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“In 1963...fifteen-year-old Hillary [Rodham] wrote to NASA asking what subjects to study to prepare for becoming an astronaut. NASA wrote back that no females need apply.”

—Shana Alexander, “The Difficulties of Being Hillary,” *Playboy*, January 1994

* * * *

As the ship's engines reached peak acceleration and settled into a steady background drone, mission specialist Hillary Rodham sat back in her chair and thought about how her life might have been different. It was a common human tendency, she thought, to reflect on one's life aboard trains, planes, buses, and even during an interplanetary voyage aboard the *Sacajawea* /g, now bound for Venus.

The turning point for her, Hillary supposed, had been the letter she had received from a minor NASA functionary during her sophomore year at Maine East High School. She had written to ask how a hopeful high school student should go about preparing to become an astronaut. The response to her earnest

inquiry had fired her imagination and given her a mission—to travel into space, to set foot on the Moon, maybe even explore Mars. The technology that had built the *Sacajawea* /g and the fission-to-fusion engine that powered her, one of the more recent of the technological breakthroughs that had come along in such rapid succession after the first Moon landing, had finally put those early ambitions within her reach.

For now, she could take great pride in being among the first crew of astronauts to travel to Venus. They would not, of course, actually land on that hellish planet with its atmosphere of carbon dioxide and a surface temperature hot enough to melt lead. She and the other three members of the crew would have to settle for orbiting the veiled planet, doing radar mapping of the surface, and sending down two probes. The probes and detailed radar maps would contribute to their knowledge of Earth's sister planet, but the primary purpose of the mission was to test the *Sacajawea* /g on an interplanetary voyage.

If not for L. Bruce Thomerson, an assistant to a deputy director of public relations for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Hillary might not have been aboard this spacecraft. Another career might have claimed her—medicine, perhaps, or even law. Or, despite the urgings of a mother who had always encouraged her daughter not to limit her ambitions, she might have settled for the more conventional life of a suburban housewife in a place much like Park Ridge, Illinois, the Chicago suburb where she and her brothers had grown up.

But L. Bruce Thomerson—seized either by sympathy for her dream or perhaps merely tired of having to discourage yet another idealistic young girl—had deflected her from such possibilities with his typed postscript to the form letter that had told her NASA was not interested in any female astronauts. “No females need apply to the astronaut training program now,” Thomerson had added to the letter, “but that could change in years to come, and there are some signs within the Agency that it may. My advice is to work hard at your high school math and science courses and prepare yourself for college work in those subjects. Keep yourself physically fit. Consider graduate school or a career in one of the military services. Make yourself a credit to your family and community, and you might become just the kind of young woman NASA would proudly accept as one of our astronauts someday.”

There had been detours along the road that had taken her to Houston and the Johnson Space Center and to Cape Canaveral, but Hillary had kept her goal in sight, determined to be among the corps of men and women who would reach for the stars. Her marriage had been one such detour—or so it had seemed for a while. She had promised herself never to completely surrender her own name and identity, to lose her life to her husband's career, yet she had come perilously close to doing that.

There had been all the usual justifications. Marriage, after all, meant compromising, even when it often seemed that it was the woman who had to make most of the compromises. Nurturing her husband, advancing his interests, and encouraging him in his work were worth a few sacrifices. Even at the worst times, she had always, partly for their daughter's sake, rejected the option of divorce. And the most important reason for staying with him, for sometimes looking the other way even when his lapses had hurt her—she loved him. Throughout all the arguments, the demands of his work and hers, the flings with other women that he had not entirely given up even after they were married, she had continued to love him. She had stuck it out, stayed the course, and again Hillary was grateful that she had, even though it had meant postponing her own dream for a while. The time had come when he had needed her, badly.

Now, aboard the *Sacajawea* /g, she wondered if, despite her own accomplishments, her husband's reflected glory might have tipped the scales of NASA in her favor. Hillary thought of the last press conference she and her crewmates had endured before the flight; at least a third of the questions directed to her had been about her husband. Even knowing that her qualifications were the equal of any astronaut's, and superior to many, she still feared that she might always remain in his shadow.

