

Gregor Spörri

LOST GOD

DAY OF JUDGMENT

SAMPLE 1

PROLOG

(From my travel diary)

April 12, 1988

King's Chamber, Pyramid of Khufu, Giza, Egypt

6:10 p.m. I'm lying flat on my back, staring into the darkness above me. I let my vocal cords vibrate. The deep humming sound from my throat produces a stunning resonance effect. There's a roar in my ears, as if I were lying in a loudspeaker cabinet rather than in Khufu's stone sarcophagus. I sustain the humming sound for as long as I can – then take a deep breath – and continue.

10:20 p.m. My larynx and my back are hurting. So far, I'm not feeling any cosmic forces, nor am I experiencing a shift in consciousness. I climb out of the sarcophagus and leave the King's Chamber. Spooky silhouettes, created by my flashlight as the only source of illumination, scurry across the corbel vault of the Great Gallery. At the bottom of the vault, which is over 25 feet high and 150 feet long, I squeeze myself into the next shaft. It's almost 130 feet long and leads to the Queen's Chamber. The room is empty. I squat down on my backpack in the middle of the chamber and turn off the light. Even

though it's warm, I'm shivering. There's something eerie about being all alone inside this legendary monument.

April 13

1:40 a.m. I startle. Something's crawling across my face. A spider? A scorpion? I brush it away with a swift movement of my hand. I must have dozed off after chanting the syllable *OM* – representation of the highest divine principle – for two and a half hours. Much to my disappointment, it turns out that no energetic forces are at work in this chamber either.

I clamber back to where I started. From there, I enter another shaft, over 300 feet long. It leads 100 feet downward into the base of the pyramid. For the last few feet to the so-called Rock Chamber, I have to crawl on all fours, with my backpack strapped to my belly, because the shaft is so narrow.

The air in the 1,000-square-foot chamber is stuffy and damp. I let the beam of my flashlight wander. A pit opens before me, about 30 feet deep. To its right loom two roughly-hewn boulders, taking up half the space. They look like giant, unfinished sarcophagi. For whom were they intended, I wonder? I take a few pictures, then sit down between the "sarcophagi," and switch off the light.

3:45 a.m. I stare at the fluorescent hands of my diver's watch. No energy waves. No shift in consciousness. Not even a tingling between my ears. What's keeping the cosmic energy from entering me? What am I doing wrong?

Frustrated, I go to the entrance. As I'm waiting for the guards, whom I paid a pretty penny to lock me inside the pyramid, I play through the next experiment in my mind. This time, it's going to happen!

5:00 a.m. It's still cool, yet sweat is oozing from my pores. Akram, the son of one of the pyramid guards, is climbing a few feet above

me, barefooted. I'm having the hardest time trying to keep up with him. No wonder – at the annual contest for the fastest climb up the Pyramid of Khufu, this kid left his competitors in the dust. And they now pay great respect to the “Pyramid King,” until it's time for the next unlawful showdown.

My heart pounding, I climb the last few stone blocks – until I'm standing on the very top of the 455-foot-tall monument. The feeling is sublime. In spite of the darkness, the view is magnificent. In the east glitter the lights of the awakening city. In the southwest looms the shadow of the Pyramid of Khafre. The view downward is no less spectacular. I'm getting dizzy and realize: one misstep, and I'm dead.

Originally, the three Pyramids of Giza were encased with bright, polished limestone blocks. So-called pyramidions (capstones) formed the peaks. These ancient Wonders of the World weren't isolated structures – they served as hotspots within a vast city of temples, of which nothing is left today.

I crawl to the center of the pyramid's flat top, where a wooden tripod is anchored to mark the original building height of 481 feet. Akram is astonished to see all the things I'm retrieving from my backpack: a water-filled Coke bottle, tent poles, duct tape, a long-sleeved sweater, a neoprene hood, gloves, and a diving mask. First, I put the tent poles together. Then, I attach the bottle to the pole with duct tape. Next, I put on my sweater, hood, gloves, and mask. The boy's eyes are getting bigger and bigger. I hand him my camera and instruct him to take cover at the edge of the pyramid top. I tell him to press the shutter button as soon as something happens.

