

Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread

The world was scheduled to end on a Wednesday.

Which, really, was the worst possible day it could have ended on. By Wednesday, you're already sort of settled into your routine of the week, and yeah, everything sucks because you have school or work or just Normal Human Responsibilities, but it's also okay, because it's *Wednesday*, which means tomorrow is *Thursday*, which means the day after tomorrow is *Friday*, and Fridays freaking *rule*.

But the world was scheduled to end on a Wednesday,<sup>1</sup> which meant there would be no more Thursdays, and then no more Fridays. Which sucked.

“At least I won't have to suffer through another Monday,” Reese said. “Right, Pepper?” He was floating upside down in the middle of the space shuttle, bobbing up and down like something floating in the water. Just like the bread I would throw into the duck ponds before I learned that feeding ducks bread screws with their metabolism and makes them fat and lazy and have a shorter lifespan. And before I realized ducks were stupid birds that just had cute babies so girls like me would throw bread at them, even though they *knew* bread was bad for them because, well, read above. Reese was like white bread floating in a duck pond, because he was the whitest white boy there was. Also, his ruffled curly hair was the shade of sourdough.

My stomach growled. I was thinking about bread too much.

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<sup>1</sup> Russian astronomers found this out on a Friday (the only Friday that sucked in the history of Fridays), and on Saturday they decided that maybe it was time to finally let old wars die and tell the United States about this. And, of course, some rookie in the White House overheard the whole Earth Is Actually Ending No Mr. President This Is Not A Joke Sincerely Those Filthy Commies nonsense, which led to instant media coverage that spread nationwide, and then internationally. It was after #EarthIsCancelled became the number one trend on Twitter that all trained teenagers (more on this later) were called to report to their assigned training sectors to prepare for take-off, and on Sunday, over 10,000 space shuttles were shot into space without so much as a send-off party. Sayonara, I guess.

“No school,” Reese continued. “No more bagging groceries after school work. Wait, if the world is ending, are you still supposed to hand in your two-weeks notice? Because I totally forgot to do that.”

As Reese talked, I pressed the button on my HoloBand<sup>2</sup> and squinted at the square screen that clicked on. My Hologram circuit was old—just an hCirc28—which meant that the screen flickered transparent, occasionally, and sometimes pressing the “s” key made the entire thing crash. Other than that, it worked just fine, and it wasn’t worth it to go buy the new hCirc37,<sup>3</sup> with the world ending and all. I clicked the Particle-Identifier app<sup>4</sup> and watched as a light purple beam shot out of my HoloBand.

Reese looked over my shoulder, finally upright again. “Whatchu lookin’ at?”

“Trying to see which of these damn powder packets can turn into bread,” I said, floating over to the set of kitchen drawers. There were no cupboards because in anti-gravity situations, things kind of just become jelly and don’t function right, even very solid things, like kitchen cupboards. NASA didn’t want all their precious little American children banging their precious little American heads on cupboards that kept opening and wouldn’t stay shut, so they just installed a wall of drawers<sup>5</sup> instead. That sucked, because the best part about a kitchen was opening and closing all the cupboards, again and again, as you tried to find the right plate or cup or hidden candy jar that your mom hid in a new spot every week.

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<sup>2</sup> Much like every great invention, this was created by some super-genius college dropout in his parents’ garage, and can now be found on the wrist of everyone and their mother. Grandparents don’t understand them and, quite frankly, neither do I. All I know is that it has apps and makes cheating on tests super easy.

<sup>3</sup> An hCirc (short for “Holo-Circuit”) powers a HoloBand. They’re sold separately because Capitalism.

<sup>4</sup> Literally the only app I ever use (other than Angry Birds). Basically, it scans stuff and tells you what it is, what it can be used for, and, if applicable, its chemical formula. It can detect even the faintest trace of any particle. That’s why I was using it—to track down any potential bread residue.

<sup>5</sup> Even the British installed cupboards in their shuttles. We beat them in a revolution, yet can’t beat them in space-resistant cupboards? Weak.

Frick. I was gonna miss my mom.

“Bread?” Reese asked. “Uhhh, Pepper, that isn’t a part of our scheduled meal plan.”

“Let’s just disregard the meal plan,” I said confidently<sup>6</sup>.