Foolish, she thought, to think that way. She had never been one for self-pity, even during the worst times. She would certainly not indulge in self-doubt while on the most important journey of her life.

* * * *

That the *Sacajawea* /g was going to Venus, rather than to Mars, was the reason all four of the astronauts aboard her were women. The exigencies of politics and public relations had given Hillary and her crewmates this mission, since it had seemed appropriate that the first human beings to travel to Venus—to orbit Venus, at any rate—be female. They would not be the first crew to test the fission-fusion pulse engine that powered the *Sacajawea*; an earlier version of this ship, the *Selene*, had gone to the Moon and back in two days almost a year ago, in 1997. But NASA's first all-female space crew had guaranteed even more media coverage of this mission than of the pulse engine's first test.

“Peak acceleration achieved,” Lieutenant Colonel Evelyn Holder, pilot, Air Force Academy alumna, and commander of this mission, murmured at Hillary's left. Evelyn ran a hand through her short brown hair and leaned back in her chair. “This baby's going to pretty much run herself from now on.”

“Never thought I'd see the day,” Judith Resnik said from behind Evelyn, “when we could get to Venus in less than three weeks.” Judy, an electrical engineer by training, was a slender woman near Hillary's age with a cloud of thick dark hair.

“Never thought I'd see the day,” Victoria Cho muttered, “when I'd be on Oprah and get a photo shoot in *Vanity Fair*.” Victoria was a geologist—or maybe “aphroditologist” was the more appropriate term for her profession during the course of this mission.

“Letterman,” Judy said. “That had to be the worst, doing Letterman.”

Hillary wasn't so sure about that. Exchanging sarcastic ripostes with David Letterman, schmoozing with Jay Leno, Rosie O'Donnell and Barbara Walters, fielding questions from Ted Koppel and Sam Donaldson on “This Week with Diane Sawyer”—none of that had especially bothered her. It was the intrusiveness of many in the media, their refusal to acknowledge that she and her crewmates had any rights to privacy. During the weeks before the mission, when interest in the *Sacajawea* /g and her crew was building to a fever pitch, camera crews and reporters had been camping in front of her house in Houston at all hours. Worse still were the newspaper and magazine articles that, to Hillary's mind anyway, bordered on tabloid journalism. The journalists had ferreted out every personal gossipy detail about her life they could find—how she had met her husband, women who claimed to have had affairs with him during the Seventies, her spiritual beliefs—nothing seemed to be off limits. Even Hillary's daughter, who had done nothing to deserve such intrusiveness other than to have the parents she did, was not spared garbled reports about her love life and parties she had attended on campus and fellow students she had allegedly dated.

Some of the questions asked of Hillary were, she felt strongly, questions no one should have to answer. She had fielded most of them, evaded the most intrusive inquiries, and consoled herself with the thought that she had fulfilled her responsibilities to NASA's public relations staff.

“Could be worse,” Jerrie Cobb had told her. Jerrie, the first American woman in space and the first woman to go to the Moon, was old enough to remember when things had been worse. “Could be a lot worse if nobody cared about the space program. We'd have all the privacy we wanted then.”

Hillary could not imagine people being bored by or indifferent to the space program. Her dream might have begun as a teenaged girl's fantasy, but it had grown into something much larger than herself,

humankind's greatest venture, something that would help make the world a better place. "We are not interested in social reconstruction," she had said in 1969, as the first student to speak at a Wellesley College commencement, "it's human reconstruction...If the experiment in human living doesn't work in this country, in this age, it's not going to work anywhere."