At that moment, the sun rises, and Akram shouts, “Yalla! Yalla!”

I slowly raise the pole with the bottle at the top to a vertical position. It's a wobbly balancing act. Cautiously, I prop my contraption against the wooden tripod. As I position the bottle by the tip of the tripod's center rod, I instinctively duck my head. But nothing happens. I push the bottle a couple of inches higher. Still nothing. I keep correcting –

a bit to the right ... to the left ... down again ... higher ... Nothing. Nada.

Akram suddenly points downward and shouts, “Must go! Must go!” Cursing, I put down the contraption and step to the edge of the pyramid top. Down below on the plateau, two white-clad figures are flailing their arms. I ask Akram if this is his father. He shakes his head violently, hands the camera back to me, and begins to climb down. I want him to take a souvenir photo of me, but the Pyramid King has already disappeared between the stone blocks. All I can do is take a moment to snap a couple of pictures of the surroundings. Then I pull the diving gear off my head, shoulder my backpack, and follow Akram. I leave the contraption behind.

I don’t recall how I make it down to the plateau without falling. But I do remember clearly how Akram takes to his heels as soon as he arrives at the bottom. My escape route, however, is blocked. Judging by their shrill voices, the two Arabs are launching all sorts of threats against me. I do get that it’s illegal to scale the pyramid. The “sheriffs” therefore have an easy time convincing me to leave them a generous baksheesh in exchange for my free passage.

Caprice Palace Hotel, Cairo, Egypt

I go back to the hotel and take a nap. I’m having bad dreams.

After dinner, I run into Jochen at the hotel bar. He’s a German engineer whom I’d met on the flight to Cairo. I told him about my plans, so he’s eager to learn how the pyramid experiments went.

“Total bullshit,” I growled. “It’s a new-age fairytale they tell suckers to separate them from their money.”

“And what about Napoleon and this English writer?”

“Made-up hogwash.”

Jochen massages his chin. “Maybe you’re just not the right guy for this.”

“Oh, like, I’m not subtle enough? I don’t have the right antenna or something?”

Jochen grins and nods, and asks what it was like on top of the pyramid.

I make a dismissive gesture. “Nothing happened whatsoever.”

Jochen keeps probing. “Did you do it right?”

I quote from one of my books: *“If you position a liquid-filled bottle at the location of the original pyramid point, the cosmic energy entering the structure there will cause the bottle to burst.”*

“A purely physical experiment without any spiritual requirements on the experimenter,” Jochen has to admit.

“Exactly! And I’m dumb enough to haul half of my diving gear up there to protect myself against the splinters raining down.”

Jochen pats my shoulders to comfort me.

We order beer for Jochen and cola for me, raid bartender Ahmed’s supply of pistachios, and talk about Egypt, its pharaohs, pyramids, and mysteries until well after midnight.

SAMPLE 2

December 18

Oval Office, White House, Washington, D.C., USA

“Your moon-rocket story is a total disaster!” rages the president. He slaps the latest issue of the Washington Post against the chest of the NASA administrator and space advisor. “Why are you doing this to me?” Donald Trump runs in a circle. “You know these newspeople are like hyenas. Now they’re tearing into me again!”

Scott Nolden looks pained. “We were thinking –”

“You weren’t thinking anything!” shouts Trump and raises a threatening index finger. “Your brains were turned off!” He stops pacing. “There must be a way to figure out who this goddamn piece of junk belongs to.”

Darell Sherman, the president's scientific advisor, looks no less pained. "This thing is not on any list, and there's no spacefaring nation that would ever have used such a symbol."

Trump plants himself in front of Sherman. "Then why are you pulling this crap out of your asses?"

"We're sorry. We just couldn't accept at first ..."

"Accept what?" barks Trump.

Sherman takes a deep breath. "That we have no clue what it is."

Trump stamps his foot. "But this goddamn imam already knows —"

"Excuse me, Mr. President." A Secret Service agent sticks his head through the door.