A red light flickered on in the corner of the shuttle, and a boring dad-voice fuzzed through the small intercom.<sup>7</sup> “No disregarding of the Meal Plan will take place.”

“But I want bread,” I whined. The Particle-Identifier beam highlighted the screws and bolts and metal panels that it scanned, and the official names were read aloud to me. I scanned Reese, watching the purple beam hit his armpit and heard the husky, deep Australian voice<sup>8</sup> say, *Dove Women’s Deodorant*, to which I just raised my eyebrow. “You use women’s hygiene products?”

Reese snorted. “Gendered commercialism is a farce.”

“Touché.”

“Besides,” Reese added, “Once civilization starts again, I’m gonna start a new trend. You’ve heard of women buying men’s razors as a statement...”

“Please stop.”

“Well, get ready for men buying women’s deodorant as a statement!” Reese did a karate chop through the air. “*Heeyah!* No longer shall us males suffer with the same old Old Spice bullshit clogging up our armpit pores! We shall raise our arms and embrace the scent of flower fields and cherry blossoms and kittens!”

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that in all sixteen years of my life, I had never disregarded any meal plan. This was the most exciting thing that had happened to me since being sent off into space, and that had happened a mere six hours ago. I was on a total adrenaline rush.

<sup>7</sup> It was some NASA worker, who, we were told, would watch over us until The End of the World. After that, we were on our own.

<sup>8</sup> If I’m going to suffer through constantly having to listen to some stupid robot in a phone talk to me, it might as well sound like the man of my dreams.

“I have never worn a deodorant that smells like kittens.”

“Down with the patriarchy! WOMEN’S DEODORANT FOR ALL ETERNITYYY!”

“Does this mean you’re gonna use my deodorant?”

“Have a little faith, Pepper,” Reese said, nose scrunching up. “I’m not *that* weird.” I stared at him, and he cleared his throat. “Okay, well, I won’t...not without *permission*,” he amended.

“You need help, dude,” I told him, turning off my Particle Scanner. I wasn’t in the mood to make any more accidental discoveries—some plain old-fashioned searching would just have to do. I opened a drawer and searched for bread. Powdered rice, powdered mashed potatoes, powdered roast beef, powdered broccoli. No bread. Damn it. “Professional help.”

Reese floated up to the ceiling and did a backflip before pulling himself over to the red light in the corner of the shuttle. “Hey Mr. NASA dude!” he called. “Do I need professional help?”

Static crackled and the boring dad-voice spoke again. “We all need help, Mr. Mansfield,” it said. “The world is ending and I’m going to spend the rest of it monitoring two teenagers try to find powdered bread.”

Reese’s face scrunched up and he grimaced, hissing in a breath through his teeth as he floated down a little. “Yeesh, NASA man...way to bring down the mood.”

“Hey, NASA man? Sir?” I asked. “Can you tell me where the powdered bread is?”

Nothing. And then, the faint sound of sniffing over the intercom, and a low groan that sounded an awful like, *Ooooooh gaaaaahd, we’re all gonna diiiiie*. Then the intercom clicked off.

“Well,” I said. “He’s no help at all. Reese, help me find this stupid bread.”

“Oooh, bossy lady.”

“Shut up.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Moving around with no gravity was hard, even with all the training Reese and I had completed. We’d been stuffed in anti-gravity chambers since we could walk, just like every other trainee, and still, it never got any easier. We learned in school that before the anti-gravity chambers, they’d have astronauts suit up and go into deep pools to try to simulate the weightlessness that comes with the loss of gravity. Well, I really pitied those astronauts, because moving in space wasn’t like swimming at all. You couldn’t just kick the air and expect to *go* anywhere. Everything was push and pull, push and pull. Reach the bar against the wall and propel yourself forward; make your way to a wall and kick yourself off from it like a torpedo toy in a swimming pool. My biceps probably would’ve been jacked, if the anti-gravity wasn’t basically devouring away at my muscle mass.

As we searched for the bread, Reese decided that now was the perfect time to list everything he’d miss about Earth. Number one was koala bears.<sup>9</sup>

“They’re just so friggin’ adorable,” he explained, shuffling powder packets without really paying attention. I nudged him out of the way and looked myself. “Just hugging trees and stuff. And they eat that fruit and you just see them and think, yeah, I understand that. I understand *you*, little koala dude. I totally get it.”