That experiment had been working in recent years, not least because of the space program. That, along with ending the war in Vietnam, had been part of President Hubert Humphrey's legacy; being out from under Lyndon Johnson's shadow had imbued the former vice-president with a boldness few had previously believed he possessed. By the time Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Michael Collins were on their way to the Moon in July of 1969, the summer after Hillary's graduation from Wellesley, the safe withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam was proceeding rapidly, Secretary of State Eugene McCarthy was issuing optimistic announcements about the progress of peace talks several times a week, Senator Edward M. Kennedy had cut short his Massachusetts vacation to migrate between Palm Beach, Florida and the Kennedy Space Center making political hay by reminding people of his brother John F. Kennedy's promise to send men to the Moon, and NASA had announced successful experiments on an ion drive and plans for building reusable shuttlecraft and a permanent space station in Earth orbit.

Hillary's young life, marred by assassinations, violence, an unpopular war, and the increasing animosity between her generation and that of her parents, had suddenly looked brighter. In the wave of good feeling induced by Secretary McCarthy's diplomatic successes and the Apollo 11 Moon landing, people again looked ahead. There was even talk that NASA was at long last seriously considering the recruitment of female astronauts. The summer of 1969 had evoked in Hillary the strange and eerie feeling that a bleak future had somehow been averted, that she and her fellow citizens were at last moving away from the darkness that had threatened to overwhelm them toward the light at the end of the tunnel.

* * * *

A year on Venus, the time it took the veiled planet to make one revolution around the sun, was 224.7 Earth days. The time it took Venus to rotate once on its axis was 243 Earth days, meaning that the period of its rotation was longer than a Venusian year.

"A seriously weird cycle, if you ask me," Victoria Cho said. "Let's face it, the whole damned planet has a major case of PMS." The geologist had apparently heard most of the one-liners about Venus. That much of the humor was sexist didn't surprise Hillary; NASA had remained a male bastion well into the Seventies. Jerrie Cobb and the first group of women to train as astronauts had not been recruited until early 1977, after President John Glenn's inauguration, when even the most misogynistic guys in NASA had finally concluded that long sojourns on the planned space stations and lunar outposts almost required the presence of women.

Victoria set down her cup of coffee and gazed at the image of Venus on her laptop. "Leave it to a female," she went on, "to get the simplest things ass-backwards." This was a reference to Venus's retrograde motion, to the fact that it turned on its axis from east to west. That Uranus also rotated in a retrograde direction was ignored in that particular joke. Once Venus, the brilliant morning and evening star, had been seen as a celestial embodiment of female beauty. Now she seemed to represent, for some, female peculiarities, eccentricities, and just plain orneriness.

"I think I've heard them all by now," Hillary said. She and Victoria sat at the small table where the astronauts ate their meals. The constant thrust of the *Sacajawea* /g's engines provided the one-g gravitational effect that kept their coffee in their cups and their butts in their chairs; they would not have to deal with the weightlessness of free fall until they were in orbit around Venus.

Victoria looked up from her computer. "Look, after this trip, we'll probably each get a Venusian crater

named after us.”

A crater called Rodham, Hillary thought. That was something to look forward to, as long as her crater didn't become yet another joke.

* * * *

To pursue her goal of becoming an astronaut had meant standing up to her father. Hugh Rodham had not been an easy man to defy. He had died almost six years ago, and Hillary still felt that loss deeply, but her father had also been a hard and unbending man.

“So,” Hugh Rodham had said to her at Wellesley, “you've made up your mind.”

“Yes,” Hillary said. They were in her dormitory room, packing up her things. Her father had driven the long distance from Chicago to Wellesley to see her graduate, leaving her mother with her brothers Tony and Hugh, Jr. in Park Ridge.

“Heard you're going to some conference in Washington soon. Young leaders of the future, they called it, whatever that means.” Her solidly Republican father sounded suspicious, as if she had been invited to join some sort of leftist cabal.

“It's sponsored by the League of Women Voters, Dad.” One of the reporters who had interviewed her after her speech must have told him before she could. She had decided to go, even though the event seemed designed largely for young people who aspired to political careers. She might meet some people who could one day help her at NASA. Politics had its uses.

“More money in being a doctor,” he said, “than in what you plan to do.” She thought of the game they had played when she was a child, when her father had tutored her in the statistical mysteries of the *Chicago Tribune's* stock quotations and had drilled her in how to choose good investments. “Going to medical school, or even law school, would make more practical sense if you have to have a career. You were talking about being a doctor all last year.”