Trump turns on his heel. "You're interrupting."

"Your visitor, sir."

Trump looks at his watch and nods. "Send him in."

The security officer disappears. Two minutes later, a stocky older man in a bright-blue jacket enters the Oval Office.

Nolden can't believe what he's seeing. "What in heaven's name do you want from *him*?" he whispers in the president's ear.

"He's on a lecture tour through the U.S. and Canada," Trump mumbles back.

"So?"

"I was told he might know something about the satellite."

Nolden shakes his head in disbelief. "The UFO-gods guru?"

"Over one-third of Americans believe in UFOs."

"The guy's a crackpot, not a scientist!"

"He sold 70 million books on this subject."

"Harry Potter sold 500 million copies. You'll be ridiculed if news of this meeting gets out."

Trump waves the Washington Post in front of Nolden's face. "Does it matter at this point?"

Nolden drops down on the sofa with a groan.

Trump gestures the blue-jacketed man into the office and introduces everyone.

Sherman, who prefers to stand, leans against the fireplace next to George Washington's portrait.

Erich von Däniken takes a seat on the sofa opposite the president and the NASA administrator. "You asked to see me because of the satellite?"

Trump nods. "That's right. We want to hear your opinion."

Nolden grimaces. "The *president* wants to hear your opinion."

Trump shoots Nolden a look of disapproval.

"We're at a dead end," says the voice from the fireplace.

"I'm not surprised," says the 83-year-old. "Do you know what's in my books?"

Three heads shake no.

Däniken looks from one to the other. "Are you at least familiar with my theory?"

"Not really," says Trump.

"Just marginally," says Sherman.

Nolden mutters, "My work entails journalists asking me about your ideas every now and then."

Däniken smiles. "And what do you tell them?"

"That it's all nonsense. Baloney. Bullshit."

Däniken's smile narrows. "Do you believe in the God of the Bible, Mr. Nolden?"

"Of course."

Däniken's smile is gone. "A highly intelligent guy like you thinks my theories are nonsense, but believes in a supernatural divine being – one that, on the one hand, is capable of creating a universe and everything in it; and on the other hand, makes human beings out of clay, speaks from burning bushes, loves the smell of burnt offerings, approves of slavery – and in order to punish the disobedience of his chosen people, the Israelites, has an assortment of perversions in store that are worthy of a sadist, but certainly not of a god." Däniken takes a deep breath. "Fifth Book of Moses, Deuteronomy, Curses for Disobedience: *If you do not obey the Lord, your God, and follow all his commands and decrees, he shall tear your families asunder,*

destroy your crops, bring plagues upon you, strike you with fever and consumption, cover you with horrible boils from the soles of your feet to the top of your head, and punish you with rashes, scabies, blindness, and confusion of mind, until you become mad with anguish and pain.”

Däniken gives Nolden a provocative look. “With all due respect, sir.” Nolden’s face turns to stone.

“Even though no one in his right mind would argue that we are the only intelligent species in this galaxy, it’s virtually a sacrilege to think that the Earth could ever have been visited by representatives of an extraterrestrial techno-civilization. Give me a break.”

Nolden looks down at his shiny Italian shoes.

Sherman seems to be thinking hard.

Trump appears impatient. “So, can we talk about the satellite?”

Däniken sighs. “It’s not so simple.”

Trump twists his mouth. “What do you mean?”

“Without background knowledge, you won’t know what to do with my information.”

Trump puffs himself up. “You’re talking to the president of the United States of America. All I gotta do is snap my fingers, and the very best people are available to evaluate your information.”

Däniken points at the Washington Post on the side table between the sofas. “You’ve *already* snapped your fingers, Mr. President.”

Trump sullenly pushes a strand of hair from his face.

Däniken offers a conciliatory smile. “I suggest that we first take a short excursion into the world of the ancient aliens and then talk about the satellite.”

