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Secret Lives

by Rosalyn Hurst

The Professor hated the Moonbase; the unspoken hierarchy, stretching from the newly arrived, up to those who were long established, though they did not realise that their careers had long fossilised in the arid and alien moonscape. On reflection he could not understand why he committed himself to that vomit inducing journey, and perhaps worse, the dread of the return, blasting unnaturally back to Earth.

It was the Professor's job to uncover, or as he liked to put it laughingly, 'unearth' those secrets, those hidden traits of applicants for the third stage missions to deep space. Of the thousands of applicants from schools, universities, workplaces, fifty had been selected to be shortlisted for the five place final team. Two to be alert, three to sleep.

The Fifty had understood the order of 'No secrets, everything will be known,' and they had consented to chips, monitors, and cameras to peer inside their bodies, to observe their conscious movement and to probe their dreams. Forty-one applicants were sent immediately back to Earth, but in accordance with the plan, as their capsule approached the dark side of the Moon, it was detached to hurtle unseen towards the sun, the voices of the screaming passengers unheard in the vast nothingness of space.

The Nine, were informed that now they should submit two personal items they wished to take with them, just grams, a small gift from The Administration, in the rigid preparation of deep space travel; a recognition that the chosen team would not be returning to Earth for many years - though the expectation of the programme was that they would never return.

The Professor wearily sorted through the tiny mementos, the keepsakes of their lives abandoned to the lure of adventure: the exploration or the thrill of being the first to see, experience, taste and smell the far beyond. He considered whether The Nine were aware these items revealed their inner secrets, dreams that had remained undetected by the analysis, or even the candidates themselves.

The religious icons; the crosses; crucifixes, the crescents, and concerning to the eyes of The Professor, pleas for safe journey, a medal of St Christopher, a paper with Hindu chants to Vishnu Sahasranamam.

Personal items: photographs, some he could pass, for they were obvious, but it was the others, reduced to a microdot that were suspicious, for they predictably contained pictures of a baby, a man, a woman; an undeclared child, a lost love. For these candidates hoped to enrol in order to escape a situation which they would only recreate again.

And finally the last group, a varied and challenging assortment, always more interesting. He looked benignly at small bags of soil, honouring an old tradition that if they died, this token of the homeland would stay with them

Two candidates had submitted boxes. One in silver, so light, so minute, so exquisite in detail and yet to open it was a puzzle, so it was difficult to work out the signs and symbols, but The Professor was persistent, and as expected it contained seeds of a mild narcotic plant. He appreciated the ingenuity. He checked back to the candidate, a lively, non-compliant and lateral thinker: the candidate passed.

But the other box gave him pause for thought. The material structure was a challenge, like some carbon-based rock, similar to those found on the asteroids. There was something disturbing about the patterns. He recalled those medieval secret locks he had studied as a pastime when he was a boy. By delving into these long hidden memories he was eventually able to open it. Engraved on the back of the lid was the Dog Star located accurately in Canis Major. An indented surface held two delicate ivory pieces, sharp pointed, like dog teeth, perhaps wolf fangs? Canine definitely.

He reviewed the candidate's report, brilliant engineer, a polymath, a loner, loved the dark side of the moon, unfazed by the total blackness of deep space no problem there, but yet...The Professor experienced a rare sense of unease. All the psychometric data stated that the candidate, was rounded, showing appreciation of the warm vibrant bodies around him yet showing no sexual lust, no deviation from the accepted norms...but yet. As a professional and dispassionate academic he could not dismiss this applicant, but chose to put in him in sleep for the first part of the voyage... just in case.

With rare artistic symmetry, as the ship with The Five rose silently towards the unknown abyss The Professor entered the homeward module, with eager anticipation for the press conferences, the accolades awaiting him. But at that very moment he received an email from his 14 year old son, with an enthusiastic resume of a novel, a son who was his secret disappointment. The Professor did not see, did not feel the adjustment as they swung around the dark side of the moon, did not look for the last sighting of Jupiter, for he could only experience a chill to read about a vampire with the teeth so very similar to that box, the man who welcomed the dark, who loved vibrant warm bodies, as he, The Professor, the guardian of all secrets, alone in his capsule, hurtled towards the sun.