I paused. “You’ve seen a koala before?”

Reese shrugged, his lips pursing. “In videos,” he admitted.

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<sup>9</sup> Well, he initially listed IKEA Swedish Meatballs as his number one. To which I replied that there were rumors that the meat in those meatballs was actually mouse meat (duh, because cows became extinct, like, ten years ago), and then he decided he’d miss koalas more.

Koala bears were one of the few species left on Earth, which was funny since they were actually completely useless. All the important animals—the elephants and tigers and wolves and even the friggin’ *otters*—were extinct. All Earth had left, really, were sparrows and mice and cockroaches. And koalas. A crap ton of koalas.

“Oh,” Reese said. “And Disney movies. God, I was so looking forward to watching the seventy-third remake of *The Lion King*, too.”

“I saw the trailer for that. Was it really just going to be two and a half hours of people in animal-print leotards doing interpretive dance and screaming?”

“Yeah. Wicked, right?”

“Sure, if that’s the kind of thing you’re into.”

“Aha!” Reese exclaimed, thrusting his hand in the air. Clenched in his fist was a light brown paper packet. “Found the bread! Take that, NASA!”

“Let me see,” I said, kicking off from the drawer I had been looking through and coming to float next to Reese. I examined the packet. They all looked the same—light brown packaging, sealed airtight. A simple label decorated the side, and on this one, it was crooked. I tilted my head and read it. “This says *yeast*, Reese.”

Reese frowned. “Isn’t that basically bread?”

“Ugh, no, it’s not.”<sup>10</sup> How the hell did your mom pass the intelligence test to put you in the lottery?”

Reese shrugged. “She didn’t. She won season six of Miss America, Pregnant Edition.”

Which (sort of) brings us to the main reason why I was stuck in a space shuttle with no kitchen cupboards and no powdered bread (as far as I could tell) and a sixteen-year-old boy

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<sup>10</sup> To be honest, I didn’t actually understand how yeast worked, but I was almost positive it wasn’t bread. Like, 95% sure.

named Reese Mansfield who wore Dove Women's Deodorant and was very passionate about koala bears.

Let's go back to the beginning:

The world was going to end on a Wednesday. But eighteen years ago, scientists didn't know that. They knew the world was going to *end*, of course—everybody knew that. They just didn't know *when*.<sup>11</sup> So they took precautions. Ten thousand space shuttles were created by space exploration programs all over the world, and twenty thousand people were invited to travel in them—just not the people that everyone expected.

There was a time window of about 35 years—why train some twenty-something year old only to realize they'd be fifty-something when they'd actually have their mission? Not that being fifty was *old*, it just...wasn't ideal. The wormholes discovered were another ten years distance away—and after that, scientists didn't really know. They guessed that the closest habitable planet was an additional five- to ten-years travel. Those sent up to space needed to be young and they needed to be prepared, and scientists only had a time window of 35 years to figure it out.

So they figured it out.

Expectant mothers all over the world were told they could enter their unborn child into a lottery for a spot on one of the shuttles if they just took a few tests. Most of these were health tests—tracing genealogy and determining which babies would be the healthiest.<sup>12</sup> Then, there were intelligence tests, done on both parents if possible.<sup>13</sup> Those that passed officially had their child entered into the lottery and got a nice fancy ticket to prove it. If their child won, they would

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<sup>11</sup> And, believe me, no one thought it would be a stinking Wednesday.

<sup>12</sup> "Ableism at its finest," Reese once told me.

<sup>13</sup> Of course, these intelligence tests didn't really predict how smart the babies would end up. Some kids in the training academy had both parents pass the intelligence test with nearly perfect scores, and the kids themselves were dumb as rocks.

be one of twenty-thousand other children that would be paired and sent up in shuttles into space towards a new future.