Trump, still grumpy, checks his watch. “I don’t have all day though.” “I understand, Mr. President.” Däniken takes a notebook computer from his briefcase and puts it on his lap. “According to the ancient aliens theory, extraterrestrial intelligences visited the Earth during mankind’s early history and created human civilization, or at least shaped it in a lasting way. As for me, I am firmly convinced that such

an event took place. When it happened and the people of the Stone Age witnessed the powerful appearance of the aliens and their spaceships, these cavemen were completely out of their depth, both intellectually and linguistically. It had to be a divine apparition. And so we read in the scriptures of God's house or dwelling place in heaven, of fire-breathing, winged chariots, of stairways to heaven, and of glowing clouds upon which angels descend to earth and rise upward again."

Däniken opens a text file. "In the Old Testament, there's even an eyewitness account of such an event. The Book of Ezekiel says: *I saw an immense cloud coming, with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The cloud burst open, and a bright light shone from within, like the glow of glistening gold. In this light, I saw four creatures, and each creature had four wings. Their bodies gleamed like burnished metal. Between the winged creatures was something that looked like burning coals, and fire moved back and forth among them. As I looked closer, I saw a big wheel beside each creature, touching the ground. And each wheel was intersected at a right angle by a second one, so that the wheel could go in all four directions without being turned. When the winged creatures moved, the wheels moved with them. And when the creatures rose from the ground, the wheels also rose. I heard the sound of their wings, like the roar of rushing waters, like the tumult of an army, like the thundering voice of the Almighty. When the creatures stood still and lowered their wings, the sound did not stop. Above the heads of the creatures, I saw something like a platform, sparkling like crystal. On top of the platform was what looked like a throne of lapis lazuli. On the throne sat a figure like that of a man. From what appeared to be his waist up, he looked like glowing gold, and from there down, he looked like blazing fire, and brilliant light surrounded him. Thus the Most High and Glorious was revealed to me in all his radiant splendor.*"

Däniken looks up. "So the almighty God has to use a helicopter-like vessel to get from heaven to earth? Rather peculiar, don't you think?"

Nolden lifts his gaze from his shoes. “You’re cherry-picking a convenient quote from Ezekiel’s work, ignoring both the historical and the religious context.”

Däniken waves away his objection. “Ezekiel’s eyewitness account was part of my first book, *The Chariots of the Gods*. That was in 1968. Joseph F. Blumrich, then a chief engineer for the Apollo program, read the book and was outraged that a layman like me dared to fantasize ETs into the Holy Scripture. In order to refute me, he analyzed Ezekiel’s report by means of several Bible editions and the Torah.” Däniken looks around the group. “At the end of the lunar flight program, Blumrich published his book: *The Spaceships of Ezekiel*. In it, he declared my Bible interpretation as absolutely correct. He was clever, because he actually applied for and received a patent on the biblical wheel that can go in all four directions.”

Nolden utters a snide grunt.

“But not only the Bible and the Torah tell of gods cruising around in flying machines. Even ancient Indian scriptures, the Vedas, have exact descriptions of such apparatuses –”

SAMPLE 3

March 29

Orlando, Florida, USA

It’s still quiet at Lake Eola. Only the cackling birds on the bankside and the homeless people – dazzled by the first sunrays, stretching and yawning on the park benches – are drawing attention.

It’s already the third time that Sally Brown passes the jetty with the pedal boats. With a satisfied nod, she reads the display of her white multifunction watch. It took her six and a half minutes to circle the lake. Sally runs one more round. Then, windmilling her arms, she trots back to her jeep, which is parked behind the open-air stage. As

she brushes the silver-white nape-long hair back into shape, she observes a bunch of little kids trampling on an anthill while screaming war cries.

“Heeey!”

The boys turn around to her.

“What are you doing?”

“Killing ants,” says the one with the black Darth Vader hat.

“What did *they* ever do to you?” Sally comes closer. “You’re destroying their world.”

“My father always pours gasoline over the hills in our yard,” says the one with the glasses. “I can hear the critters burst.”

Sally is getting angry but keeps calm. “Imagine a giant monster trampling around on our city just for funsies. What would you think about that?”

