

Rocket Science

by Paul Phillips

On the morning of his last day on this planet, Pascal was visited by the woman who had been his wife for twenty years. The encounter took place in the medical quarantine unit of the launch site. It was not possible for Mrs Pascal to make physical contact with her husband.

“Oh pumpkin,” she cried when she saw him now, prepared for his imminent mission; it had been a term of endearment between them. And because it was all she could do - or would ever be able to do - she added, several times: “Look at you.”

Pascal tried to remember when they had last seen each other and how they had left things, but his head was full of facts and figures that all related to the next day of his life, not the weeks, months and years that had preceded it. Fortunately the technician Creech was present to remind him.

“You wanted to say something about your daughter.”

He said something. It sounded like “Ex...”

Perhaps ‘explain’?

“Your daughter Rachel.”

He said something else that sounded like “Why?”

Mrs Pascal bit her lip and fought to keep the anger from her face. Her eyes moved around the room as though pinning notes to the various racks and trolleys of life support equipment. The last pin went right into the centre of her husband’s forehead.

“What about Rachel?” she said.

“I... I can’t...”

“Sometimes it’s a thought that is rejected,” Creech explained. “Give the immunosuppressants time to work.”

“What about Rachel?” Pascal’s wife repeated. Since early childhood it had been said of her that she did not suffer fools gladly and ever since she had heard this pronounced she had thought it a foolish expression. Of course, in these times, in this world, there was a need to suffer fools – especially for a woman - and of course some were better at this than others, but who would ever do so gladly? Only a fool.

The ideas had yet to order themselves in her husband’s head. The names for them had yet to petition the muscles of his mouth. First it was the turn of his eyes – bloodshot, boiled-looking – to slide back and forth between the pulsing tubes, pumps and gauges of the medical impedimenta. As he breathed, they breathed.

In and out.

Up and down.

Addition.

Subtraction.

Colour returned to his lips – yet seemed to drain from his once-blue eyes.

All life was an equation, of course.

“She’ll - receive - the best - of this...”

“She will indeed!” Creech added - for Mrs Pascal’s benefit - “the very best.”

“...in all four corners of the world,” she scoffed. “The very best beneath this firmament!”

Her outburst had left a wavering cloud of condensation on the glass. She raised a fingertip and sketched an ovoid, before encasing it in a rotated square.

On the other side of the partition, Creech gestured for her to return to her seat.

“That, Mrs Pascal, is why we’re here.”

The whirr of the CO₂ scrubbers dropped a halftone. The lights dimmed and then brightened. The centre’s generators had shut down as the local grid came back online.

“You must excuse me for a moment,” Creech said. “I have to check on the accumulators.”

When he heard the technician dogging down the airtight door from the far side, Pascal opened his eyes again, regarded his wife and let out a kind of laugh.

“My nose itches!”

“I can’t help you with that.”

“And - the inside of my thigh.”

“No one can help you with that.” This time, the broken laugh was hers.

“You used to, remember? Oh - God.”

“What is it?”

“The strangest thing. I think of you – of us, how we were – and I feel, almost feel, myself arousing... Why are you crying?”

“Why do you think! Look at you – the great star voyager.”

“I don’t suppose they want me to voyage to any stars. I don’t think they’re ready for stars. Nor, to be frank, could we achieve the required altitude.”

“No shit!”

“Well, precisely. But if they can get me up there, even just for one complete orbit...”

“Then your life will have meaning? Your life had meaning.”

“No. Not after Rachel. Rachel spoiled everything.”

“You believe that?”

“You know I don’t mean it in that way, but yes, I have to believe that.”

“So you can do this. For Rachel.”

“Yes.”

“Pascal. You’re not doing this for her.”

Perhaps it was the way the microphones transmitted the sounds but he appeared to hear her words without registering their meaning, recognising them only as a cue.

“Of course I am. I get up there - prove the Earth is round – and the Government doesn’t have to take it from the Flat-Earth brigade any more. They can re-hire the experts, redirect the funds, fix the satellites, get their bloody Cyber working again. We start getting *our* world back. And you get the very best medical care, for Rachel – a complete waiver on the pre-existing condition, they’ve promised.”

“I don’t know what you really believe any more. I don’t know what they’ve put into you... what they’ve cut out of you...”

There came the thuds and hisses of the pressure door being opened. Mrs Pascal pressed her forehead against the glass.

“My dear,” her husband said in a meaningless way. It was as though he had been unplugged from the conversation and this was the noise that it made.

“Creech,” she said, knowing he was there.

“What is it, Mrs Pascal?”

“You spoke about the effects and the side-effects of the immunosuppressants, but this is something else. He has lost cognitive function. What have you done to his mind?”

The technician had crouched down next to the module, one eye on the dials. As his gesture took in the chrysalis of expanded polystyrene and bandages and gaffer tape, Mrs Pascal noticed the dirt under his fingernails.

“It’s not brain surgery,” he said.

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So how would one describe this, Pascal wondered while he sat – lay – in his module atop the launch tower, waiting to be inserted into the fairing. Sitting? Lying? Perhaps something in between? But no, because in between sitting and lying you had reclining and this wasn’t reclining, this was...

