

4,300 words

## THE SPACE WALK

My life long dream has always been to go to space.

Whenever I went on about the astronaut program and the challenges they faced my parents would smile and tell me, "you'll grow out of it. You're just a kid." I'm sure my parents loved me. And in their own way wanted to see me happy. But my dreams were idle tales to them. I heard the same sentiments repeated by different people through out my young life; my teachers, my friends. But whenever someone told me "you can't do it", my insistance to prove them wrong grew. The question was how?

From my early childhood I realized I have a special interest in computers. I just got how they worked; restricted by logic, they never did anything unexpected. Unless there was a bug in

the program. When I was twelve I already knew how to program in C. But this wasn't low level enough for me. I wanted to understand how the machine executes instructions at the most basic level, so I learned assembly language. For you non-computer geeks out there assembly language is the programming language the central processing unit uses to execute operations. To me understanding the nitty-gritty details was the only way to truly build more advanced applications.

By fifteen years of age I had already become a software development master. I'm not gloating here. I'm not trying to toot my own horn. This is what the news papers wrote about me after I developed an automated space flight program. My Artificial Intelligence program was able to

navigate a space craft out of earth's orbit, plot a course to Mars, use Mars' gravity to sling shot back to Earth, then put the space craft back into orbit around our planet. There are some pretty complicated calculus equations going on there, trust me.

The news coverage I got from doing this project brought me to NASA's attention. It's not everyday you have a fifteen year old girl who understands orbital mechanics. And as we say in NASA, it's all history from there. I graduated computer engineering when I was eighteen; finished my masters and PHD when I was twenty-one. I wasn't only smart, but turns out I'm pretty athletic too. I qualified for the astronaut program. All in all by twenty-five I was NASA's top-pick for the next manned mission

to the first confirmed habitable planet,  
TRAPPIST-3.

NASA had launched an unmanned space craft to the planet 170 years ago. It took the probe 120 years to get to the planet. That's how we're sure it can support life. It then took them another 50 years to develop the technology necessary to get humans there. By the time I was born into this world, NASA had already built a space craft able to travel the forty plus light years in a mere 120 years.

You're probably thinking a 120 years, how will she live that long? That's where suspended animation comes in play, also referred to as cryogenic sleep. Basically, the crew is put in cryogenic pods and "frozen". While in cryosleep the human body's aging process is reduced to a

crawl. But a human can not stay in cryosleep for a continuous 120 years. We would have to wake up periodically; once every three months to be exact. We stay awake for seven days and then go back into our cryogenic pods. In total during the 120 years travel time our bodies would age only 9.2 years. Not bad.

Being the ambitious person I am, I also volunteered to be the mission's care taker. That means if anything goes wrong, I'd be the first one the computer wakes up to fix the problem. If I can't fix it by myself, then I'll wake someone else up. The Care Taker's role came bundled with many extra hours of training in all areas, from software, to space ship mechanics.

Despite all the dangers and uncertainty surrounding this mission, I was super excited.

I'm not exaggerating when I say, this has been the fulfillment of my life long goal. Well that's until I met Jonathan. I knew getting into a romantic relationship with Jonathan was a bad idea, for obvious reason. But the guy just wouldn't give up.

We met at our Church. He had just moved from a different state and didn't know anyone; used to sit all by himself during the service. The guy was handsome, I have to admit. Probably the main reason I decided to have pity on him and invite him to help out with the homeless run. A group of the church youth made sandwiches and handed them out to the homeless in our neighborhood. The homeless folk were always happy to see us. One would think it's because of the food we brought them, but I really believe

it's cause they found people to talk to.

Jonathan really got into this ministry. Every week he would buy all the food himself, and be the first one to make the sandwiches. At first I just thought it's because he's a nice guy, but then I realized for Jonathan it wasn't just about feeding people. It was about caring for the entire person; body, spirit and soul. He always said that everyone has a hole in their soul. A unique shape only God can fill. His mission was to make people recognize this truth. The more I spent time with him, the more I discovered the hole in my sole had his name on it.