The answer comes in unison. “Cool!”

Sally takes a resolute step forward. “Get outta here, you little demons!”

As the brats trot off, flipping their fingers, her cell phone rings. The caller’s name makes her frown.

“Hi, Denzel. Working early?”

A grumble instead of a greeting. “Where are you?”

“Jogging in the park.”

“Stop and get your ass over here. Now.”

“You nuts? I have to take a shower, change, eat breakfast –”

“Forget about that.”

“You get up on the wrong side of the bed?”

“Whatever. Get moving.”

“Hey! I –”

Click. Her boss hung up.

An hour later, the 28-year-old science journalist enters the suite of Life Science. There really wasn’t anything in the editorial offices of a popular scientific monthly that couldn’t wait until she had at least freshened up. Sally is wearing a short white top with silver lettering:

TBTL (“Too Beautiful To Live”); along with light-gray jeans and heels with braided-bast soles. The chief editor is nowhere to be seen, so she heads for the coffee machine.

“I said *now*,” barks a voice behind Sally’s back, not even a minute later.

She turns around and holds up the steaming coffee mug. “Be with you in five minutes.”

The short, burly man shakes his head stubbornly.

“Two minutes, okay?” Sally haggles.

Denzel takes the mug from her hand and grabs her by the arm. “Come.”

Sally slaps his fingers hard. “What the hell is going on?”

Denzel scrunches his face. “Some douchebag from the Department of Defense [DoD] has been hogging my office all morning. That’s what’s going on.”

“And what does that have to do with me?”

“Ask him.” Denzel waddles over to his office with Sally, opens the door, shoves her in, and slams the door shut behind her.

The douchebag is a good-looking hunk, as tall and wide as a cupboard. He is reclining in Denzel’s chair with his feet on the desk and the latest issue of *Life Science* in his hands. Sally can’t help but grin. No wonder tubby’s ego suffered serious damage. The cupboard takes his feet off the table, puts the magazine aside, and sits up with a wide smile. Except for his powerful, dazzling white teeth, everything about him is black. His skin, his hair, the Ray-Ban glasses, his shirt, tie, suit, shoes, socks ...

“Ms. Brown?”

Sally takes her gaze off his socks. “Yes?”

He holds out his business card. “Frazer Jones, DoD. I’m here to offer you a job.” He points to the second chair. “Want to sit down?”

Sally takes the card, shaking her head. “What job?”

Jones clasps his hands on the table. “It’s about this UFO satellite. There are plans to investigate it more closely. We want you to be part

of this project as a media person. Your job will be to process the results of the investigation journalistically and present them to the global public once a day.”

“Wow.” Sally tilts her head. “Print or online media?”

“TV and live stream.”

“Oh.” Sally swallows. “I don’t really have a background in that.”

“You’re sexy and bright. Everything else, they’ll teach you.”

Sally blushes to her ears. “Why don’t you hire a professional for this?”

Jones holds up the magazine. “You have a knack for explaining complicated, but also delicate scientific topics to laypeople in an exciting, entertaining way. Exactly what we need.”

“Hmmm ... And how long would this assignment last?”

“Including all preparations, about six months.”

“That’s a *huge* project.”

“It certainly is.”

“And when would I start?”

“One week from now.”

“That soon?” Sally scratches her ear. “And my job here? Denzel won’t just —“

“You quit.”

Now Sally has to swallow twice. “Listen. I’m quite comfortable here. I have mostly free reign in my work. I have a great relationship with my colleagues, and I make decent money. Half a year passes quickly. And then what? I don’t think Denzel is going to hire me back if I walk out on him, pretty much overnight.”

Jones smiles. “You don’t need to worry about that.”

Sally looks incredulous. “You already talked to him? He’s cool with it?”

“He’s not.” Jones lifts himself out of the chair. His head almost touches the ceiling. “But that’s okay, because you’ll get new, much better job offers.”

Sally frowns. “Can you be more specific?”

Jones flashes his powerful rows of teeth. “You’ll be famous, Ms. Brown. I can guarantee you that much.”