It was true. Hillary had temporarily lost sight of her goal during the tumult of 1968, with its shocking assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy and the rioting in Chicago during the Democratic convention, when she had gone into the city by train only to witness kids her age being beaten by police. The wounds inflicted on society by such tragedy and disorder, especially on the poor and disenfranchised who had so few to fight for their interests, were intolerable to her. She would go to medical school, perhaps at Harvard or Yale, and specialize in pediatrics. She would set up a clinic in the inner city, perhaps in one of the Chicago neighborhoods she had visited with the Reverend Donald Jones and the youth group of Park Ridge's United Methodist Church. Her patients would be the impoverished urban blacks and migrant workers for whom she and her more fortunate friends had organized baby-sitting pools and food drives.

But such musings had been only a brief detour from her long-held aim. Doing medical and biochemical research was also a way to help people, and if she became an astronaut someday, she would have a public forum—a bully pulpit of sorts—from which she could inspire others to do the good works that could change society.

“More money in being a doctor,” her father repeated as he sat down on one of the beds.

“Maybe so, but I've been offered a real opportunity—I have to grab it. Things are changing, Dad.”

“Things are changing, all right, and not always for the better. Dick Nixon would have had an honorable peace with victory, not this namby-pamby time-to-reach-out-and-rebuild crapola. You wouldn't have seen Nixon and Agnew acting like Humphrey and Muskie, running around the country apologizing to a lot of long-haired kids for—”

“Dad,” Hillary said, keeping her temper in check, “I don't want to talk about politics.” Politics by itself, she had finally concluded, would not solve anything. President Humphrey, with all his talk of reconciliation, would be getting nowhere without the promise of technological feats that would mark the beginning of a new age. Businesses with new technologies would create new wealth; people would lift their gaze from this small planet to what lay beyond it.

Only such a dream could rouse what was best in her species. Only the prospect of great technological advances, and the wealth they would produce for everyone, could keep her country from tearing itself apart. At last the rich and powerful might be able to reach out to the less fortunate without having to fear the loss of what they had. The wretched of the world would have a true hope of improving their lot.

“You're stubborn, Hillary,” her father said. “You won't change your mind, I can see that.” He had said the same thing when his once Republican daughter had come home from college and declared herself a Democrat.

Hillary sat down next to him and put her hand on his arm. “You'll be proud of me. It's a great school. I'll be one of the first women to go there.”

“Must not be much of a school, then. Maybe they lowered their standards.”

Hugh Rodham had always belittled her and her brothers that way. “Must be an easy school you go to,” he had muttered while perusing her report card of straight A's. “Must not be much of a college,” he had said when she was accepted at Wellesley. His words had spurred her on instead of discouraging her; she had understood what he really meant: It's hard out there. The world is a tough place, and it's my job to make you tough enough to deal with it. Being second-best isn't good enough; you'd better aim high.

“Dad,” she said softly, “you're talking about Caltech. I couldn't have done any better. And Caltech doesn't lower standards for anybody.”

* * * *

Venus was a world of volcanoes. They ranged from small shield volcanoes built up slowly by repeated flows of lava to huge shield volcanoes that were hundreds of miles across. Some were flat-topped pancake domes with steep sides, while still others, unique to Venus, were circular coronae surrounded by rings of fractures and ridges.

“Here's the deal,” Victoria Cho had explained to the reporters at the first press conference for the *Sacajawea* /g's crew. “Like, some ninety per cent of the surface of Venus is volcanoes. You've got the biggest variety of volcanic forms there as anywhere else in the solar system. You've got these big Hawaiian-style jobs like Sapas Mons, and then you've got these features we call coronae that aren't like anything on Earth—the coronae are those big circular forms you see on the screen behind me. Some of them have lava flows spreading out, some have shield volcanoes inside them. Most of these coronae aren't so big, but there's a few like Artemis Corona that are way humongous—about fifteen hundred miles across. And in addition to all of this serious weirdness, you've got these big impact craters that look as if somebody just plopped them down there at the last minute—the last minute, in geological terms, meaning less than a billion years ago.”

