

Star City

Last week I was at the Star City market selecting beetroots when a woman in a bonnet threw an egg at me. It landed short, as if she hadn't been sure whether to hurl it. She lowered her head, pulled her shawl around her and moved away quickly, but I knew what it was. I am the enemy of every Russian woman now, Yuri, because they all want to lie beside you in our bed. You are a man, you must feel so proud. This is what comes with being a cosmonaut, yes? They taught you how to calculate escape velocity, how to deal with zero-gravity, but not the fame, not the adoration, not the sighs of women pressing their warm bosoms against you as they ask to make a photograph with you, their soft hands lingering as they ask for your autograph on a postcard with your face on it, no?

It is curious, what the 108 minutes you were up there out of the earth's atmosphere have done. Maybe these women think, yes, Yuri Gagarin, the closest thing we can come to a star, to an angel. But you are the same Yuri to me, the one who smiled at me from across the airbase cafeteria at Orenburg. When you came up to me, I exhaled, and realised I'd held my breath all the time, as you wended your way past the benches. You asked my name and my bowl of *rassolnik* clattered to the floor from my hand. My cheeks flushed hotly with embarrassment, but you only smiled even more broadly, and bent to pick up my spoon. I always loved your smile. Now the world does too. Sergei Korolev has said of you to the newspaper, "He possesses a smile that lights up the Cold War." I keep all your cuttings in a manila folder; it is coming to be quite thick.

Do you remember, 5th October 1957, the night after the Sputnik launch, how you took my hand and we sat on the knoll off Chebenki northeast of Orenburg, looking for her in the night sky, though we had not a telescope with us? We fancied we could see her with our naked eye. I remember your hands tuning the radio dial so carefully, searching for her signals on the radio, 20.005 and 40.002 MHz. We listened to the sound of space, of progress, of Soviet pride for 22 days, till Sputnik's transmitter batteries went out. Your face fell, like a little boy's. But the thirst in your eyes, when we heard on the news, Nikita Khrushchev's announcement of sending a man into space as soon as the conditions were right. You said it was going to be you, and I knew it would be so.

Only three years later you were in the Sochi Six. 2200 pilots handpicked from all over Russia, down to nineteen, then six, in the express lane to the Soviet space program. When you told me about the deadweight spacesuit they made you wear into the underwater maze tank, I was so frightened, but you were thrilled just to be in the suit. The isolation chamber, with no windows and watches, where you saw ghosts you left behind as a child in Klushino, when the Nazis were there, explosions in your head. Then the wires they rigged up to your brain, the questions they asked—from celestial mechanics to mathematical equations to *What is it like, with Valentina?* You never told me what you answered.

I saw less and less of you. Elena would ask me "Where's Papa?", and I would say with conviction, "Papa is going to see the stars", but as time went by, I turned away so she couldn't see the tears in my eyes. The exhilaration of youthful ardour when we'd first talked about it under a full moon; we were alone in the airfield, supine, looking up at

the cold stars and you'd whispered in my ear, "I'm going to be the first man up in space, just you wait and see," as if you were doing it for me rather than you; as you turned over onto your elbows and told me you would bring me back stardust, as my body yielded under yours.

You were heady with ambition and I was drunk on you, I'd thought to myself, ah, what a man. There were other pilots who'd taken me out dancing or to dinner back in Orenburg, but you were the only one who wanted to catapult through the stratosphere. But now there was Elena and I was with child again, and still you could only talk of the cosmos when all I wanted was for you to think of family. Who was the selfish one, you or me? How dangerous space travel was, and what folly it suddenly seemed to me, the governments of the world not content as it were with the troubles on this planet, instead setting their sights on being the first to master outer space.

When Galina came into the world, you were at the base. By then we were living in Star City—how your eyes sparkled when you first told me its name, how I too was beguiled. It was known to others as "closed military townlet No.1 of the Soviet Space Program", and was highly restricted—it made us feel important. I saw the isolation from others as merely a bearable fact of living a life with you. Before that, we'd been living on the Luostari airbase in Murmansk, near the Arctic Circle. I would have gone to the ends of the earth with you—I still would, only I realised your flight—and you—would be—and had always been—solitary, and that earth was not enough for a man like you, and perhaps then I should have thought, let alone a woman like me.

You still cared, I'd like to think that, and that is why you didn't tell me the date of your planned space flight—you gave me a date that was 3 days later instead—15th April 1961—so I wouldn't worry, in case you died. Yet, what a disingenuous move, how could you? I am a woman, but how could you think I would not want to partake in the burning moment of pride of my husband, of our country? Everything led up to that, but in the crucial moment, you pulled wool over my eyes.

I heard it on the news, as if it were about someone else—the husband of another woman, the father of other children. Elena asked if it was Papa on the news, and I told her I didn't know. I made myself a cup of hot tea and sat in the kitchen. Galina cried to be fed but I ignored her. It said in the papers that you said to Khrushchev you'd whistled that tune all us Russians know, "*The Motherland hears, the Motherland knows/Where her son flies in the sky*" when re-entering earth's atmosphere and reading that, I thought, my, my what a charming man. I wish he were mine.

If I saw you so little in the lead up to the spaceflight, I saw even less of you upon your return. You were back for a week, but you had to keep company with all the officials. It was the first you saw of Galina, and you held her for all of ten minutes. You gave Elena a doll; she was afraid of it. And then you were off, to Italy, Germany, Canada, Brazil, Japan, Egypt. I have not seen you in five months now.

Yuri, I look for you everyday in the papers. Yesterday, the milkman came before I took in the papers, and he left two pints of milk instead of one. When I brought in the papers, I saw why. On the front page, Gina Lollobrigida—*The World's Most Beautiful Woman*, as the film goes—funnily enough, we'd seen it together: 1955, the year we first met—was kissing you, at the Moscow International Film Festival. The men and

women caught unawares in the picture were looking at the both of you with good-natured envy. You were back in Russia and I had not a clue, I had not seen you, and you were being kissed by Gina Lollobrigida.

Your eyes were modestly downcast, your smile broad. Her profile was beautiful—what an exquisitely Italian chin; the line of her neck. Her left breast was pressing in onto your jacketed chest, you were leaning in to her, ever the gentleman. There were more decorations on your left lapel than ever before, I've long lost count.

I've cut that photo out and added it to the manila folder. You're by turns handsome and confident in every article, be it by yourself or surrounded by an adoring public; your smile or an uttered witticism or some incredible detail of your feat. The papers say you almost died, that during the fiery re-entry to earth, your spacecraft's cables failed to separate, that you parachuted out of the capsule seven kilometres above the earth. Women like the egg-throwing *zhenshchina* in the marketplace, like Gina Lollobrigida, men like the milkman, like Khrushchev, they see a man who has been to the stars and back, who has defied gravity and stared death down. Perhaps when they look at you they feel closer to God.

But Yuri, I look at you and see the little boy who lived in a mud dugout for three years during the war, subsisting on vermin and wild berries. I see the schoolboy teaching himself addition and subtraction by pushing spent ammunition cartridges into small piles at his feet. I look at you and see the man who took my breasts in his hands and promised me stardust.

When the sheen of this fades in time—do not be mistaken, I am not willing it to pass faster, I know this is what you have lived and breathed for, what you would have died for—not me, never me—know that I will be waiting for you here, unchanged, in Star City.