SAMPLE 4

May 11

Coonabarabran, New South Wales, Australia

It’s long past midnight. Ned Kelly is still sitting in front of his computer. A Sheldon Cooper T-shirt is hanging loosely around the odd-ball Ph.D. student’s pigeon breast.

Ned has two identical but time-shifted images of the Libra constellation on his screen. He evaluates the sky scan by comparing the results of his manual search with those generated by AsteroidFinder, a new program that automatically detects asteroids.

Heather Smith, program developer for the Spacewatch project at the University of Arizona, has been able to recruit some young researchers, such as the 25-year-old doctoral student Ned Kelly, to test the beta version of a new software in their spare time.

This small town of almost 3,000 inhabitants, consisting mainly of bungalows, is the gateway to the Warrumbungle National Park. Coonabarabran is located 280 miles northwest of Sydney. There’s a tourist office, some restaurants, motels, hotels, and RV parks, as well as a golf club and a museum.

Ned shares a bungalow with his brother Pete, who is six years his senior. Pete works as a ranger for the National Park. Their parents, who live just a few houses away, are likewise employed by the park – Paul as a veterinarian, Clara as an accountant. The National Park also includes the Siding Spring Observatory with the Research School of Astronomy and Astrophysics, where Ned studies galactic archeology.

Ned enters a search code into the computer, hoists himself out of the swivel chair, slips into a fleece jacket, and steps outside the house, a Winfield Blue between his lips. The cancer lung on the package doesn't stop him from occasionally indulging in a cigarette.

Ned blows smoke rings into the night, brushes his unruly hair from his face with his fingers, tilts his head back, and looks up at the Milky Way. It is surrounded by about a billion other galaxies. An average-sized galaxy is home to over 100 billion stars. Approximately one in ten stars has planets. Ned does the math and estimates that there are ten quintillion planets in the vicinity of the Milky Way alone. The entire part of the cosmos that can be observed from Earth comprises as many as 100 billion galaxies and thus one sextillion planets. To include all the planets of the universe, the sextillion with its 21 zeros would have to be appended with a few thousand more zeros – an undertaking utterly beyond human imagination. It also baffles the mind that, as a result of collapses, explosions, and collisions with other celestial bodies, about 100,000 stars disappear from the firmament every day, annihilating their potentially inhabited planets.

Ned takes one last drag, flicks the stub into the dented can next to the entrance, and carefully closes the door. He doesn't want to disturb his brother, who is sleeping next door and, in contrast to him, has to get up very early. After a visit to the fridge, he returns to his room with a silver-blue can to his lips. Six feet away from his desk, he freezes. His pupils narrow. The hand holding the can sinks down. Mechanically, he takes a step forward. The can crackles in his hand. Sticky juice splashes. The hand opens. Crumpled aluminum clatters to the floor.

The 24-inch monitor shows the 20th photo from a sequence of 24 high-resolution shots taken by the camera of the 1.8-meter Spacewatch telescope at the top of Kitt Peak in Arizona. The photo is studded with stars, but its left edge shows a not very sharp, coin-sized circular black area. At the top right of the screen flashes a red exclamation point. The asteroid alarm. It is triggered as soon as the

program detects changes within an image sequence. Even the alpha version of AsteroidFinder worked flawlessly, identifying and recording some of the best-known Earth crossers. Currently, about 7,000 asteroids are registered. A thousand of them are considered potentially dangerous. But not one of them is perfectly spherical. Ned considers whether a dwarf planet or moon could be behind this effect, only to discard the idea immediately. Planets and moons don't just cruise around. Still standing, he gradually enlarges the photo, but can't discern a pixel error, nor a display, camera, or sensor error. Tousling his hair, he shuffles back and forth between his desk and bed in his flip-flops. *A black hole?* He pauses in front of the monitor for a second, then shuffles on. *Dumb idea.* First of all, those celestial vacuum cleaners don't pop up overnight. Second, as a result of spacetime curvature, the stars near a black hole would appear distorted. Third, an accretion disk, which transports matter to the hole, would have to be visible. The same is true for black stars and other super-heavy lumps of matter.

