

HOME CYGNUS

Time to say goodbye.

BY S. R. ALGERNON

Scheduled departure in four hours, said the computer in the wall, breaking the silence.

Dorothy set the translucent plastic box down on her bed and watched it, as if watching would make the inside bigger. Surely, Mission Control could have managed more. A thousand cubic centimetres was too little space for a life. Her quarters on the Titan habitat at least had enough room for her clarinet and her hard-cover edition of Audubon's *Birds of America*.

The box at that moment contained two pairs of earrings, a necklace and a plastic trinket that generated a hologram of the Valles Marineris canyons when you pushed a button on the top. The hologram projector took up too much space, but it was a family heirloom like the rest. Her father had given it to her at the spaceport before heading to Mars.

Dorothy glanced again at Titan through the window. *If 16 Cygni Bb is as hostile as the recruitment blurb says, I'll be spending most of my time watching the world through screens and windows, watching it freeze and burn.*

Dorothy felt like a prop master on a movie set. Somewhere in this prefab habitat room was the perfect prop, something that would open that window and bring the planet to life for her — and maybe for the Cygnans who followed her — but what was it? Was it a pair of slippers to whisk them back home? Was it a shattered snow globe to unleash a storm of loss and regret? Was it a falcon, shiny and treasured but ultimately meaningless?

She wished she had room for the weather vane on Great-Grandpa's old farmhouse. It was cast iron; it would survive the Cygnan summer, even if it glowed a little or disappeared within a blizzard from time to time.

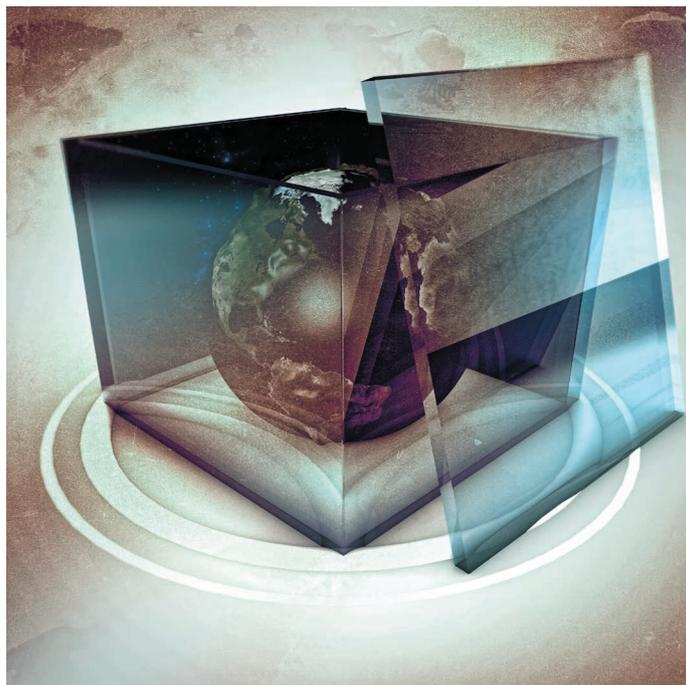
Mission Control said that we had to give up on Earth's gods, and that they could not protect us, but something is guiding me, even if I can't put a name on it.

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“Computer,” said Dorothy. “Place a call to Great-Grandpa. Try the landline.”
The farmhouse was

a billion miles away, but she knew Great-Grandpa would be there. Where else would he be?

“It's me. Dot,” she said, over the faint undercurrent of line noise. “I know this message will take an hour to reach you, and then an hour to get back, so I'm just going to talk. I'm not coming back this time, and



I might be going far enough away that we won't be able to talk anymore. I know this is sudden, but sometimes life doesn't give you easy choices. I just wanted to thank you, and to hear you one more time.”

Dorothy tried to pack, but nothing seemed quite good enough. After two and a half hours, the box was no closer to being full.

Two hours and thirty six minutes later, the sound of wind chimes and creaking wood broke the silence.

“I always knew you'd be the one who wouldn't come back. You're too much like your father. I've never been one for talking much, and not quite so many people to talk to around here. I'll leave the line open as long as you need.”

A gust of wind gathered momentum in the background.

“Looks like we're in for a storm,” added Great-Grandpa.

You have no idea.

For two hours, Dorothy listened to the

chimes and the porch swing, to the rain on the roof and the melody of a Western meadowlark. Every so often, Great-Grandpa would interrupt the natural rhythm with “Did I ever tell you about the time when ...”

Scheduled departure in one hour.

Dorothy wished she had more to say. Did Great-Grandpa ever want to listen to her stories?

It had always been the other way around. Still, she talked about whatever came to mind, about spaceports, exoplanets and all the plans that had fallen through. Her packing took on an urgency now. She downloaded movies — home movies and Hollywood classics — to a removable drive. The rest of the clutter no longer mattered. Mission Control would sell it off or station security would haul it away.

Scheduled departure imminent. Proceed to security checkpoint.

Already?

“I know, Computer. Hush.”

Wait. Not just yet. One last thing.

“Great-Grandpa,” said Dorothy. “I know you're still listening, so I just want to ask you, are you happy for me? Are you happy for all of us? Should we have stayed? Did we go in the direction you wanted?”

Dorothy knew she would not live long enough to really answer

that question for herself, but she wanted to hear his answer, in his voice.

“I'm sending the coordinates for 16 Cygnus B, Great-Grandpa. If you can find a way to transmit in that direction, keep talking. I'll listen through the ship's comm system as long as I can, until the Doppler shift takes the signal out of range.”

At the last moment before leaving her quarters, Dorothy downloaded the recording, took out the drive and put it in the box.

I know what this box is, thought Dorothy. It's a piano in a gin joint, somewhere in the desert, off the stage for a while but not forgotten, and waiting for the next set of hands to bring its old sounds back to life. With resignation, nostalgia and traces of hope, she closed the lid, took one last look around, and stepped through the door. ■

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