At first, it was a super professional thing; ticket numbers were pulled on the professional sets of professional government television programs by professional women dressed in professional dresses and professional pantsuits. Any mother that won would have a government official of her respective country present during the birth of the child—a very professional process—and then a small chip was inserted into the top palate of the child’s mouth. This was how they were identified as winners.<sup>14</sup>

Within a month, some old production CEO got the idea that, hey, maybe they could make money off of this whole business. That’s what it became: a *business*. And NASA and every other country’s space program said: Screw it. We’re all gonna die anyway, so why not make some money out of it?<sup>15</sup> And from then on, promised spots on the shuttle were given away in game shows, baking competitions, charitable events, etc.<sup>16</sup>

In the training academy<sup>17</sup>, I sort of resented the kids like Reese. To me, it seemed like they had cheated the system because they had gotten picked as a result of competitions and contests that didn’t really prove they could handle being the only hope for mankind. But then I realized that it didn’t matter because they hadn’t asked their mothers to enter cooking challenges and game shows and pregnant beauty pageants. None of us had. Our fates were chosen for us.

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<sup>14</sup> Later it would be revealed that these chips caused an increase of cases of sinus problems and also issues regarding adult teeth in later life, but by then it was too late. We were the generation of Dental Correction Surgeries.

<sup>15</sup> This, good people, is how all good things end.

<sup>16</sup> Other methods of winning the guaranteed spot included Survival TV shows, eating contests, quiz shows, mall giveaways, randomized tickets in children’s chocolate bars, and, I guess, Pregnant Beauty Pageants.

<sup>17</sup> I say “academy,” but really it was a sort of glorified summer camp. Every year I was shipped off to a desert in Arizona to go to an underground training facility where I learned more physics than any human should ever know. It totally sucked, to say the least.

We were all chunks of bread floating in the same stupid pond, waiting for a duck to eat us. Or something like that.

“Congratulations,” I tell Reese. “I’m sure she looked stunning.”

Reese puffed his chest out, and the dark gray shirt he wore, identical to my own except in the blue and white stripes that ran down the side,<sup>18</sup> pulled taught across his chest. “Yeah, well, I was there,” he bragged. Then he deflated. “Technically. You know, in her stomach. Womb. Whatever. I was trying to say that of course she was beautiful because she was pregnant with me, you know? The most beautiful person on the planet?” He winked, and I rolled my eyes.

“We’re no longer on the planet,” I told him, looking out the singular window of the space shuttle. It was long and rectangular with softened edges, and I could see Earth in the corner, ghastly gray clouds covering the surface. “In case you haven’t noticed, we’re in *space*.”

“In space, then,” Reese amended, flashing me a smile. His front teeth were crooked and there was a small gap between them, barely noticeable.<sup>19</sup>

“Sure,” I said. “Now, please, can we get to the matter at hand?”

“Watching the world be destroyed?”

“No,” I corrected. “Finding the bread.”

We looked for what felt like forever, and my mind kept drifting. I thought about many things. Like ducks.<sup>20</sup> Like bread.<sup>21</sup> Like the lottery.<sup>22</sup> Like how, months before I had even taken my first breath on Earth, I was assigned to save it.

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<sup>18</sup> The stripes on my jumpsuit were red and white. Reese figured out that when we stood back to back, spy style so the stripes lined up, it read as the pattern red, white, and blue. ‘Murica, amirite?

<sup>19</sup> Probably from the implanted identification chip. See? Issues.

<sup>20</sup> I was going to miss those deceitful bastards.

<sup>21</sup> I was so hungry. And angry. Hangry.

<sup>22</sup> I thought about this one for a long time. Three open drawers later and I kept thinking, Why? It didn’t seem to make any sense to me, how an entire planet could be okay with leaving the future of mankind to a

I never had a choice. I never wanted the tracking chip in my mouth, the three dental surgeries I had to have because of it. I never wanted to be thrown into anti-gravity chambers to practice fixing loose bolts and screws in a practice shuttle's paneling. I never wanted the blood tests every month, the endless extra classes before and after school. I never wanted the strict diet, the endless sports teams and exercise regime to keep my body in shape, all so I would be strong enough for a mission I never asked to go on.

My destiny was written for me before I had even opened my eyes. Well, now I was fulfilling it, and that was going absolutely *wonderfully* so far, given that I couldn't even find the stupid powdered bread, which probably wouldn't even taste like real bread because it was just powder, and the world was ending and *my mom was going to die* and *everything*—the Fridays, the duck ponds, the strange Disney movie remakes—would be gone forever. Like it never even existed in the first place.

