

It's All Relative

Peter Evans was really getting bored with his life. He'd been making shuttle runs to Station Delta for over five years now. Once a week he would haul the latest assemblage of the overly rich for a three day stay and then return them to their sordid and probably useless lives. In a way Peter envied them though. At least they were getting some joy out of this experience of getting to go into space. For him it had become just another job, and one he was getting increasingly bored with.

Peter remembered when he had first been picked for shuttle pilot training. The whole idea had seemed so exciting. After all, before that he had been doing commercial transcontinental runs and there is nothing much more boring than that. Peter had forgotten that at one time being a transcontinental pilot had seemed exciting too. Of course compared to plowing fields on his father's farm in Kansas anything seemed exciting.

"Shuttle Two Seven, this is Station Approach Control."

"Shuttle Two Seven," Peter replied to the voice in the earphones.

"Shuttle Two Seven, welcome back. Approach from vector seven zero at minus five, your discretion. Docking bay is open."

"Shuttle Two Seven, thanks. Thrusters set for station approach. I'll be lined up here in just a minute and will advise when starting approach."

"Acknowledged, Shuttle Two Seven."

Peter nudged the old bird onto the right vector for approach. As it was sliding into position he thought about the new mission to Alpha Centauri that was in the works. "Now that's exciting," he thought half aloud. Piloting a ship to the stars was where the real excitement was he was certain. He had seen pictures of the ship that was going to be making the trip. It was beautiful in all of its ugliness.

"Station Approach, Shuttle Two Seven."

"Two Seven, Go."

"Shuttle Two Seven, commencing approach on my mark... Mark."

"Two Seven acknowledged and monitoring. Control standing by."

After close to two hundred trips to the station Peter felt like he could do this whole routine in his sleep. In fact there were at least a few trips where, after docking, he realized he didn't remember the approach sequence. That had scared him a little and he tried to not let himself slip into repeating that sort of thing. Boredom and repetitiveness were hard things for the human brain to overcome.

The shuttle made a smooth approach right down the alley. If nothing else Peter was consistently the best shuttle pilot on the run. He took a little pride in that and tried to give his passengers the best ride possible even though it was the one hundred and ninety seventh time he had done it.

"Control, Shuttle Two Seven." Peter announced.

"Two Seven, Go."

"Control, we have soft dock. Initiating hard dock." Peter flipped the final switch for this trip.

"Two Seven, acknowledged."

"Control, Two Seven," Peter called to update them on the docking progress.

"Two Seven, Go."

"I show green on hard dock. Doors opening momentarily. Take good care of my

passengers.”

“Welcome aboard. Control out.”

Peter watched as Two Seven went through its automatic shutdown sequence that was initiated by the completion of hard docking. It was a boring formality because there had never been any record of a shutdown sequence not completing normally. Still, it was regulations so he sat there and dutifully watched the displays one at a time blink green as each task completed. When the final indicator turned green, Peter released his harness and left the ship.

By this time his five paid passengers along with their orientation assistant had already disembarked and he didn't see any of them. The only person left at the station airlock was an administrative aid whose name Peter didn't remember.

“You Peter Evans?”

“Yeah.”

“This is for you,” handing Peter a large envelope.

“Uh, thanks. What's this?”

“Don't know. I was just told to get this to you when you docked.”

“OK, thanks.” Peter walked away as he began tearing open the blank envelope.

As Peter hurriedly unfolded the piece of paper, his heart jumped. He wondered if it could possibly be what he had hoped for. Scanning the first few lines, he realized it was true. They accepted his application. Now, assuming he did all right in the training sessions, he was going to be on the crew of the Nova when it launched for Alpha Centauri. Peter's boredom turned to excitement in short order.

Peter finished out the round trip to Station Delta, taking his “high rolling” passengers home three days later. The following week, however, he returned as one of the passengers himself while someone else did the flying. At least the view is different, he told himself on that final trip to Station Delta.

Over the next six months Peter and the other applicants were put through an extensive training process geared toward determining the role each would be assigned if they were to become a part of the crew. There was the standard physical testing along with a lot of psychological testing. In many respects the psychological testing was the key element because, for the crew of the Nova, this was going to be a one way trip.

As part of the training, Doctor Hunter had explained to all of the applicants the nature of the trip they were going to be taking.

“The travel time of the Nova will be almost one thousand three hundred and one years. During that time virtually all of you will be spending the entire trip in stasis. By doing this we can sufficiently slow your bodily functions so that you will only experience about the equivalent of one full night's asleep.

