

## SPACE JUNK

By Jennifer Shreve

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Sonia had always assumed she'd be the sort of widow who wore tidy black suits and babbled to an engraved granite stone. Where would she go to leave the roses? Or tend to the weeds? Leaning against John and Anne's floor-to-ceiling window, which looked out over the Bay from its perch in the green Berkeley hills, Sonia felt the stem of her wine glass slip ever so slightly between her fingers and clutched it more tightly. On the other hand, it wouldn't do to spend her remaining days chained to a box of rotting flesh and porous bones. She pressed her cheek against the glass and felt the sun's warmth pass through it. She'd known since the beginning this day would arrive and still it had come as a shock.

That morning his skin had been cold and damp like risen dough. The air above his lips and nostrils, cool and still. She had jerked away, as though death were a sudden rustling in the bushes, a snake slithering in the corner of her eye. A callous response, she'd silently scolded, though Seymour wouldn't have agreed. She pictured him hinging upright at the waist, opening his eyes, and saying with a wry smile, "Instincts, my sweet pea. It is only natural and wise for the living to fear the dead." But no such thing occurred. Instead, she had placed her head on his silent chest and hastily split apart his purple eyelids to make absolutely certain nobody was home. Her question answered, she took his stiff hand and ran his fingers through her short, black hair. She kissed his face and wiped her tears off of his cheeks.

When satellites are launched into orbit, they often have surplus cargo space, John explained, certainly enough for a crate of ashes. Once they reached their destination, Seymour and his fellow travelers would circle the planet for a year or so before plunging back into earth's atmosphere, at which point they would be eviscerated once more in a sudden flash of fire. That's good, Sonia thought. Her husband had of late railed against earthlings polluting the sky with their high-tech debris, as if ruining their own planet hadn't been enough. Besides, space had always been his first love.

On one of their early dates, nearly twenty-five years before, she and he had scrambled up a hill just outside of Banyuls Sur Mer. She can still recall how the Mediterranean looked that evening, a dark, horizontal band behind the sparsely lit hotels and tourists shops. The air was still warm and salty from the hot August day, the clear night sky glowing with the last remnants of sunlight. Having navigated these terraced hills since childhood, Sonia knew the way and had come prepared with a heavy blanket, two half-drunk bottles of wine from her father's restaurant, a baguette, and some farmer's cheese made the day before. Impractical as always, Seymour had insisted on also lugging his telescope, fully assembled, which caused him to nearly lose his balance several times as he stumbled cheerfully along the barely defined stone path. He'd given her the moon first, just a sliver, but still remarkably bright, filling out the entire eyepiece. Even Seymour had to admit that the Pleiades, three fuzzy, undistinguished motes where seven stars should be, were a bit disappointing. How he'd gushed that night, not about real things like love or the food they were eating, but whether the universe would expand infinitely or snap back like a rubber band. And that star over there—he pointed a long,

crooked finger—dead for millennia, only its light remained, having taken thousands of years to arrive.

“I thought you were a professor of philosophy,” she’d said, feigning a yawn and scooting in closer. In truth she’d never had much use for the Big Questions. Wasn’t it better to focus on the ones you could answer, like how far is it from here to the sea and wouldn’t it be nice if we could sleep beneath these pretty stars all night? “Comparative literature,” he corrected, sweeping his hand across the sky as though it were all as clear as the evening’s menu specials.

And now? As she rolled her wine glass against the window, losing herself for a moment in the clacking sound it made, she traced an imaginary line from where she stood down to the cluttered wood-shingled bungalow they had shared for what had become, unaccountably, half of her life. She preferred her valley to these hills, the churning Pacific Ocean to the vast empty sky. She felt safest among dark, heavy armoires made of wood and chairs that suggested nothing more than sitting, not the wisps of brushed steel, glass, and plastic that barely filled this modern home. But somewhere down in that patchwork of trees and rooftops lay naked Seymour in a freezer. And their home would be crawling with memories. Two heavy weights at once pulling her towards them and holding her in place.

She heard John get up from the sofa behind her, felt the glass slip from her hands but felt too weak to stop it. She covered her face with her hands and cried, “I don’t know what to do. I can’t make these decisions.” Grasping her by both shoulders, her friend gave a gentle squeeze and said, “I know. I don’t know.”

Seymour's death rattle arrived belatedly in the form of a stainless steel capsule the size and shape of a thermos. Stubborn bits of bone and tooth tumbled amongst the silent ashes, a quiet, rhythmless percussion. A gangly boy attired in grey slacks, white cotton shirt, and navy satin tie delivered him to her thus without ceremony, just a "here you go," "please sign here, and here," and "this is a pamphlet explaining the laws on disposal." She cradled him all the way back to her car and placed him, upright in the passenger's seat, affixing the seatbelt across him so he wouldn't slide out and land on the floor among the dirty tissues and soiled candy wrappers.

