

A Most Peculiar Way

By Suzy A. Kelly

13-03-2020 - OUTBREAK

Mission Control announced Scotland's first fatality due to the new human pathogen today. So far, there have been 5,008 deaths across Earth since they discovered it in December.

We monitor communications from aboard Sirona One. The shuttle has been our home for the last 105,120 hours. Collins, our pilot, sits to my right on the flight deck. He bites his lip, mulling over the bulletin. His skin is turning grey, like mine. His eyes are a nicotine yellow at the edges. Sweat films across his neck and forehead. A barking cough erupts from the depths of his chest at least three times every hour. With my own lungs, it's easier to count the rattling gasps between each hacking fit. So far, it's fifteen.

The News from Earth repeats itself until, one rotation period later, we too say 'but *they* had underlying health conditions', as if by chanting the words we could ward off our own deaths.

Collins and I are on watch. Mission Specialists Wolfe and Purrlot have retired to the mid-deck sleeping quarters below. Collins' little finger twitches. His knee bounces, but his focus doesn't stray beyond the HUD (Heads-Up Display).

'You should rest.' I tap his elbow to reassure him. 'I can take over...'

Collins glances across to me, as if to object, then turns in his chair. 'Christ, what are your levels? Your lips are blue.'

I check the instruments. 'Temperature... 37.8 degrees.'

'And oxygen saturation?'

'SpO2 is at 89%.'

'Tell Mission Control,' says Collins. 'Your body is failing.'

At 30 AU (Astronomical Units), we're nearer Pluto than Earth.

'No,' I say. 'Without lab tests or medicine, we'll either live or...'

'Or we won't,' we say together.

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23-03-2020 - QUARANTINE

The Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 has taken 15,436 souls from Earth, 14 of them from Scotland.

Collins and I are still recovering from the respiratory contagion aboard the Sirona. Wolfe and Purrlot, I'm relieved to report, remain uncontaminated. As a precaution, Mission Control has cancelled all EVA (Extravehicular Activity) for fourteen days, the suspected incubation period.

'My lungs feel like they've been booted out by a racehorse,' I tell Collins by the galley.

He sips his bag of re-hydrated coffee. 'Mine feel like they've been mauled by a tiger...'

We grimace in commiseration, refusing to voice what might have been. Last week, we hung over our bunks like dying jellyfish, too feeble and breathless to float away, too exhausted to care.

'Rescue is unviable,' advised Control.

Collins and Purrlot float the short distance to the equipment bay. As they service the waste management system, I check on Wolfe. He smiles when I pop my head through the flight deck hatch.

'Anything?' I say.

Wolfe shakes his brown ponytail and yawns.

I haul myself down the ladder that runs between each level and creep to the empty payload bay. My hiding place smells like charred metal but I must steal five minutes alone.

Triton is the largest and reddest of Neptune's fourteen moons. The lunar surface itself is the colour of cold porridge. At -235 degrees, it's the coldest place in our Solar System. Plant life is negligible. Soon we'll check for other life-forms.

I set my alarm and stress-cry until the ringer goes off. Ten minutes later, I wash my hands. As I sing 'Happy Birthday', I pretend to feel the heat of our sun against my cheek.

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28-04-2020 - EXTRAVEHICULAR ACTIVITY

215,063 Earth souls lost. 1,332 in Scotland.

We're prepping for our first EVA post lockdown. Collins, Wolfe and I slither into the top and bottom halves of our white EMUs (Extravehicular Mobility Units), the awkward pressurised spacesuits. We don communication caps, gloves, then helmets. Collins and Wolfe await my command. Purrlot grooms himself on the flight deck.

The airlock depressurises. The door clunks behind us and we brace ourselves against the tropospheric winds. I hate these days. The Myalgic Encephalomyelitis in my body means my nerves feel like they're being pricked by thousands of tiny pins. As we trudge towards the four-wheeled PRM (Pressurised Research Module), all my muscle groups crunch. Even weird ones like the masseter in my jaw. All 56 phalanges ache. The ridge at the join of the spacesuit blisters my neck every time I move. My lymph nodes swell and strangle me. As I plot our course, Collins steers us across the depressing, pitted terrain. Wolfe shouts at everything he sees.

We pass a hairless land mammal further ahead. It sports a rectangular, blue cloth around the underside of its jaw. The elastic ear loops form a stretchy bra-hammock around its chin. Exposed to the elements, the mammal expectorates and a queue forms behind it. The dominant characters line themselves up at two metre intervals. They emit anxious bobcat-like wails until unseen forces allow them to enter a large building dedicated to the mass procurement of rectal cleansing products.

We return to the shuttle and hear an ancient London diarist on the Earth radio. Like us, he survived the terrors of the plague times, where it was illegal to open your doors to neighbours in need.