“However, some of you may be wakened at various times during the trip if necessary for maintenance purposes. Now the Nova is pretty self sufficient and has a lot of self correcting and automated repair capability so we are not anticipating that a need will arise, but we just want to warn those of you identified for maintenance operations that this could happen.

“On the other hand there are four of you who definitely will be awakened several times during the trip. You four are the pilots. Even though the Nova is highly automated and self sufficient we've determined that at least once each hundred years it is advisable to awaken one of you to survey the status of the ship and initiate any corrective actions if necessary. Of course the systems on the Nova can also awaken one of you if it has determined that there is a problem that the automated systems are not able to fully address.

“Unfortunately there is a bit of a restriction in the stasis process that we have not been able to overcome. It seems that when someone is awakened from stasis it is not safe for them to return to stasis in less than a year. So, for you four, the trip is going to take a little over three years. A different one of you will be awakened each one hundred years on a rotating basis. Peter, you will be the lead-off pilot to be awakened after the first one hundred years. You will be followed by Charlie, Jack, and Preston in turn. Peter that also means you will be the one at the helm when the Nova reaches Alpha Centauri.” The room broke into a round of applause. All the pilots had been vying for that position, but everyone knew Peter had earned it. Peter felt honored and excited.

The rest of the training became something of a blur to Peter. There were so many ship systems he had to learn that he thought classes and tests would never end. Essentially the pilots all had to pretty well know everything on the Nova. They were the first line of defense against any catastrophic contingencies that the automated systems might not be able to handle.

Much like flight training, Peter spent a lot of his time in the simulators practicing a wide variety of failure scenarios. Every day was packed with the latest disasters thought up by the engineers who had been responsible for the design of the Nova. Yet finally the simulations came to an end.

“Peter, that’s it. We’ve thrown everything we have at you,” admitted Solomon Jones, the head of simulator training.

“Come on Doc, you gotta have something else. It’s still two weeks till launch. I’m gonna get bored,” pleaded Peter.

“Well, you can come in and re-run some of the older stuff if you want. Just sign up on the schedule and we’ll provide whatever support you need.”

“Thanks Doc. Just don’t want to get rusty.” Peter knew it wasn’t about getting rusty. He just couldn’t stand the thought of waiting around and doing virtually nothing for two weeks. Running the old scenarios wasn’t very satisfying, but it did manage to fill the time while waiting for their launch date.

Finally the day came, but the launch itself was somewhat anticlimactic. The whole crew, Peter included, were put into stasis before launch because there simply was no need for any of them to be awake. Even the launch itself, as broadcast to the whole world, was not very spectacular. Ion engines starting in space just don’t have the pizzazz of those legendary behemoths that had first launched man into space. All there was to see was a little light from the business end as the Nova slowly pulled away from its dock near Station Delta.

While those ion engines didn’t pack much acceleration they made up for it by continuous operation. A month later the Nova with its measly acceleration was the fastest ship that had ever been launched from Earth and it was just getting started.

On Earth the launch of the Nova got a lot of news coverage the first few weeks. After that there would sometimes be a news story on the anniversary of its launch. In the mean time, the Deep Space Tracking Network dutifully monitored the mission year in and year out. Forty seven years after its launch the guys stuck with tracking the Nova considered it one of the most boring jobs they had ever done. Then the signals from the Nova disappeared.

Everyone knew it would happen. They even knew almost to the second when it would take place. The Nova had reached the limit of the Deep Space Tracking Network’s ability to detect the signals from the Nova. The people on Earth assigned to track the Nova mission were overjoyed. They were finally released from the boredom. Unconcerned about being disconnected from Earth, the Nova continued through space with its ion engines glowing and its crew fast

asleep.

Coming out of stasis the first time was very disorienting to Peter. Still, it was very much like the simulations he had been through. After he had recovered he checked out all of the ship's systems and determined that everything was in perfect working order. Now he had 364 days of time to kill.

That first year Peter watched every movie that had been stored in the ship's library. He also read and watched all the news that had been broadcast during the forty-seven years that the Nova had been within communication range. Finally the day came, and after completing his last entry in the ship's log, he re-entered the stasis chamber and went back to sleep.