In the days immediately following his death—a swift, decisive aneurism, as the coroner's report would confirm nearly two months later—she'd looked up many times from the couch where she was sorting through his papers or from the kitchen table where she sat, barely eating, expecting Lazarus to emerge dazedly from his study and request a pot of green tea. But with this tin, there could be no longer be any doubt. As she entered her home, clutching her husband to her chest, she felt a familiar, nervous flutter in the soft folds of flesh below her navel.

Everything about living in the United States had terrified her at first. The cars were so big, the people spoke very quickly, restaurants served food just minutes after you ordered, the pot was way too strong, the wine too cloying and rambunctious, and everyone wanted to know what she *did*. If he hadn't been her constant companion that summer, patient and loyal as a guide dog accompanying her on every banal adventure, reassuring her that her English was perfectly understandable, that his friends indeed liked her, she might not have ever come back. But when it came time for him to return to teaching, she'd found it difficult to leave the house. Later she would find hobbies, own a

business, pronounce r's with the front of her mouth not the back of her throat, but then, hours stacked upon hours. What was she doing in this strange place with a man eighteen years her senior? Could she really commit to a life that in no way resembled the one she'd always imagined for herself?

In November she fled. Come December, he went chasing after her, arriving in France, bags overflowing with marriage proposals and promises. She'd returned to Berkeley with a Mrs. and a determination to reinvent herself in the true American fashion. And how. With his help, her own café, serving breakfast and lunch, which Seymour christened "La Lune." A few close friends of her own. A house with a neglected rose garden in back. The clipping soon grew roots and its weak, pale vines stretched out beneath a new sun.

But Sonia had remained essentially a creature of habit, trading one routine for another, but never again straying too far. So it seemed natural, necessary even, to slip Seymour into her purse before heading to the grocery store, and to set him on the counter next to the cutting board while she prepared a meat pie, and to say to him, "You'll never believe the photo I found today while clearing out your boxes in the garage," to ask, "What was the name of that couple we dined with, the ones from Africa?" and "Were we driving the bug or the station wagon when we broke down near Joshua Tree?" Only once did she twist open the lid and whisper, gently lest some of the ash rise up to kiss her lips, "Seymour, the universe is expanding infinitely. It was in the paper today. I thought you'd like to know." Though she wasn't so certain herself. She rarely made it past the headlines.

On the morning of the space burial, the sky was gray, the air was damp, and a frisky wind wove in and out of the folds of Sonia's black pant suit and ivory silk blouse as she huddled with John and Anne on the long, flat tarmac of Vandenberg Air Force Base. Freshly poured asphalt and diesel fumes from a ceaseless parade of work trucks stung the insides of her nostrils. Regrettably, her small party was not alone. Eight other clusters of "close loved ones" shivered there, too, somber eyes affixed to the sleek gray rocket sitting on a platform connected to a tall white crane. Men in blue and yellow jumpsuits would appear and disappear, stopping to examine and tinker with the craft before driving off in their white pickups. Where was he? Did they have him? Panic clutched at Sonia's throat. Perhaps there was still time. She could run after one of them, have her husband carted off to a mausoleum where she could visit him on weekends and holidays with the normal bereaved folks. But when the suited man stepped up to the oak podium, situated off to the side, and beckoned the crowd to take their seats, she knew it was too late.

After a moment of silence, he began, in a deep melodic voice, "Gregory Adam Asner, You will always be in our hearts and dreams. Michelle Elaine Lambert, Peace in eternity. Ian Michael McGriffin, may you forever soar." Great plumes of smoke and fire billowed up from beneath the rocket. A low rumbling steadily grew louder. What a fool I've been, Sonia thought, honoring a dead man's wishes, when I'm the one who must live with them. The man's voice grew high and tight to rise above the ruckus. "Seymour Edward James, From stardust we came; to stardust we return. William Steven Parker, The Force be with you. William Jason Timor, On the ultimate field trip!" Vibrations rippled out from the ship. They rose up through Sonia's shoes, filling her entire body with such powerful trembling that she could no longer entertain her sad regrets. She could barely

hear anything now. “Ingrid -arg— mith, — hopes and dreams — in us. Mar— nor West, —my — ounds —ou. Pa— rick —ittaker, —fron —ier.” Rattle became roar as the ship extracted itself from gravity’s clutches, drowning out the exclamations and applause which rose soundlessly as rose petals and dirt flung into the air. Sonia, now fully caught up in the moment, whipped her head from side to side. “Dieu, mon dieu!” she cried over and over. He was a glowing fire, then a tiny speck, and although her heart pounded against her rib cage as the rocket’s faint glow was finally swallowed by the sky, for the first time since he’d died Sonia sensed something like peace. It was exactly what he would have wanted done, the fast track to the beginning, an afterlife of sorts. It would have to do. Adieu, Seymour. Adieu.