Victoria folded her arms. “Now about ten per cent of the Venusian surface is this weird terrain we call tesserae, those bizarre, rugged deformed-looking expanses of really wrinkled land, and they're the oldest places on the surface of Venus. It's like the rest of the planet got flooded by lava from volcanoes, and the tesserae are islands. So here's what I want to know. Did the whole surface look like that once, all deformed by tectonic activity, or is it just that the tesserae are so old that they're, like, all cracked and wrinkled from age?”

As wrinkled as some old hag who's spent too much time at the beach, Hillary thought, remembering another crack she had overheard among the geologists. Volcanoes erupting from time to time, atmospheric pressure so intense on the Venusian surface that the lower atmosphere of carbon dioxide was suspected to be as much a liquid as a gas, the extreme heat, the poisonous sulfuric acid in the clouds—all of it made her think that giving Venus's topographic features female names was appropriate. The planet seemed as angry as women ought to be after centuries of male oppression that had often been as oppressive as the Venusian atmosphere. Venus could almost be seen as the planetary manifestation of a just female rage.

* * * *

Hillary finished testing the crew's latest blood samples in the *Sacajawea* /g's small laboratory, then left the lab. She was in effect the ship's doctor, given her degrees in biochemistry and the paramedical training she had acquired during her years of training with NASA. Along with some biological experiments, she took blood tests, checked blood pressure, analyzed urine samples, monitored cardiac function, and made other medical tests and observations. She did not expect to see any signs of calcium loss or muscle atrophy until they were in orbit around Venus and again weightless, but they were not likely to be in free fall long enough for any such loss to become significant.

Hillary's cubicle was a small chamber aft that was about the size of a large closet. Inside were a narrow bed, a flat wall screen on which she could call up movies, television programs, and other visual material from the *Sacajawea* /g's databases, and a sound system on which she could listen to selections from the ship's music library. She let the door slide shut behind her and stretched out on the bed, then impulsively reached inside her pocket for her devotional.

The crew of the *Sacajawea* /g had been allowed to bring along a few personal items. Among the few possessions Hillary had aboard were a Chicago Cubs baseball cap, some favorite photos of her daughter Chelsea Michelle, and her pocket Methodist devotional of Scriptural passages.

Hillary had begun carrying a devotional with her ever since her teen years, when Donald Jones, her church's youth minister, had opened the eyes of his privileged white charges to the unfairness and cruelty of the world. He had believed that a true Christian had to be involved with the world. Overcoming alienation, searching for and giving meaning to modern life—that was the way to redemption; doing good works and ministering to the troubled and less fortunate was her duty.

She had done what she could, venturing out of the citadels of Wellesley and Caltech to tutor children in Boston's Roxbury or Los Angeles's Watts, helping to organize a medical clinic and child care program for some of Houston's working poor. Always she had felt that she could have done more, that she had compromised, that she had often placed too much importance on worldly things. Still, if she had not taken some trouble to make what had turned out to be lucrative investments, her husband, always oblivious to petty economic concerns, would have done little to provide them with more security. The dream of space had drawn her, but also the knowledge that, as an astronaut, she would be able to touch more lives and have a greater public forum. She had drifted away from her childhood faith, but it had helped in forming her, in making her feel her obligation to others.

Her husband had never understood her spiritual beliefs, such as they were. To him, science and religion were adversaries. “I can live with doubt and uncertainty and not knowing,” he had often said. “It's better to live not knowing than to have an answer that might be wrong. I don't know how you can think this whole universe is just some stage where some God's watching people struggle with good and evil. Doubting, admitting our ignorance—those are our tools as scientists.”

They had argued about a lot of things. She had almost always lost the arguments, but went down fighting. Now she would give anything to be able to argue with him again. Hillary closed her eyes for a moment and felt the pain of his loss once more.

* * * *

Unedited portion of interview with Rita Bedosky by Jane Pauley for “The Voyage of the *Sacajawea* /g,” report to be aired February 11, 1998 on “Dateline NBC”.