I thought about all of this, and without meaning to, I started to cry.

“Oh, wonderful,” NASA man said through the intercom. “Gerald, we've got another crier.”

“What?” Reese asked, and then he looked at me, which was absolutely something I did *not* want to happen, because he did exactly what I knew he'd do. His eyes widened and his lips parted but he didn't say anything, just kept staring at me as I turned my head away and used my sleeve to wipe my reddened cheek. I saw his fingers twitch from where they were resting on the edge of a pulled-out drawer, as if he was unsure of what to do with his hands.

I prepared myself for the awkward comforting words, the possibility of a cautious hand laid to rest on my shoulder. But all Reese did was stare at me. Then he asked, hesitantly, “Does...does the bread really mean that much to you?”<sup>23</sup>

I froze, then just nodded and began to cry harder. Because it *was* the bread, really. When it all came down to it, I had never made a choice in my entire life—I trained without complaint,<sup>24</sup> I had stuck to meal plans and diets and exercise regimes without even a roll of my eyes,<sup>25</sup> I had patiently awaited The End of the World with an idiot I didn’t even choose to be partnered with, and now I was on the last mission mankind had set out to do.

I was on my own.<sup>26</sup> For the first time in my life, there was no one to tell me I *couldn't* want things, and so I had let myself want things, and what I wanted was bread.<sup>27</sup> But it seemed as if the universe thought it wrong to allow me to have it. It felt as if I was going to spend my entire life following a plan I had no say in.

“Hey,” Reese said. I was ugly-sobbing now, which was just the cherry on top of my mental-breakdown sundae, and Reese was beginning to panic. “Hey,” he said again, voice cracking. He scrambled around,<sup>28</sup> opening drawers and furiously looking through them. “It’s okay,” he said. “We’ll find it. I’ll find it.” Food packets flew everywhere, floating up around him like a tornado. A tear slid off my chin and then bobbed up and down in the air, a perfect sphere of water, and through it I could see the reflection of the Earth, perfectly centered, awaiting

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<sup>23</sup> Sigh. Men.

<sup>24</sup> Not my choice.

<sup>25</sup> Again, not my choice.

<sup>26</sup> Except for Reese and the 19,998 other people in space. Whatever. You get the idea.

<sup>27</sup> A stupid thing to make the very first thing you want in life, but valid nonetheless.

<sup>28</sup> Something that, admittedly, looked absolutely hilarious without gravity.

certain doom. The tear wavered, ripples gliding over the surface of the Earth inside, and then it floated away, gone.

“Wait,” Reese said. He looked around, panicked, and then pushed off from the floor of the shuttle and shot up towards the ceiling. His hand stretched out and his face scrunched up in determination as he snatched a bundle of food packets from where they had drifted up into the corner of the shuttle. His head knocked against a panel, and it looked like he hit it pretty hard, judging by the loud *clunk*, but he didn’t even acknowledge it. He ripped off the rubber band and threw some over his shoulder, and then he stopped. “I found it,” he said in disbelief. “Here, Pepper, I found it.”

And then he ripped it open, and powder exploded everywhere.

I’ll be honest and say that I didn’t really know how to react. I mean, I had just realized I’d never really lived during my entire time of being alive, and the very first decision I made for myself was forgoing the meal plan and trying to find powdered bread that I knew was somewhere on that godforsaken shuttle. And there it was, now a cloud of dust the color of sand, surrounding Reese’s head like a halo. He looked shocked, like someone *else* had just tore the food packet open and spilled powdered bread everywhere, not him. Then he looked at me like *I* was the one who did it and he couldn’t understand why.

Miraculously, I began to laugh.

“What?” Reese squeaked. Powder from the packet floated in a cloud near his head, and on his inhale, some got up his nose. He sneezed violently. I laughed harder. My sides already ached from crying, and now they hurt like hell from gasping for air between my laughter. A few more tears floated up and away from where they had clumped on my eyelashes. Reese just kept

staring at me. Slowly, almost unsure, he began to laugh too. “I’m so,” he said, but he didn’t finish his sentence. “This is really—”

I nodded like I understood, because I did, in a way. Everything was going wrong and it was horrible, but it was also okay. Reese smiled sheepishly. Food packets were everywhere, a disorganized mess that would take forever to clean up, and one gently bumped into my ear. I reached for it and read the label.