Oh don't get me wrong. I fought falling in love with him tooth and nail. But you know what they say, the heart wants what the heart wants.



Now, I love him and can't even think of a life without him. But this presented me with a tough choice. TRAPPIST-3 or Jonathan? Was I willing to give up on my dream for him? Option A meant history will always remember the name, Amelia Bowman, as one of the first human beings to ever live on a planet other than Earth. While option B meant living like many other women before me; get married, have a family, live a quiet and ordinary life. Well, being who I am, I went with option C. I pulled some strings, well more like very thick ropes, and got Jonathan on the mission with me. I actually changed the entire face of the TRAPPIST-3 program. Now the entire crew is composed of married couples. This served two purposes really. One, human beings are always longing to love and be loved, so to

deprive us from this would just be cruel and could turn us into something less than human. Two, we can now raise the first generation of humans on a completely different planet.

Jonathan and I got married eight months before take off. We wanted to make everything official, celebrate with our parents and loved ones before we blasted off to a new world. And then about a month into our marriage we discovered I was pregnant. It was a complete shock to both of us. It wasn't something we were planning on, but it happened. This single event could destroy everything I worked for my entire life. You have to understand, every waking moment before meeting Jonathan I spent working towards the dream of going to space. My initial knee-jerk reaction was to get an abortion. I was

hellbent on going through with it too. I didn't want to tell Jonathan, so he didn't try and dissuade me from my decision.

On the night before my abortion appointment, he came home with a baby bed. He put it together very excitedly. We didn't speak much while he assembled it. I was feeling pretty crappy about myself at that point. But I was still adamant to have the abortion. Nothing will stop me from going to space. Once Jonathan finished putting the bed together he sat on the floor, his back to the wall, watching the bed in pining desire. I worked up the courage to ask him what he was thinking. He told me something I would never forget, "I know that I might never see our child. Your dreams are way too big and too grand and I don't want to be selfish and ask you to

give them all up. But, you know, I just wanted to experience how it feels to be a father, even if it's in a small way." I think something broke in me that day. Maybe he found out about my abortion appointment, maybe it was pure coincident or maybe it was divine intervention. I don't know, never asked, but that day I knew for certainty he wasn't the selfish one, I was. The purpose of the mission to TRAPPIST-3 is to preserve human life, and here was a human life growing inside of me and I was going to kill it. How much of a hypocrite was I. I made the decision then to chose my child and my family over my dreams and ambitions.

As fate would have it, I had a miscarriage in the fourth month of my pregnancy. We had to have the baby removed but I got to hold him in

my arms. I was a mother for a few minutes. It was the most joyous day of our lives and it was the saddest simultaneously. Jonathan and I cried that day and the day after and the day after.

When I decided to keep my child, I gave up on going to TRAPPIST-3. I readjusted my dreams. I drew up all these plans of having a big family, four or five kids, teaching at the university, raising my kids, attending their graduations and weddings, growing old with Jonathan and dying at a good old age. Now these dreams are gone. I had nothing to strive for. Was it possible to reclaim my old one? The opportunity was long gone. I gave up. That's until one day Jonathan gave me a letter from NASA accepting me back into the TRAPPIST-3 program. Apparently, I was so important to the

program they were happy to have me back. I never reapplied, but apparently Jonathan reapplied for me. He told me this, "God wants us to get on that space ship and blast off to the sky. I don't know why and I certainly don't know what's waiting for us out there. But you should know this, where ever you go I'll be there with you." His words gave me the strength I needed to continue pursuing my dream.

This brings me to today. Everything was going according to plan until it no longer was.

We're about eighty years into our journey. The entire crew is in cryogenic sleep when the computer wakes me up. My pod opens up and I sort off just float out. It's like waking up from a two months sleep, literally. It takes a moment to get my bearings. The ships alarms are blaring

loudly all around me. It gives me a headache.