Amazing how quickly after the final memorial salves had been applied, the last condolence kiss planted on the wound, that the skin sealed up and the scab fell away, revealing life, raw and red in spots, but essentially as it was before. She rose before dawn on Fridays and Saturdays to search for knick-knacks at estate sales, caught up on all the bookkeeping at her café, and updated the lunch menu with a zucchini quiche and warm pumpkin soup. Soon she was meeting friends for dinner, and steadily regaining the twelve pounds she had lost. Little by little, she relinquished pieces of him. Books and papers to the university library, clothing and their bed to a shelter. Those things which she could not bear to give up, his age-worn oak desk, the dim green reading lamp, the same Orion telescope pointing now at a phantom moon, were slowly overtaken with receipts from her café, empty tea-stained mugs, books on tapestry and roses, the exotic disarray he’d always kept so carefully pruned.

But what a hypocrite he'd been, criticizing her messiness, when there was always more of him popping up in the oddest of places—a stray pair of fleece-lined leather slippers tucked beneath the couch, an indecipherable note beside a question mark scrawled in the margins of a recipe book, a scholarly journal arriving with an interview, published after the fact. Whenever the weight of his life—He existed! He exists!—became too much, Sonia would retreat to her garden. Surrounded by the heady aromas of her roses, the vivid greens of her hedges, she would sink her hands into the dirt, let its gritty cat-tongue soften her skin, grateful that she would never have to reach down into this earth and wonder if it was Seymour clinging to her wrists and nestling beneath her fingernails. Oh, but wasn't that just the sort of thing would Seymour take issue with? We were all dirt, he'd say, shaped like Adam from the same cosmic mud, life and death locked in eternal waltz, all these fairy tales and metaphors of resurrection and the afterlife holding aloft some semblance of a truth that only science could confirm. Seymour—Sonia shook her head like a dog after a bath—will you ever go away?

It was while in such a frame of mind that Sonia gazed up from her watering early one morning to see a speck glinting with orange sunlight as it cut across a purple band of sky. The trajectory was straight and smooth, too high to be an airplane. Squinting, she was just able to make out a rectangular shape. Seymour? A ridiculous thought. The sky was teeming with satellites. But she couldn't shake the feeling he was up there, ashes and bits, looking down on what was left of his life, unable to take in the view.

There had been a period in her life when in the depths of her grief she had taken pills only to conclude that time alone could alleviate the symptoms. Ten years they'd tried before finally abandoning their quest for immortality. To Seymour it was all just

biochemistry, this goes down, you take this to make it go up. Some things, of course, couldn't be fixed. But this time, Sonia had no one to put on a brave face for. This time, she would let grief run its slow, strange course. She would follow wherever it led, which is why, after seeing the mysterious object in the sky, she promptly set down her watering can and walked towards the house, not even pausing at the sliding glass door to shuffle off her gardening clogs before going inside. From beneath a stack of magazines, she extracted a glossy brochure. Peeling it open and scanning the words, she found what she was looking for. Soon she was online, selecting the Navigator 05 from a list of satellites orbiting the planet. What she learned was this: The object she had seen from her garden was indeed a satellite, but Seymour had been floating above Germany at the time. Hello there, Seymour. Hello.

He moved from north to south in daylight and south to north in darkness. Almost fifteen times a day he circled, endless twine around a massive ball. The images were several minutes off, but correct enough for Sonia to know that while she ate dinner Seymour was sailing over Australia. In the time it took her to bathe, he'd crossed Antarctica. The following morning, when the sun's light erased the stars, he'd be drifting over Texas. How frustrating their paths didn't cross more often.

For several months she checked in on Seymour throughout the day. Then, she set rules for herself. I will go one full day without checking on him. I will go two days without going online. I will look now, but that's it until Friday. It was no different from visiting a gravesite, she reasoned. She would look now. What was the harm?

The hike to Franz Josef Glacier was to be “delightful” and “easy,” a mere two hours in

either direction, looping through lush tropical vegetation, with many rewarding views of waterfalls and rare bird species along the way. But two and a half hours into the hike, it is clear the book has it wrong. The journey is all uphill. The “path” comprised of slick, wet boulders that Sonia must climb over or maneuver around. Clinging to vines and moss, she drags herself up and up. Afraid to slip and break a bone, she has to concentrate on each step, forgetting to gaze at the waterfalls cascading down a cliff across the gully. She’s brought only two bottles of water and one is close to empty . Her small backpack, holding a sleeping bag, flashlight, several Band-Aids, a sandwich, a bruised banana, and a wrinkled package of fig cookies, is fast becoming a liability. But somewhere along the way, Sonia grows surer of her footing. The vines and moss seem to pull her forward. Step, step. Leap, leap. She is Sonia of the jungle, now, a wild and fearless thing pushing her way through dense jungle. She stifles an urge to yawp.