“Oh,” I said, still smiling. “Look.”

*DEHYDRATED SOURDOUGH: JUST ADD WATER, the label read. OPEN WITH CARE.*

“You—I—” Reese stuttered. He reached for the packet, then pulled his hand away quickly. He laughed nervously. “I probably shouldn’t touch it,” he joked. “You know, because... well...” He waved his hand around the bread-powder that had continued to swirl lazily around his head. More powder got in his nose and mouth, and he sputtered and waved the cloud of powdered bread away.

“No,” I said, “You probably shouldn’t.” I clutched the powdered bread hard in my hands, and then held it out to him. “But you worked really hard to find it for me, so here.” He didn’t move to take it, and I shook it in his direction. “C’mon, Reese. We’ll make the bread together.”

He hesitated, but then he reached out and took the packet. “Okay,” he said, still sounding unsure. He looked up at me. “Gently,” he said.

“Gently,” I confirmed, watching as he slowly tore open the packet along the dotted line. He tore a hole that was just an inch wide before stopping. Then, he pinched the rip shut with intense concentration, as if this was the most important thing he’d ever done in his entire life. I reached over to grab the water hose and handed it to him, then reached over to the knob and set it

on the “drip” setting. Reese fit the nozzle into the little hole he had torn open and kept it in for a few seconds before nodding at me to shut the hose off.

Slowly, gently, he shook the packet. I never understood space food down on Earth, and I still didn’t really understand it when I was actually in space, but I figured I’d give credit where credit was due; powdered bread certainly was efficient. Within a minute, the flattened packet had expanded and was beginning to steam. Reese held it away from him with a frightened expression, and I closed my eyes and breathed in.

“Mmm,” I sighed. “Smells like bread.”

“Is it ready?” Reese asked. I leaned forward and looked inside the bag. Not that it helped; I couldn’t really see anything. I shrugged. Reese chewed on his bottom lip and then looked up at the intercom. “Hey, NASA man? Is our bread done?”

Silence.

“Uhhh, NASA dude? Sir? Bro?” Reese asked. Nothing. It was then that I realized how empty the air had become in our little shuttle. There was no static over the intercom. There was no humming of computers or little beeps from my HoloBand. Reese, who usually breathed like a gorilla,<sup>29</sup> wasn’t even making a sound, and that’s how I knew something was Terribly Wrong.

Reese let go of the still-steaming powdered bread packet and kicked off from the shuttle floor to the ceiling until he was face to face with the little red blinking light. Except it wasn’t blinking anymore—it wasn’t even lit up.

It’s hard to explain how it felt, floating in space in a small shuttle with a packet of steaming powdered bread that isn’t really powder anymore, realizing that you might’ve just

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<sup>29</sup> He probably snored like one, too (something I was not looking forward to).

missed the singular most important thing that was ever going to happen to mankind.<sup>30</sup> My stomach sunk, and even though there was no gravity, I felt as if everything grew heavier; my thermal jacket seemed to weigh a hundred pounds, my tracking chip burned in the roof of my mouth, and Reese kept calling out again and again, and there was no answer, not even static, until his voice cracked and then he just stopped. I shut my eyes tight and felt my heartbeat pulse in my ears.

I didn't want to look out the window.

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“Pepper, I think—” Reese croaked.

I opened my eyes and looked out the window.

The world was scheduled to end on a Wednesday, and end it did. Just not then. Because as I turned my head to look out the window, static played over the intercom.

“—I tried that, Gerald, I—oh, wait, I think they hear me now.” Distantly, another man said something like, “I told you so,” and NASA man snapped, “You didn't tell me *squat*, Gerald.”

Slowly, Reese let himself float back down to my level. “Oh my God,” he said. He looked from the light to the window, where the Earth stood, perfectly fine and okay. Still destined for certain doom, but for the moment all right. I felt the heaviness in my chest begin to lighten.

“Connection was lost briefly,” NASA man explained. “It seems as if one of you bumped into the antenna panel in your whole food-finding frenzy.”