Ned shuffles for a while longer – then stops cold. *Moron. There are four more pictures!* He plunks down on the chair and types a command code. It takes a moment for the files to load from the host computer in Arizona. Ned kills the wait by spinning around in his office chair

...

By the seventh turn, he gets dizzy.

During the eighth turn, the 21st photo is being depixelated.

During the ninth, he aborts the carousel ride and topples off the chair with his mouth agape.

Groaning, he pulls himself up by edge of the desk. The black spot is still there. But it has a completely different shape now. Ned slides back into the chair and watches aghast as the last three pictures superimpose.

For over a minute, he sits motionless. Then he looks at his watch and navigates to the ABC News web-radio channel. As if through cotton wool, he hears the newscaster's voice: "... and three o'clock in the west. This is the news.

SAMPLE 5

9. September

Cape Canaveral, Florida, USA

PAO (Public Affairs Officer): »T minus two minutes.«

LCC (Launch Control Center): “Launch sequencer is go for pressurizing liquid hydrogen.”

The so-called beanie cap – an arm-mounted hood for venting fuel gases that escape at the top of the tank – is retracted.

LCC: “Close your visors.”

Eileen: “You heard the lady. Seal your helmets. They’re about to light the fuse.”

Carlos throws Sally a kiss and flips the visor down. She answers him with a nervous smile. Then she too shuts her helmet. The sounds around her die away. What remains is the buzzing of the voices in her headphones and the whizzing of the breathable air that flows through her suit.

PAO: “T minus 55 seconds.”

OTC: “We are now switching you to internal power.”

Tom: “Roger.”

In the rear of the orbiter, where the fuel cells are located, several relays click.

Sally’s lips tremble with excitement. Her teeth are on the verge of chattering.

The camera’s red light goes on.

Carlos and Sally stick their thumbs up in unison.

PAO: “T minus 31 seconds.”

LCC: "Launch sequencer is go for auto sequence start."

Tom: "Roger."

Eileen: "Sue!"

LCC: "Don't tell me you forgot to turn off the stove."

The commander has to laugh. "No. Listen. I want you to call the parents of the boys from Grand Central and give them our condolences."

LCC: "Will do. Soon as you're in orbit, I'll get on the phone."

Eileen: "Thanks. I owe you one."

Launch director: "I wish you a good flight and a successful mission."

PAO: "T minus 16 seconds."

300,000 gallons of water now pour onto the launch platform from the nearby tank tower. This sound and heat protection measure prevents damage to the spacecraft and platform.

PAO: "T minus 11 seconds."

LCC: "Go for main-engine start."

Sally crosses her arms in front of her chest and presses her legs together.

PAO: "T minus ten seconds."

OTC: "Burnoff system activated."

The B.O.S. begins to spray sparks under the nozzles of the main engines, igniting and burning off prematurely leaked fuel gases.

LCC: "Countdown continues."

PAO: "Nine ... eight ..."

The onboard computers open the fuel valves. The turbopumps suck fuel and oxidizer from the main tank through 16-inch-thick pipes and push the two liquids into the combustion chambers of the three main engines.

PAO: "... seven ... six ..."

LCC: "Ignition."

Fractions of a second apart, the main engines are ignited. With a hoarse roar, the Atlantis awakens from her eight-year sleep and at once begins impatiently to yank at the steel shackles that still chain her to the launch pad.

Rocket and astronauts are flung forward and instantly back into the vertical. If the rocket were to explode at this moment, no stone would be left on another within a radius of several miles.

PAO: "... three ... two ... one ..."

LCC: "Booster ignition."

Violent shaking. At the same time, the cabin is filled with a booming and thudding that extinguishes any further thought in Sally.

Within one tenth of a second, the two solid boosters ignite their full capacity. The thrust of the three main engines has now reached its target level as well.