"Casper," I call the onboard computer.

C.A.S.P.E.R stands for 'Computer Assistant Space Program'. I added the 'er' because it just sounds cooler. "What's going on?"

"Good morning, Amelia," Casper says in his smooth deep voice. "I do apologize for waking you up before your scheduled time."

"Is there a problem? Or did you just miss me?"

I stand up slowly, get dizzy and support myself on the nearest solid object.

"There is a problem."

I float to Jonathan's pod and check the readouts on the computer console attached to it. All his vitals are normal. He sleeps peacefully.

"Jonathan and the crew are all operating

within optimal parameters. You do not need to worry."

Next, I float to a computer console in the center of cryogenic room 1, which houses fifty of the one hundred cryogenic pods. I check on the status of the rest of the crew.

"I'm following protocol, Casper."

"I believe your actions indicate your concern is for your husband more than it is to follow mission protocols."

"Are you going to psycho analyze me or are you going to tell me why you woke me up?" I say as I float to the command center.

"I'm trying to strike up a friendly conversation to ease the news I'm about to deliver."

"Casper, sometimes you annoy me."



"You wrote my algorithms, Amelia. Could it be that you put too much of your personality in mine?"

"Ah, that must be it. Smart ass."

I get to the command center. It's a small octagonal room in the center of the ship. All the Pilgrimage's sensors and controls feed into the computer system there. I head to the main console and check the readouts. The ship's engines have stopped.

"Casper, why did the engines stop?"

"There is an unexpected drop in the solar power supply."

I go to a different console and look through the power readouts.

"If the power continues to drop at this rate the cryogenic pods will shutdown."

"Indeed Amelia, but the safety measures will wake up the crew first. Unfortunately, they will lose the benefit of having their life spans preserved till we reach our destination."

"Well thanks for the comforting news."

"It's hardly comforting news, Amelia. Are you okay? The entire crew will be dead by the time we arrive at TRAPPIST-3."

"I was being sarcastic, Casper." I roll my eyes. Although Casper's algorithms are designed to learn and emulate human behavior it is sometimes hard to teach a computer simple concepts like sarcasm.

"Ah, I understand."

"Why aren't there any logs detailing what happened?"

"It appears that sensor relay A is damaged."

It's disrupting the data path to the command center."

"What caused the damage?"

"The most likely explanation is a meteor hit."

"A meteor hit? Didn't you perform a thorough scan of the area?"

"Space is vast Amelia."

"Don't get defensive with me."

"I can not get defensive, Amelia. Although you designed my algorithms to give the impression of being human, I am in fact not human, nor do I suffer from human emotions."

"You're making it sound like it's a disease; human emotions."

I'm searching through the manual for details on Sensor relay A.

"Human emotions have been the cause of serious catastrophes which are recorded in your own history. Would you like a list?"

I finally find the section on sensor relay  
A.

"No. It looks like we can bypass that relay completely by routing the sensor data through the secondary data analysis switches."

"Excellent idea, Amelia. It will require implementing and deploying a new API on the switches. The hardware interfaces are not readily compatible."

"Yes Casper, I know that. Can you do it, or should I show you how?"

"You are being sarcastic again, isn't that correct, Amelia?"

"Yes Casper. Now can you do it?"

"My Central Processing Unit is highly parallelized, Amelia. I can perform multiple tasks at the same time; talk to you, implement the API changes and run a diagnostic on the rest of the ship's systems."

"I'm impressed, but are you done yet?"

"The data is being routed as we speak. It should be available in 3, 2, 1."

The screens in front of me come alive with the sensor data.

"Oh, no."

"Yes, indeed, Amelia. This data does not appear promising."

"We've lost one of our four rear solar panels. What kind of meteor strike was that?"

"We were hit with 34 small meteors."

"34! We're lucky none of them punctured the

body of the ship."

"I do not think lucky is the word I would use Amelia."

I move to a different control panel and pull up the schematics of the ship.