RITA BEDOSKY: You are going to edit this?

JANE PAULEY: Yes, of course.

BEDOSKY: You'll have to—my friends say I'm kind of a motormouth.

PAULEY (clears throat): We're speaking to Dr. Rita Bedosky, who was one of astronaut Hillary Rodham's closest friends when they were both graduate students at the California Institute of Technology. Dr. Bedosky is now a professor of physics at American University in Washington, D.C.

BEDOSKY: Which is kind of weird, when you consider it. I always thought that if one of us was going to end up in Washington, it'd be Hillary. She was always more political than most of us.

PAULEY: She organized the first Caltech women's group, didn't she?

BEDOSKY: Sure did, and we sure as hell needed one. There were so few of us back then—we really relied on those once-a-week meetings for moral support. First it was just the grad students, but when they started admitting women as undergraduates, we were there to look out for them. And it was Hillary who saw that we could have some valuable allies if we brought in the secretaries and office workers and the cafeteria staff and the cleaning women. With all those Caltech guys, we women had to stick together.

PAULEY: So it was rough for you.

BEDOSKY: Imagine the Pope and the Catholic Church having to deal with the first women in the College of Cardinals. We were intruding on the all-male priesthood of science. We didn't belong there, the way some saw it, or else we were freaks. It's a lot different at Caltech now, but with us, about the best you could hope for was to be treated as a kind of honorary man.

PAULEY: Did Hillary Rodham, coming into that extremely male environment from a women's college, ever get discouraged?

BEDOSKY: If she did, she never let on. Hillary was about the most together person I'd ever met, even back then. She was kind of driven, if you want to know the truth, and she knew exactly what she wanted to do. She was going to get her doctorate in biochemistry, and then she was going to teach and do medical research on calcium deficiencies and bone loss and osteoporosis, because she guessed that would give her a better shot at being an astronaut someday. And she was right, given the physiological problems the early astronauts developed on *Skylab One*, before the Doughnut—excuse me,

Skylab-Mir Two —was built. And even with a revolving space station... (pause)

PAULEY: She told you back then that she wanted to be an astronaut?

BEDOSKY: Yeah. It was something she basically kept to herself, but I could tell she really meant it. She'd drive up to JPL—the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena—every time she had a free moment, to see what the latest unmanned probes were sending back. Sometimes she was with her husband, when he was doing some consulting there, but other times she went by herself. Met some important people there, too—like I said, she was always more political than the rest of us.

PAULEY: You were with Hillary when she met her husband, weren't you?

BEDOSKY: Oh, yeah. That was in the spring of 1970. Hillary and I were sitting in the Greasy—in the cafeteria, having some coffee. He was sitting at a table near us with some other students, talking and occasionally beating out a rhythm on the tabletop with his hands—he played the bongo drums, you know—and he kept staring at Hillary. This wasn't the first time, either. About a week before, in the library, he was staring at her, too. I remember wondering why, because Hillary wasn't really his type—he was more into California blondes, your basic babe type. Hillary had started lightening her hair some, but about all she ever wore were sweatshirts and jeans or loose dresses with Peter Pan collars, and she was still wearing thick Coke-bottle glasses, but obviously he must have noticed *something* that interested him. So he's staring at her, and she's staring right back.

PAULEY: And then what happened?

BEDOSKY: Hillary said, "I'm going to go over and speak to him," and before I could say anything, she got up and walked over and said to him, "Look, if you're going to keep staring at me and I'm going to keep staring back, I think we should at least know each other. I'm Hillary Rodham." And then she put out her hand.

PAULEY: Her daughter told me that her father used to tell that story to their friends.

BEDOSKY: I think that's what got to him, that Hillary had that much chutzpah and just came right up and introduced herself. So he said, "Well, I'm Dick Feynman." But of course she already knew that.