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29-04-2020 - FIRST CONTACT

218,649 Earth souls lost. 1,415 in Scotland.

After yesterday's excursion, I'm confined to the sleeping area. While the others fulfil their daily tasks, I recover in my bunk, worn out like a dismembered ragdoll. If I lean over the side, I'm convinced I'll see my stuffing torn out and scattered. My bones feel too heavy for my skin, like they might sink through it.

Collins shoves the portable HUD into my lap, and, in that moment, I hate him; the way he picks his teeth, his tastes in music, food, literature.

'Ugh,' I say, my cabin fever kicking in.

'You'll feel better taking part,' he says. 'You've got this.'

'I'd rather scrub my fanny with wire wool,' I say under my breath.

With the equipment stowed, the mid-deck is mere feet wide, but it feels even smaller today, as if the aluminium sides are shrinking in on me, on all of us.

Wolfe and Purrlot squabble by the galley, an arm's length away. Their back-and-forth exacerbates the gnawing tension in my skull. My lungs still feel dry and heavy from the infection, so I'm too wounded to reprimand them at full volume.

Collins takes charge. He points at each culprit and shouts, 'Wolfe, enough. Purrlot, go eat.'

Except for the creaking of the shuttle, peace reigns. Wolfe follows Collins to the flight deck. Purrlot perches on the end of my bunk. I'm unsure if his wicked smile is about getting Wolfe censured or because he's eating a tuna sandwich.

I click the meeting link.

'Welcome to...' chirps an Earthbound Zoom Administrator.

'Fuck off,' I mouth at the screen.

'Everyone, turn your cameras...'

I slam the portable HUD shut. *Not today.*

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19-06-2020 - HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

454,889 Earth souls lost. 2,470 in Scotland.

Provisions are low. A delivery is scheduled from Earth next month. Until it arrives, Collins and I must enter hostile territory and forage for what we can.

We hear no church bells ringing. No chip wrappers or pizza boxes line the gutters. Even the gulls have deserted this part of locked-down Triton. Some life-forms still roam the flatlands, their arms outstretched, inquiring after caffeinated beverages.

‘Whours ma hazelnut latte?’ they moan.

Collins wheels me into the supply station, as my body is still too weak to stand unaided. He parks me beside the carrots and sprints ahead to wrestle a minister for the last loaf of bread. Masks are mandatory now, so most astronauts, cosmonauts and taikonauts adopt effective Personal Protective Equipment. Everyone except for the stocky older gentleman who strides past me with a tartan scarf wound around his mouth.

‘This is pure Big Brother,’ he mumbles at his trolley.

I imagine felling him half-way down the vegetable aisle with a well-targeted turnip.

As I struggle to drop a bag of stubbly carrots into the basket on my lap, a young woman leans over my head to grab a light salad dressing from the shelf above.

‘Och, bless you,’ she says, ‘it’s cheaper to buy those individually.’

I do the smile-and-nod thing until she and her cotton sundress billow around the corner to the tinned soups.

If I had the physical strength, the energy, the co-ordination – to reach for the carrot, hold the bag open while depositing said carrot, and repeat that process several times before twisting the bag closed and weighing the motherfucker on the scales – don’t you think I would?

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20-07-2020 - SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF

606,922 Earth souls lost, but Oxford University offers hope with positive vaccine trials.

I slouch in my chair on the flight deck. The crew work on the level below me. Wolfe performs an inventory in the equipment bay: one large and four small bouncy orbs; two stuffed friends. The softer the mouthfeel, the more comfort they bring him. Purrlet grooms his ears. Collins processes technical data.

I spare them my feelings. Not that they won't listen, but I'm a scratched disc, skipping and repeating the same song from morning to night. Even my eyelashes feel exhausted. It takes Olympian effort to chew food or raise my diaphragm. I feel like an upturned crab with my squishy parts exposed, ripe for predation.

Collins encourages me, 'We've come so far... why not try something different?'

He's right. I can't let my impulsive panics isolate me forever. Following Mission Control's daily briefing at UTC 12:00, I press 'launch' and join another meeting. A secondary window opens onto the HUD.

What passcode?

I reach my fist out to punch the display, then remember the number is in an email. I enter it and Earth opens up to me. Multiple miniature screens appear. Rows of intense faces in mid-flow discuss the booked speaker's texts.

The administrator unmutes me then splits us into breakout-rooms without warning or consent.

'We can't see you...' say strangers.

Shit.

I want to bury myself in the lunar sand, but I force an eyelid open and click, click, click the 'leave meeting' button. *No cameras.*

Wolfe finds me bent double, nauseous, head-in-hands. He rests a hairy arm on my shoulder to comfort me as my thoughts cycle.

'Next time,' says Collins.

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31-08-2020 - STATIC-FIRE TEST

846,985 Earth souls lost. More rumours of potential vaccines in Russia and the USA. Mission Control is tracking the virus via mobile apps. Elsewhere, they're bribing citizens to dine in public.