"Okay, we'll need to jettison that panel and extend the auxiliary one."

"Implementing."

A 3D model of the space ship appears on one of the screens. Another screen shows a live view of the solar panel as it's being jettisoned. There is a series of bursts along the connectors on the base of the panel. However the panel is so damaged that a section of it breaks off and slams into the ship. Rough vibrations knock me off my feet. I quickly regain my footing.

"Casper, What happened?"

"One of the power connectors attached to the panel was not released."

"Well that sucks."

I zoom into the 3D model of the ship and examine a part of the damaged panel. It is still attached to the ship with a thick power cable. The cable was used to transfer power from the solar panel to the ship's systems. The force of the blowout during the jettisoning process caused the damaged section to whip around dangerously. It keeps slamming into the body of the ship and then continues its random motion.

"Amelia, the erratic motion of the broken panel will eventually damage the adjacent ones."

"Looks, like it's time for a space walk."

"Godspeed, Amelia."

I smile at Casper's attempt to emulate human

responses as I exit the control center. I float through the weightless environment of the ship heading to the airlock. The ship shakes once in a while as the damaged panel keeps slamming into it. I have to hurry before it causes irreparable damage. When I reach the airlock, I put on my space suite.

"Open up the airlock, Casper."

The air vents from the airlock then the external doors open. I float to the door and sneak a look outside trying to see where the broken panel is. Suddenly, it zips right in front of me. I push myself inside in shock.

"It wasn't going to hit you, Amelia. It passed ten point three three meters away from you."

"Yeah, thanks, Casper. Monitor its motion



path and warn me if I'm in danger."

"Affirmative."

I look out the airlock doors again, and then float smoothly outside the ship, sticking close to the exterior frame. I push myself along the metal frame of the Pilgrimage, careful not to float helplessly away into the vastness of space. The endless field of stars fills me with a sense of apprehension, but I return my attention to the task at hand.

I arrive at the rear solar panels and approach the frenetic cable, careful not to get sliced in half. There are burn marks around the port the cable is attached to. The cable appears to have been fused to the port. Thankfully, the adjacent solar panels themselves appear undamaged for now.

"Amelia, proximity alert. The damaged panel is approaching your location. I estimate 1 minute before impact."

I look up and the monstrous panel zips too close for comfort. I take out a space screw driver and get busy dismantling the power port. The panel zips by again even closer this time. I feel the sweat drip over my eyes. I blink to clear my vision.

Almost there. One screw left.

The panel zips again.

"Amelia, five seconds."

I successfully disconnect the port. The centripetal force of the panel hurls it away from the ship. The cord unwinds forcefully as the panel pulls it. The metal end of the cord swings towards me. I do an acrobatic move.

Holding onto the frame of the ship, I push myself such that I arc around my arm. The metal end of the cord rushes a mere centimeter away from my helmet. I watch it as it floats away, breathing in relief.

"That was a close one, Amelia."

"Tell me about it. Alright extend the auxiliary panel, Casper."

A door in the body of the ship slides open and the panel starts unfolding slowly. It never ceases to amaze me how large these panels are. I feel minuscule beside it. The electrical engine unfurls the new panel. But then it stops without fully unraveling.

"What now?"

"There seems to be a mechanical error in the fourth joint, likely caused by an impact from

the damaged panel" Casper says calmly.

"Do you ever give me good news Casper?"

"I only give you facts. Would you like me to lie to you?"

"No. That's okay."

I push myself up until the fourth joint. From this vantage point, I can see the Pilgrimage in all its glory. I smile at its magnificence, but as I turn around to examine what's wrong with the joint, I see a sight that freezes the blood in my veins. My eyes widen in terror.

"Amelia, the starboard sensors were damaged during the meteor impact. We have a blind-spot right at your location" Casper says.

"We have a much bigger problem, Casper," I say. I'm looking at an asteroid easily twenty

times the size of the ship heading right at us. I take out a distance measuring tool and point it at the asteroid.