The spaceship's eruption of brute force triggers an equally brute rush of adrenaline in the astronauts' veins. Sally's body stiffens down to her pinky toe, and her heart beats so hard that she believes her chest is about to burst at any moment.

LCC: "Liftoff!"

The bolts of the eight fasteners are detonated. The Atlantis is free. 3,000 tons of thrust push against 2,000 tons of liftoff weight. For a moment, it seems as if the rocket will never leave the pad. But then, at first only inch by inch, then foot by foot, it slowly moves upward.

1:20 a.m. Night becomes day as the Atlantis escapes the surrounding water vapor cloud in the bright light of the booster flames.

"Go baby, go!" shout the spectators on the beaches, on the causeway, and in the stands, but their voices drown in the rocket's thundering roar.

As soon as the orbiter has cleared the height of the launch tower, the LCC hands over flight control to the Mission Control Center (MCC) in Houston.

Ever faster and ever higher rises the spacecraft, riding on its trail of fire. Equipped with cameras and binoculars, the spectators watch the action, jeering and applauding, trying to cut through the rocket noise with their whistles.

20 seconds after the launch, the rocket turns around its longitudinal axis and continues its ascent in the supine position.

26 seconds after the launch, the rocket reaches the zone of maximum aerodynamic pressure, mandating a throttling of the main engines.

MCC: "Atlantis, throttle down to 75 percent."

Eileen: "We are throttling to 75."

30 seconds after liftoff, the rocket has already burned the bulk of its fuel and thus lost more than two-thirds of its launch weight. The solid fuel in the boosters, which are sort of like high-energy firework rockets, doesn't burn off uniformly for technical reasons, resulting in ever faster and harder thrusts. The astronauts feel as if they keep getting kicked in the butt. The racket in the cabin is so loud that communication between the cockpit and ground control is limited to the necessary minimum.

40 seconds after the launch, the rocket pierces the sound barrier at four miles altitude and reaches the thinner air layers shortly thereafter.

MCC: "Atlantis, throttle up to 105 percent."

Eileen: "Throttling up to 105."

"Old nag, my ass," Tom cheers. "The Atlantis is taking off like a young racehorse!"

Sally too, pushed deep into her seat by the acceleration force, lets her emotions run free and shouts at the top of her lungs. Carlos joins in as well. Only from Gunther, not a single word is heard the entire time.

Two minutes after the launch, the rocket reaches a height of 27 miles at Mach 3.9. The boosters are burned out and get jettisoned. Their overpowering throbbing is replaced by the even rumble of the main engines. And although the spacecraft keeps accelerating and reaches a speed of 5,500 miles per hour and an altitude of 60 miles shortly thereafter, the flight becomes increasingly quiet.

International Space Station ISS

The ISS is flying over the capital of the Russian Federation. Even from a distance of 240 miles, Moscow's star-shaped network of streets is clearly visible. Dmitry Zhukov opens the lid of his flask. Vodka flows out. Under the influence of weightlessness, the liquid is transformed into a cherry-sized ball as if by magic. The space-medicine specialist purses his lips, sucks the ball in, and toasts his hometown. He's been living aboard the space station for 437 days now. One of his main tasks is the investigation of weightlessness-induced vision changes in cosmonauts.

Dmitry watched the shuttle launch via live stream. So now they're on their way to recover the UFO that made him world-famous. Two more days until his landing in Kazakhstan, then a new life begins. First, he will follow an invitation by the Americans to attend the return of the shuttle and then share the media limelight with the Atlantis crew. Unfortunately, there won't be any photos with the UFO satellite, because the object will be transferred right on the runway into a cargo plane and flown out to Nevada. In the notorious Area 51, it will then be disassembled into its parts. The Muscovite shrugs. What's one photo more or less? Magazine and book publishers and film producers are already clamoring for the rights to his story. Dmitry takes another sip. He'll need a manager, a stylist, a chauffeur, auto-graph cards ...

Something's flashing above the Earth's horizon. Dmitry rubs his eyes. The object is rapidly getting bigger and starting to glow ...

**THE LAST
SPACE SHUTTLE MISSION**