It has been just over a year. As Sonia surges onwards and upwards Seymour is wrapping up his final tour de terre. On this night, shortly after sunset, he will re-enter the atmosphere over New Zealand in a fiery burst that Sonia knows she must not miss if she is ever to get on with her own life. She could have watched from practically anywhere on this two-island country, or neighboring Australia or Fiji, for that matter, but when she’d read of the glacier in her guidebook, she knew it had to be. Here was ice so old, so deep that it had carved deep fjords and canyons. Ice so plentiful it melted into rivers and waterfalls. Yet, it could be measured, calculated, understood. Its coldness could be felt. You could climb it, touch it, maybe even taste it. What better powerful counterweight to the vast, emptiness of space, keeping her firmly rooted here on earth as Seymour became no more? This time, her eyes would not be closed. This time, she would get to say

goodbye. Besides, she had reasoned, the night sky around the glacier would not be polluted by city lights—one of Seymour's most common complaints—though rain clouds often made it difficult to see the stars. Some possibilities you simply had to live with.

By the time she reaches the vista, the sun hangs low and red in the west and the air is starting to cool. Pushing back a thick slug of black salty hair from her brow, she sits heavily on the picnic bench and searches the ice below for some reassurance that all her effort has not been in vain. All she sees are deep grooves of blue ice stained with brown earth and gray gravel. Impossible from this vantage to say how deep, how long, how old.

How dare the wind pick up, lifting the cold sweat off her puckered skin, at a moment like this? And why are her feet suddenly so wobbly as though her legs were planted upon two squishy balloons? Spreading out her sleeping bag onto the picnic table, she wonders whether her teeth will stop chattering once she's crawled inside. And why, in her 45 years, hadn't she been more of a outdoorsy type so that she'd be better prepared for this one essential moment? Then there's this other awkward matter she hadn't anticipated. Although it's unlikely anyone would come upon her at this late hour, she takes cover amongst the thorny bushes, dropping her pants and carefully hovering to avoid brushing up against a leaf or, god forbid, a snake. She closes her eyes. Her stomach seems to collapse. An apple shedding its core. When she rises, she feels hollowed out inside. Relieved. Tired.

So slowly as to be almost imperceptible the sky darkens. One-by-one the stars pierce its thin fabric. It's clear out. Thank goodness for that. But the darker it becomes, the colder it gets. Sonia shivers. Soon she cannot stop shivering. Her tongue is dry, her lips are cracked, but just one bottle of water remains. There is no way she will make it

back in the dark, she thinks, crawling into her sac, head resting on her deflated backpack. She waits. As she waits she thinks of John and Anne rising from their warm feathery bed halfway across the world, of her mother and father tucked into their unkempt graves. She thinks of the sound of onions being chopped on a thick wood cutting board, how as a little girl she used to tie her two braids together with a piece of red yarn, and the way that French wine often tasted to her of granite. It occurs to her that everything she has, everything that mattered, was right here with her all along.

Soon enough the shaking subsides. She is out of danger for now, but her feet and hands are still tingling and every ache and pain, not just from that day but, it seems, accrued over a lifetime, stab and prick, knead and grind. At times the sky appears to move closer to her then spring back. She notices, with some surprise, that its shape seems to change from a flat, wide plane when she sits up to something more like a dome when she lies down. She clinches and releases her jaw. She slaps her face, gently at first. More than once she snaps herself back from the brink of unconsciousness. Focus, Sonia. Focus.

For if she blinks, she could miss it. If her eyes happen to be focused on the north and Navigator 05 appears in the south, she might only catch a trace of it. If she dozes, she will certainly miss it. But she is so very tired and cold.

What was that? Was that it? It could have been a shooting star, but she still can't wiggle her fingers or toes. Sonia tightens the sleeping bag over her head, causing the sky to shrink to the size of a dinner plate. Her body feels light and airy now. Her lids float down over her eyes, then jolt back open. Thin white mist rises over her mouth. A faint streak of light flits across the corner of her eye. Was that it? She isn't sure. Why not? That was it. Even if that wasn't it, even if it were some other piece of industrial debris

consumed by a fiery cataclysm against the grand backdrop of outer space, what difference did it make? Sonia laughs, having finally gotten the joke. Yes, that was probably it.