I remember friends and family abandoned in Edinburgh. The city's Book Festival finishes tonight. There's no queueing for authors or gorging on ice-cream in Charlotte Square this year. Everyone meets in the digital realm. Cameras are optional in this final author talk. No torture rooms. Those able to withstand forced camaraderie chat to strangers with confidence.

How do they do it? If the planet's people came with a manual, I could check off every step and stitch myself back into the social fabric.

I scrunch my eyes and imagine my bare feet sinking into the cool lawns of Charlotte Square. Damp grass pushes between my toes. I smell fresh print, coffee, anticipation. The sun's warmth kisses the nape of my neck as I feel my body take easy, unhurried steps. Soon, I run through the Square toppling pyramids of paperbacks and hardbacks. My chaotic heart beats in my throat as I gain speed. I run just because I can. My arms keep time because, here, they can.

When I open my eyes, it's over. My bunk holds me prisoner.

The Earthlings discuss their hardships while the author gets ready.

'I'm held hostage in this hoose,' says MadDerrick88.

'Ken,' says Angelasupermum. 'We're like battery hens.'

'Picking up ma antidepressants wis ma big day oot...'

'Fuckin hellish.'

'They talk about my everyday existence as if it's not worth living,' I rage to Collins.

'You've had twelve years to acclimatise,' he says. 'Have patience.'

Three fucking cheers to my permanently locked-down life.

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22-09-2020 - RETROGRADE ORBIT

965,642 Earth souls lost.

Our lives revolve around Mission Control's briefings. Disease replication numbers, death statistics, percentages and acronyms punctuate our day. Director Sturgeon urges us to remember the FACTS protocol ensuring basic cleanliness and 2m social distancing.

My routine starts with medication and ends with meals and data entry. Collins has the additional burden of housekeeping duties and helping me perform my toilette whenever my energies crash. Purrlot oversees rations, sleep schedules, grooming, and waste management. Wolfe performs a daily spacewalk after Director Sturgeon's announcements. She's like the One o'Clock Gun for us, but without the panicked tourists squawking and ducking.

Collins sits cross-legged on his bunk with Wolfe and whispers, 'The rages and despair. I can't cope.'

It's about me, I think.

I clear my throat before entering, feeling weighted down, as if I've swallowed a boulder. 'I've got that Zoom journaling group starting today...'

'Mmhhh. That's great,' says a thin-lipped Collins. He turns his back, like he's given up on me, and plays with Wolfe. 'Where's your Freddy-teddy? Where is he?'

'Wish me luck?' I say, 'I could use a hug.'

Collins struggles to smile but he still wraps his arms around me. 'Good luck.'

Purrlot rolls onto his back and demands we cuddle him. Wolfe is my loudest cheerleader. He tosses his fluffy grey teddy towards me, his favourite possession, and barks when I catch it.

'Thanks, buddy,' I say.

I clutch the stuffed bear with the ragged nose to my chest. For a moment, the boulder in my belly transforms into a Wolfe-shaped feather. But in my chair on the flight deck, I freeze. *Stop spinning. Launch the meeting. Act. Make contact. Take a chance?*

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29-09-2020 - WORST-CASE SCENARIO

1,002,864 Earth souls lost. Over a million deaths in two-thirds of a year while a second wave of infections surges across the planet.

The journaling group is now a weekly Zoom. Whenever my throat constricts in a meeting, I hold Freddy-teddy in the crook of my arm and squeeze its paw until the heebie-jeebies pass.

Kay1234, the cheery administrator, greets the ten of us and leads the group meditation. We spend 50 minutes writing our hearts into our journals. Cameras optional. The final ten minutes is a celebration of members' insights. We hear everyone with patience and empathy.

'Routine is key to surviving confinement,' I say to HellsBells666.

Like me, she's 45 and propped up by pillows. She contracted the virus in April, like Director Johnson in London. She still suffers energy loss and brain fog. Her body aches like a bruise. Like me, she's shorn her dark hair short after her arms struggled to bear its weight. The online newspapers call this 'Long Covid' but Myalgic Encephalomyelitis sufferers recognise kindred patients.

'Babywipe bath *and* fresh pyjamas... you did great today!' I say.

HellsBells666 and I fist bump the screen in solidarity. Kay1234 moves around the sharing circle.

On my turn, I say, 'I examined my fears. The lump on Wolfe's shoulder has doubled...' I dig my nails into my talisman's foot. 'He collapsed in his bunk yesterday.'

1, 2, 3...

'Quick,' says Collins with a tremor rising in his throat. 'Wolfe needs us...'

I bite my cheek and wave goodbye to the group.

Wolfe shivers. There's no shine to his hazel eyes. It's like he's leaving us. Collins, Purrlot, and I all agree to bunk in with him tonight.