Four hundred years later Peter again woke from stasis. He recovered more quickly than the first time and again had run through all of the ship's systems in record time. Everything was still perfect. Peter found it interesting reading through everything that had been written in the ship's log over the last four hundred years by Charlie, Jack and Preston. This occupied his time for almost a month. Three hundred and thirty seven days to go. Peter re-watched some of the movies, but found no interest in re-reading the old news stories or watching any of the five hundred year old broadcasts from Earth.

It was getting pretty boring, but finally Peter reached day three hundred and sixty five and was very relieved. Signing his name to the last entry in the log he once again stepped into the stasis chamber and welcomed sleep to end his boredom.

Four hundred years later Peter awoke from stasis the third time. This time there was nothing to it, and he didn't even feel woozy. Of course the ship checked out perfectly yet again and Peter noted that it had already reversed its orientation and was now decelerating as it continued to Alpha Centauri. They were on the downhill slide to their destination. The excitement about that didn't last long though. Peter knew they still had over four hundred years left to go.

Again Peter tried to keep himself occupied with movies and books as much as he could. It didn't help much. He was all alone and he was bored stiff. Each day it was getting harder and harder to go through the motions. Every day looked like the one before it and like the one after it. Peter tried to motivate himself by writing more extensively about everything in the ship's log. At least it took time to write it all down.

Finally the three hundred and sixty fifth day arrived and the Nova dutifully recorded its first anomaly of the entire mission. Peter's stasis pod did not reactivate on schedule.

Less than one hundred years later the sensor system of the deep space transport Orion registered a large object along its trajectory. The Orion alerted its crew who were much relieved to have something to do rather than just spending another month on autopilot before their arrival at Alpha Centauri.

"What do you make of that?" Pilot Enrique O'Shannesy asked.

"Beats me. It's big and looks old, but it looks like it has some engines that are still operating." Co-pilot Diedre Franklin observed.

"Think we should check it out?" Enrique prompted.

"Anything would be a blessing compared to the boredom of this freight run."

"OK then. Let's do it!"

Enrique pulled the Orion alongside the aging ship where they could finally read the registry number and name. "Look at that!" he exclaimed. "Naw, it can't be. But it is! You know what this is Diedre?"

"Not a clue. Looks like ancient history."

“It is ancient history. It’s the Nova! You remember, the first ship ever sent to Alpha Centauri!”

“No. You’re kidding. I thought that was just a myth. You mean there really was a Nova?”

“Yep, and that’s it. We have to get a look inside.”

“Wait a minute. If that’s the Nova then it’s still on its way to Alpha Centauri?”

“Yep, come on, come on. This is exciting!”

Enrique placed the Orion into its automatic station keeping mode then he and Diedre used a small maintenance pod to rendezvous with the Nova.

As they were on final approach it occurred to Diedre, “Why didn’t anyone find this before now?”

“There’s a lot of territory between here and Earth. By the time we had engines that would let us get out this far in a reasonable amount of time no one really knew where to look. Records from almost a thousand years ago were pretty useless. People finally figured that if the Nova wasn’t a myth we might just have to wait another three hundred years for it to turn up.”

“And now here it is. Amazing. Now all we have to do is figure out how to get inside,” Diedre noted with a bit of skepticism regarding their ability to succeed.

After they docked it did take them a while to get inside all right, but to Enrique it was well worth the effort. Everything inside was pristine. It was like the Nova had just launched. As they made their way through the ship they were impressed that all this technology from over a thousand years ago was still functioning. Then they found Peter. He was pretty well desiccated. There was no obvious indication of why he had died, but the ship’s log was nearby as was his unused but fully functional stasis chamber.

Diedre made a copy of the log book while Enrique found something he could use to cover the body. After they were finished Enrique made one more log entry to explain what they had done so the next pilot to awaken would know what had happened.

After returning to the Orion, Enrique and Diedre began reading through the last few entries of the log to see if it contained any clues to what had happened. What they saw was that Peter had become increasingly disturbed over the last few months of his last watch on the Nova. He was seriously depressed, a little paranoid, and apparently had developed schizophrenia as well. It seemed that with so much boredom his mind had just started giving up. Despite all of this he had actually managed to finish his last log entry on the day he was supposed to re-enter the stasis chamber. Then, from all appearances, instead of entering the chamber he just died.

Enrique turned to Diedre, “You know what? I think he died of boredom.”

“Boredom? You kidding? What those people were doing was exciting, but this damned Earth to Centauri freight run probably is going to bore me to death some day.”

“I guess it’s all relative,” Enrique observed.