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<sup>30</sup> I imagine this was not a new feeling. Someone on July 20, 1969, probably waited in front of their TV for five hours just staring at it, only to get up for a snack and come back to find they had missed the moon landing. All for a stupid sandwich.

I thought back to Reese scrambling around for the powdered bread, the way he torpedoed himself from the floor and banged his head into the wall, so hard it seemed as if the shuttle rocked back and forth. Just like that, everything righted itself again, and it no longer seemed like The End of the World. Even though it very much was.

“I thought Earth was gone! And we had missed it!” Reese exclaimed. “Oh my god, NASA man, my dude, my bro, I could kiss you right now!”

“You’re about 67,000 miles away from the surface of the planet,” NASA man said. “That would be impossible.”

“Here, wait, I’ll blow it out the window—”

*“Do not attempt to open the window, Mr. Mansfield.”*

Reese snickered as he backed away from the window. “You’ll stick with us, right?” I asked suddenly, my head turned to look up at the blinking red light.

There was a slight pause. And then, “The world is ending,” NASA man grumbled. “I’m not going anywhere, believe me. I still have an hour or two left.”

“Oh,” Reese croaked. His voice was a little strange, like there was something caught in his throat, but he swallowed and it went away. He smiled. “Hey, NASA dude, do you wanna play I Spy?”

“Absolutely not.”

“I spy with my little eye....” Reese looked around.

NASA man barked at Reese to stop, to clean up the mess he made, to grow up because he was nearly seventeen and *how in the world were you allowed to be part of the final mission of mankind?* I pulled the packet of probably-ready bread closer to me, until I was holding it against

Magdalena Deniz

my chest. The warmth of the bread soaked through my space undersuit and swelled in my chest. For now, everything was okay.

The intercom clicked off, and Reese sighed.

“Pepper,” he said. “Come here.”

He was floating on his stomach in front of the large window. The tip of his nose was an inch away from the glass, and he was staring at the Earth as if it was the most beautiful thing he’d ever see in his whole life. I don’t know, maybe it was. It was sure something, and sometimes just being something is more than enough.

“That beautiful planet is gonna disappear,” Reese said to me. It was a horrible thing, the Most Awful Thing, and yet he was in awe. He kept his head turned towards the window, but his eyes flickered to stare at me through the reflection in the glass. “I wanna soak it all in before it does.”

By now our shuttle had travelled far enough that I could see almost all of Earth in the window. I wondered how many people I was seeing, how many had gathered inside their homes around the TVs to watch the take-off, to hear the last night of news, to watch the very last rerun of their favorite *Friends* episode. I thought of my mom, who I hadn’t allowed myself to think of ever since I was strapped in for take-off. She’d be outside, that’s for sure, watching the sky, stargazing, wondering which constellation I was closest to.

I brought myself closer to Reese, knocking aside floating food packets as I went. He made room for me, and we floated side by side, Reese on his stomach with his chin resting in his palm, and me floating with my legs crossed underneath me. It felt like a picnic, which I know it probably shouldn’t have, given the world was about to end and we were in space, but it did. It really did.

I ripped open the packet of once-powdered-now-actual bread and tore a piece off before popping it into my mouth. The outside was cool and a little crunchy, the center soft and warm on my tongue. A little thrill ran down my spine. It wasn't that bad, for space food.

"The world is freaking *ending*, Pepper," Reese said. He turned to look at me. "And we have the best view in the whole universe."

I rolled my eyes and ripped off another piece of bread before handing it to him. "Other than the twenty thousand other teenagers they've shot into space."

"You're ruining the moment. A koala bear wouldn't do this to me."

"It's going to be a long journey," I said decidedly. Strangely, I found that I was... sort of looking forward to it.<sup>31</sup>

Reese knocked his elbow into my side. I watched as he rolled over onto his back, let the chunk of bread float in the air above him, and then craned his neck to try to catch it between his teeth. I pressed my finger into the big red mark on Reese's temple, the one he got banging into the side panel of the shuttle. I traced the outline of it with the pad of my finger as he finally caught the chunk of bread between his lips. He chewed while saying, "At least we have bread."

"Yeah," I agreed, dropping my hand and turning to look back at the Earth, now just a little bit smaller. "At least we have bread."

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<sup>31</sup> Something I would never tell Reese. Well, maybe. We'll just have to wait and see.