaika, ya Chaika!'

It's as if a huge, white, bird with black-tipped wings circles and calls.

It's a sound that beckons earth to stars.

At lunchtime, as I drift to sleep, sniffing unfamiliar smells and future pleasures of roast dinners, miles above me a woman floats by in the depths of space.

II

Junior Lieutenant Valentina Tereshkova peers through the porthole of Vostok-6 and gasps in delight.

‘I see the horizon!

A light blue: a beautiful band.

This is the Earth.

How beautiful it is!

All goes well.’

For some moments her radio crackles, gives a whistly whine and then falls silent. It won't be until late afternoon – around teatime – that her spacecraft passes over Ground Station again. For now, she will continue, through light and dark, and light and dark on her voyage around the planet.

Valentina Tereshkova is the first woman in space.

III

Six hundred and twenty kilometres north east of Karaganda, on the fifty third parallel, it is nineteen thirty hours and bright as day. The sun continues to stretch its rays, bathing the vast Soviet landscape in much needed light and warmth. As if it still grows, this pale, yellow plain spreads to the very horizon where a haze of distant mountains can be seen shimmering faintly. Even as summer reaches its height, they still have snowy peaks.

There, in the east, the land becomes thick forest of coniferous trees – spruce, larch, cedar and juniper: a hot, damp and tangled place filled with the musty smell of mould and the

sweet scent of wild berries. But here – here in ‘the middle of nowhere’ - flatness expands in all directions as far as you can see. A bird’s eye view – that of a hawk or a falcon perhaps - would witness deserts and semi deserts, of stone, salt, clay and sand, giving way to immense, semiarid grassy plains of wormwood, tamarisk and feather grass which in turn transform to thickets of elm, poplar, reeds and shrubs growing along the banks of rivers and lakes. If it was observant it might see fellow inhabitants too: on the ground, roe deer, foxes and badgers, gophers, sand rats, jerboas and reptiles, as well as boars, jackals, brown bears, ibex and lynx. Of the air, pheasants, partridges, black grouse and bustards.

To the west it could glimpse the Caspian Sea, to the south the Syr Darya River; then in the east Baikonur Cosmodrome and to the north the Labour Camps and industrial and nuclear testing sites.

But here in remoteness these things are far away. Here our bird is free.

Here, Davydka and Roman sit before their fire and eat their supper: unleavened bread like great, flat stones, noodles with smoked sausage and strong, hot tea. It has been a long day. The sheep have been restless, not grazing and a bit jittery. Roman wonders if a wolf or fox has been spooking them but Davydka says no.

‘The grass wasn’t good.’

Besides, Blazh would have sensed if anything was wrong.’

He tosses a piece of steaming sausage to the sheep dog.

Davydka wipes his long moustache with the back of his hand and pulls his grey, felt hat over his eyes. Rest, at last.

So, the shepherds had moved on. Allah be praised, there was plenty of good grass here.

IV

Valentina nudges the pencil and logbook with her finger as they float weightlessly before her face. She watches them spin and then glide off into a distant corner of the cockpit. She is in darkness now. The only light is the dim, gentle hue of instruments. The temperature reads twenty degrees and all is quiet.

‘This is a womb.’

Before this, she thinks, I’ve had a life.

‘Perhaps this is my tomb.’

She wonders if there is life to come, and remembers her mother.

‘My mother’s quiet sobbing remains a bad dream in my memory.’

I can feel her heavy, dark head in my child’s hands.

V

Ground Station celebrates.

‘Well done Comrades! We have a Soviet daughter in space!

She is a heroine!

She will have the *Order of Lenin!*

Yes, and the *Gold Star Medal!*

She is a Worker!

She is one of the People!

‘What if she doesn’t come back?’

‘She is dispensable. There are thousands like her.’

Like a lamb to the slaughter then?

‘Either way, we cannot lose. Think of it...as an experiment.’

VI

Valentina was raised by her mother.

Her father, a tractor driver and Red Army soldier, was killed in the Finnish War when she was three. Her mother was a widow then, with three small children, at age twenty-seven. Every day she left the house before daybreak to milk cows.

Then they moved to the city and her mother got a job at a textile mill. At seventeen Valentina joined her there. With her first pay she bought a flower-print scarf and some sweets for her mother. Her mother burst into tears when she saw them.

‘Tears of sadness and tears of joy.’

Valentina worked hard: by day with cloth and cotton and wool; by night with correspondence courses from the Light Industry Technical School. Then, in nineteen fifty nine, at age twenty two, with the local Air Sports Club, she made her first parachute jump. Soon, she was jumping every day.

‘I set up the Textile Mill Worker’s Parachute Club.’

In that same year Yuri Gagarin went into space.

‘The first man in space!

A Soviet youth in space!’

The whole factory was filled with excitement and joy. That day, when Valentina returned home, everything changed forever when her mother said:

‘Next time it will be a woman’s turn.’

‘I was so excited, I couldn’t sleep!’

Valentina was inspired with Gagarin’s achievements and volunteered for the Soviet space programme. She had no experience as a pilot but her numerous parachute jumps – a record hundred and twenty six - gained her a position as a cosmonaut in nineteen sixty one.

‘Rocket science and spacecraft engineering were difficult. But I excelled in physical training. I worked hard. But of course, I had a dream.’

All was secret. No one, not even Valentina’s family knew until the flight was announced to the public.

Then, the day came to go. Now she was seeing a new dawn every ninety minutes.

‘It is beautiful.’

She thinks of her mother, and then, of all mothers and how the planet teams with life because of the life that mothers pass on.

‘The Earth is filled with their prayers.’

All is linked. All are connected.

VII

13.00: Davydka stands and takes a leak. He is not so young and is stiff from sleep. It is dark – though even now there is a band of paleness on the skyline - and as he relieves himself he stretches his neck and studies the stars. Great Bear is chased by Hercules and Davydka knows he faces True North.

He considers the moon.

Davydka wonders if a man will walk there.

He smiles to himself and wonders if a man might take a sheep or two there.

Now that would be something: sheep roaming on the moon. He imagines a lunar sheep pen and lambs like small, white rabbits frolicking in outer space and shakes his head at his madness.

He gazes at the sleeping figure of his younger friend. Lambing meant something different for Roman this year. Roman's wife is expecting their first child and so the season held a particular poignancy for him: fine to see so much new life but hard to watch the casualties.

The child will come in late September.

VIII

On the second day all is quiet.

Valentina sleeps all day.

VIII

On the third day she sends a message:

'Prepared to receive data for manual descent'.

At 0754.48 the retro-rocket is switched on and as the shepherds finish breakfast and I have my second night-feed, Valentina begins to land.

They look up and see her appear: a chair containing a woman ejected, swinging in air, suspended beneath white silence of billowing silk.

Behold a lamb.

They shade their eyes from the glory of morning sun as a delicate shuttle weaves together worlds and heavens and intervenes in time and place.

She comes to earth and calls:

‘It’s me, I’m home.’

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