

ANT HILL

The quota for daily launches was fixed. Due to the fifteen minute delay caused by the faulty elevator, carry Tim knew he had to forego the Bezos-Shatner hologram presentation that he routinely played for the passengers as he waited for liftoff clearance. Instead, he reported, "We're good," to the ground crew, then dove directly into his harness-locking demo while simultaneously reciting his bite-sized version of the mandatory *Earth Pop* promotional spiel.

Serif was only four years old when *Blue Origin* launched the *New Shepard*, the first of the sixty-two mile, atmosphere-piercing vehicle rides designed for civilian consumption. She recalled her parents sandwiching her on the couch to watch the event live on TV as if it were a teachable moment. They had tried to impress upon her how critical it was whether or not ninety-year-old William Shatner, a beefy TV space actor, could get through it alive. But way back then the event barely registered in Serif's developing mind as she instead focused on a tiny scab on her toe. Now she regretted not having been more attentive.

Serif was disappointed that she would not see the hologram today. She had thoroughly enjoyed it on her first ride three years ago. She thought Mr. Bezos came across as having the attention span of a gnat, but had been impressed with that old Shatner man as he described his experience. He had likened space to death and had been moved to tears by the visual confirmation that life only existed south of earth's thin atmosphere. She wondered why people looked to space when they prayed to God and why they didn't

simply look sideways. "After you die, why would you want to go toward death? Why not toward an ant hill or a nice beach?" she thought. From that day to this, if Serif had ever felt compelled to connect with a mythical, benevolent designer, she would focus on something close at hand, something alive. Of course, she hadn't been able to actually behold the experience of actor Shatner's metaphoric revelation during her first jaunt beyond the Kármán line due to being pinned against the ceiling by smelly man, but she was convinced she had at least felt it.

This time, she wanted to boldly go where no portly man had gone before - beyond the physical and into the outer space of her mind. As Serif checked and rechecked the snug on her harness, she worried that in the year 2041 no one cared about the significance of anything; that they simply consumed.

Corny Tim abruptly ended his *Earth Pop* speech, double checked the hatch latch and situated himself against the side of the capsule between passengers Eleven and Twelve. A tinny dispatch message in his earpiece could be heard by those near him, announcing in a bored tone, "We are a go." As the hissing sounds of the cold liquid oxygen pressure release and launch pad water saturation process gave way to the high-pitched whine of the power switchover to the rocket's computer system, Tim gave the passengers a thumbs up and quickly grabbed the wall handles behind him. At that moment, Serif watched the gantry wheel away, waiting breathlessly for liftoff. Within seconds, while the craft was still tethered to the pad, the rocket shook madly as the liquid oxygen/hydrogen fuel mixture was ignited below. As the white cloud of boiled water vapor on the ground

rose to the level of the capsule, the tethers were released. Finally, the unearthly voice of gravity defiance began to roar and grumble. The rocket shakily tilted back and forth in place for a second or two and then inched straight upward as it incrementally began to gain insane speed.

The lacquered hair at the rear of Serif's head, which she had fastidiously shifted up with the flashing neoprene headband only minutes earlier, was instantly drawn downward as the rocket's ascent warred with her fashion sense. She could feel another self-conscious bout coming on as her head began to tremor. "Oh no, not now," she thought. But she reasoned that the tremor would be, most likely, nearly imperceptible thanks to the jolting motion of the capsule's interior. Just to be sure, she looked all around to see if anyone was noticing.

Luckily, carny Tim was occupied side eyeing the obnoxious, taunting girl's breasts as they jiggled to the exact relative rhythms and intensities of the wildly convulsing cabin. Relieved at that, Serif then glanced across from her and saw that the man who was afraid of heights was, eyes closed, actively emptying his bladder through his pants and onto the plastic passenger seat, the fresh urine following the contours of the side of his chair and onto the floor. Suddenly, a chilling thought crossed her mind. She began to wonder if the gravity pull would make her tampon pop out. Her flow had been heavy that morning. She said under her breath, "Oh no, please, anything but that."