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01-10-2020 - SURVIVAL OPERATIONS

1,015,107 Earth souls lost. The Sirona lost her first one today.

I sit in the payload bay, knees up, back to the wall. My vision blurs. I can't see to the other side of the shuttle. It feels as though we're spinning out.

I bite my thumb while the sobs ratchet out of my body, burst-by-burst. They sound as if they belong to someone else; to the person who inhabits the strange universe where Wolfe is lost.

We rushed him to the surgery.

'Lockdown rules,' said the receptionist, gripping her clipboard. 'Only one of you can accompany him. Not both.'

Everything comes in snapshots. The surgeon explains a tumour, that our beloved Wolfe is bleeding out. That he's burning, delirious with fever. We're forced to say farewell, to untangle our spirits from his. They make exceptions. They permit Collins and I to kiss Wolfe's soft, pained muzzle together. It smells like biscuits fresh from the oven. We lie on the floor as a family and spoon ourselves around Wolfe's sedated form.

Collins grabs my hand as the death needle enters our boy's body. There's an exposed square of flesh around Wolfe's ribs where they shaved him to test his blood. My free palm covers it, skin-on-skin. I will Wolfe to keep...

He fights the onslaught, but his life peters away, heartbeat-by-heartbeat. Then comes a terrible peace where an invisible frost creeps throughout the room. In that breathless moment, our lives splinter and the planets tilt off their axes.

Collins loses himself in work. I lie on the payload bay floor with Purrlot.

'Any second now, he'll come sniffing around the corner, won't he?'

Purrlot vomits up a hairball in reply.

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19-11-2020 - WORKING THE PROBLEM

1,352,494 Earth souls lost. Rumours of vaccines are now concrete plans for their delivery in Scotland, beginning today with care workers and the medically vulnerable.

It's been 49 days since Mission Specialist Wolfe returned to the stars. His hair appears in unexpected places, like the HUD screen, my make-up bag, the driver's seat of the Research Module. I hid Wolfe's research toys a week after the funeral and stowed them in the highest cupboard in the equipment bay, along with his ashes. I still pull Freddy-teddy out of his hiding place ten times a day. Sometimes I bury my nose in the springy fur and imagine Wolfe bounding towards me. The sense memory soon chokes me, and I shove the toy back into the cupboard. Afterwards, I wash my face with cool water, afraid of where the grief might lead me.

The guided meditations in the journaling group leave me feeling lighter. Small advances like I can relax my shoulder blades, soften my stomach muscles, and unclench my jaw most days. I still have butterflies in my throat whenever I launch the meeting, but I'm tethered to the group now.

Kay1234 is a 26-year-old art teacher who lives with her extended family in Dundee. She leads the meditation and journaling practice, but tonight, she has sunken eyes and smudged mascara.

'How's your uncle?' I unmute myself to ask.

'Off the ventilator,' she says.

The group press their 'reaction' buttons to celebrate the treatment milestone with her. We shower her in digital 'thumbs up' as she blows into her hanky.

'It all escalated so fast...' she continues. 'One day he couldn't taste his food, the next he was on life support.'

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08-12-2020 - ENTRY INTERFACE

1,548,094 souls.

We commence our pre-flight checks. The plan is to leave Triton's orbit tonight. Collins closes the payload bay doors, and we change into our orange landing suits. We strap ourselves into the flight deck and, once we configure the computers, we orientate the shuttle until its tail points towards the Earth. We trust the engines will fire during the deorbit burn, approximately an hour before we touch down. Three-and-a-half minutes later, we'll descend.

HellsBells666 apologises for not dressing up or wearing lipstick. 'I'm beyond tired,' she sighs.

'Don't worry,' I say. 'My eyes are still crusty, and I flung this gaudy Christmas-Pies-for-Boobies jumper over yesterday's t-shirt. It's still got spag bol sauce down the front.'

HellsBells666 pulls her blonde hair back from her ears. 'I did snag these sparkly green baubles off the Xmas tree. Great earrings or what?'

'See, we're all doing our part,' says Kay1234, flashing home-manicured, ruby nails.

The ten of us press the new 'reaction' buttons and light up the festive Zoom party with hearts, party poppers, and applause.

Collins glides the Sirona into place. The engines fire, 80 miles above our home planet. Our lungs struggle to find oxygen as we experience the bullet-train pressure of descent at 300 knots. The roaring heat of re-entry is like a menopausal flash; a creeping burn that soon transforms into an all-consuming wildfire across your every surface.

When the worst is over, I reach my hand out to stroke Wolfe, but Purrlot trots into the unoccupied space to head-bump my fingers. I want nothing more than to swap my space helmet for a party hat, grateful to land, safe in the socially distanced arms of Earth.

Word Count: 3,420 words