"Oh dear God," I say.

The asteroid will hit the ship in less than five minutes.

"Amelia, I have interfaced with your suite's sensors to compensate for the blind-spot. I have some good news and some bad news. Which would you like to hear first?"

"The good."

"If you're able to fix the panel joint in the next two minutes, full power can be restored and we can navigate the ship out of the path of the asteroid."

"And the bad?"

"You won't have time to re-enter the ship."

My life flashes before my eyes; my childhood; my parents; the challenges I went through to get here. But most of all the time I spent with Jonathan; the laughter; the tears; the miscarriage; his support, everything. For a few short moments I regret my decision to come on this mission. I could've been back on earth living a full life with Jonathan, family, kids, the whole nine yards. But then I remember a Bible verse I read, "Say not thou, What is the cause that the former days were better than these? for thou dost not inquire wisely concerning this."

Although, I'm only twenty-seven years old, I've lived more than most do in their entire life time. I can truly say, I've been where no human has gone before. Now there is only one

thing left to do, make sure to rescue Jonathan and the rest of the crew from dying out here in space.

The metal joint appears damaged pretty badly. The only way to fix it is to cut it using my laser cutting tool and then straighten it manually. I proceed to work feverishly at cutting the metal.

"Amelia, Amelia," this is the last voice I expect to hear right now.

"Jonathan?"

"Amelia, get back in here."

I continue cutting the metal as the tears flow from my eyes.

"I can't Jonathan, I'm sorry. Casper, why did you wake him up?"

"It seemed like the human thing to do,

Amelia. Give you a chance to say goodbye to your husband," Casper replies.

"Amelia, please, just come back in," Jonathan says.

"I'm sorry I'm gonna have to break my promise."

"What do you mean?"

"To grow old with you."

The asteroid is looming larger by the second. I close my eyes tightly to force the tears from my eyes. The metal of the joint finally breaks. I secure my back on part of the frame and use my legs to push the folded panel flat. The electric engine kicks into gear and unfolds it the rest of the way.

"I'm sorry, Jonathan. If it wasn't for me, you'd still ..."



"Stop talking," Jonathan says. I can hear the tears in his voice. "I would never trade a single second from the time we had together."

"Sorry, to interrupt Amelia," Casper chimes in. "You're successful. I would recommend clearing the space craft. The sudden acceleration can harm you."

"No, Amelia," Jonathan says.

"I love you, Jonathan." I say and push myself away from the ship. I float softly farther from the Pilgrimage.

My body swims effortlessly through the emptiness of space. So many emotions flow over me, but the primary one is shock really. I don't think I fully grasp my imminent death. Sure it'll take a few days to happen, but dying from thirst or suffocation is not something to look

forward to. I consider ending it right now. All I have to do is take off my helmet. It'll be over in a few seconds. Would that be considered suicide? Or mercy?

I'm now far enough from the Pilgrimage and can see the airlock I exited from. At first I thought it's my eyes playing tricks on me, but then it becomes clear. It's another space suit diving out of the airlock. That one is equipped with a jetpack to allow it to navigate in space.

"Casper, what's going on?"

"I'm sorry, Amelia, I couldn't stop him."

The ship accelerates away at an incredible speed. In a few short seconds, it's just another dot in space.

"I'm coming for you, Amelia," Jonathan says.

Jonathan is in that space suite. He

approaches me and throws me a cord which I catch and hook to my space suite. We use it to pull each other closer. I hug him as much as the space suite allows. With only a few inches separating us, his teary eyes look into my own.

"What did you do?" I ask astonished.

"Did you really think I'm going to leave you alone?"

"Why Jonathan, why?" My tears are flowing freely. "Now we're both going to die out here in space."

"Maybe we're not going to grow old together," Jonathan says. "But we will live the rest of our lives together."

Jonathan smiles a loving smile. I wish I can reach through the helmet and touch his face.

We drift off in each other's embrace.