Perching?

The tower swayed. Presumably the old missile – literally a museum piece - was also swaying. (There were no proper weather forecasts any more, only deniable foretellings.) Did that put paid to any plans for pinpoint accuracy or was it something that would ‘all be sorted out by the gimbals’? This phrase had been used a lot during the briefing sessions. And there had been a lot more about things such as inclination and velocity that he half-remembered at best. He only had so much room for information in his head and not all of it added up and his wife’s visit had complicated everything.

It hadn’t gone well, that last meeting. Well, it had started hopefully and gone downhill and in that respect it had mirrored most relationships, their own included. But

there was no disputing that it had ended very badly - except to argue, perhaps, that they had already had their bad ending, long before, and that what this was instead, and what it could only ever be, if one wanted to settle on a word, a single word with a meaning both terminal and open-ended, was aftermath.

“Good one,” Creech’s voice sounded in his head.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Oh, sorry, thought it was a joke. After – math.”

Pascal blinked. Although he couldn’t move an inch inside the module, he felt his equilibrium falter as something turned over in his skull like an embryo in an egg or the yin and yang of memories and imaginings, inter-nested, like gimbals...

“You mean because of the lack of calculations. The computers falling silent and the Cyber slipping out of alignment – isn’t that how it happened?” Despite what Creech had told him over and over and what he had learned for himself about his newfound and everlasting and not-worth-worrying-about immovability, he tried again to sit up and the sensation came close to sending him insane. He began not only to internalise the words but to externalise them as well. “You mean the mundane navel-gazing of the Flat-Earthers and their determination to subtract a whole dimension from our existence... You mean the closure of the Science faculties, the redundancy and re-education of experts... You mean crowdsourcing opinion and calling it intelligence: multiplying everything by nothing...”

He heard and felt the footsteps on the gantry getting nearer. His tone softened, becoming almost teasing.

“You mean people who used to plumb-in bathrooms for a living working out payloads on the back of a pack of cigarettes and butchers – Butchers! – making the

adjustments. But if that's the best we can do to cling to enlightenment in a post-knowledge, post-capable society then tell me this... how are you reading my mind?"

Creech picked up the survival module, tucked it under one arm and began to walk with it towards the nosecone.

"It's not rocket science," he said.

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She had been such a beautiful child. Bright in every sense, without her mother's grave allure or the deep dragline of her father's darkest thoughts - an explosion of light and life and love.

Even school, with its mindless elevation of self-fulfilment over substance, became a delight, seen through her eyes. What did the heavy footprint of the previous generation really matter when the next could dance? And why shouldn't she have confidence? Why shouldn't she have promise?

Then, out of the blue, came the headache, the neck ache, the aching limbs. With vaccines having been discredited many years earlier, there was no containing the outbreak. Instead, orders were placed for a thousand iron lungs: one was found in a derelict museum and taken apart to see how it had worked.

A thousand mirrors too. It was the way they could see their parents' faces on visiting day; the faces that their parents put on.

The angled mirror on the front of the survival module was not dissimilar. With everything packed and taped into place, Pascal could observe at least something of the view through the porthole. Although a miniature camera would be filming the same view, and they would attempt to transmit its feed back to Earth, it was important for him to bear witness with his own two eyes. Whatever happened in the end to the

makeshift satellite and its irrecoverable occupant, the warhead's multiple re-entry system had been jury-rigged to eject the magnetic wire recording of his commentary and return it in one, precious piece.

It was vox-operated. When he vocalised, it recorded.

"Rachel," he said.

Creech's voice was still in his head. Presumably that side of their conversation would be recorded separately, all assuming the link survived lift-off.

"What was that, Pascal?"

"Just thinking. This must be a bit like how it was, for her."

"Ten seconds. Nine... eight... seven... "

(No, of course it didn't add up.)

Pascal shut his eyes. He might have screwed up his whole face in trepidation if the muscle groups and the expressions of which they were capable had not been simplified. There was only so much of him – and the animal organs to which he had been grafted – that could fit into the module. Originally it had been designed for a small dog.

He thought of his wife's face instead, and how it was when they parted for the last time: the tortured look on those once-familiar features as she hammered with her open hands on the dirty glass, leaving patterns like an afterimage of startled waterfowl.

"Look at you, you bloody fool, look at you! Rachel can't be saved. Rachel could never be saved. You've not done this for her, or us, you've done it for you, to run away – from her, from me, from your fucking *self*..."

"Lift-off... We have lift-off..."

This was it. This was the moment he had been waiting for, when all those memories, or what remained of them, were blasted away and when the only thing that mattered, and all that would ever matter from now on until the end of time, was the mission to put the world back the way it was meant to be.

The module rattled and shook. In his cocoon, Pascal trembled with anticipation.

“Reaching escape velocity...”

When it came, the sudden deceleration was mind-numbing. Exactly as if the missile had struck an immovable barrier, everything behind him and around him moved instantly forwards to vanish in an explosion of light and life and love.

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The waveform was flat, the speaker silent. She exhaled on the glass and drew – rather expertly – a mirror-image question mark.

The technician shook his head and turned off the machine.