* * * *

"That's Chelsea with her aunt Joan, Dick's sister," Hillary said to Judy Resnik as the other woman sat down on Hillary's bunk. "And this photo was taken during her freshman year at M.I.T." Chelsea Michelle Feynman strongly resembled her father, with the same lean body, unruly hair, and slightly goofy smile. There was so little of Hillary in her daughter that it was almost as though she had been no more than a receptacle and incubator for her husband's seed, as medieval physicians had believed women were.

"And she's going into physics," Judy said, "just like her father and her aunt Joan. It must run in the family."

"Dick was a great father," Hillary said. "He liked being a father so much that he wanted another child right away. We kept trying, and we were thinking of adopting when—" She paused. Even after all the years that had passed, she found it painful to remember that time. "He'd be so proud of Chelsea now," she finished. Her daughter, she knew, had saved her marriage.

* * * *

Unedited portion of interview with Daria Derrick by Deborah Norville for "Inside Edition," to be aired

February 12, 1998.

DARIA DERRICK: It was after Hillary moved into Dick's house. Supposedly she was still sharing an apartment with her friend Rita, but that was just for cover—everybody knew she was living with Richard Feynman.

DEBORAH NORVILLE: He'd broken up with you by then?

DERRICK: Oh, yeah. Not that we were ever really going together. Dick was a real Lothario. I always knew he wasn't serious about me, but... (pauses).

NORVILLE: Yes?

DERRICK: When I was with him, when he was focusing all his attention—all that high-powered genius—on me, it was like I was the only woman in the world. He might have been this Nobel Prize-winning physicist, but he was also a very sexy guy.

NORVILLE: So you went over to his house to get something you'd left there.

DERRICK: Yeah, and Hillary answered the door. She'd only been living with him for a couple of months, but she already looked different—her hair was a lot blonder, for one thing, and she was wearing contact lenses. She was definitely looking more like a California girl—probably thought that was the way to keep him interested.

NORVILLE: Richard Feynman had a lot of unhappiness in his personal life, didn't he?

DERRICK: You can say that again. I still remember the night he pulled out this old battered suitcase with all these old letters and photographs from his first wife—Arline, the one who died in the Forties from tuberculosis. I realized then that I could never be what she was to him, or what his third wife had been to him, either. He never talked much about his second wife.

NORVILLE: The one who divorced him during the Fifties on the grounds of mental cruelty?

DERRICK: The one who claimed he drove her crazy with his bongo drums and with doing calculus problems in bed. I think he knew that marriage was a mistake, but Arline—Arline was always going to be perfect in his mind, because she passed away so young. And Gweneth, his third wife—if she hadn't died in that car accident, I think he would have stayed happily married to her—she was really good for him. That's what one of his old friends told me, anyway—she loved him, but she was sort of independent-minded, too. Maybe that's what attracted him to Hillary. I think maybe he married her to keep her from moving out. She wanted a serious relationship, and I guess he was ready for marriage again by then.

NORVILLE: Did Hillary tell you that herself?

DERRICK: Oh, no. She didn't talk about personal stuff with anybody, and I wasn't exactly her bosom buddy. I mean, she had to have known Dick had a roving eye, but she must have forgiven him for it. After all, she was married to one of the most brilliant men in the world, and that's worth more than monogamy, isn't it?

* * * *

“I'm getting married,” Hillary said to her parents over the phone.

“Who's the lucky young man?” her mother asked.

Barely pausing for breath between sentences, Hillary explained that she was going to marry a man who was almost thirty years older than she was and that this would be his fourth marriage, quickly adding that he was the world-renowned physicist Richard Feynman, that he had worked on the Manhattan Project to develop the first atomic bomb during World War II, and that he had won the Nobel Prize in physics for his work in quantum electrodynamics in 1965.

A long silence ensued. “He's a Jew, isn't he,” her father said at last.

“Well, yes. He's from a Jewish family. Dick's not very religious, though. If you must know, he's basically an atheist.” Hillary heard her mother sigh. “We want to get married before the fall semester starts, and I hope you'll both come out here for the wedding. Dick's mother and sister will be there, too, but we're not making a big fuss.”

“A physicist,” her father said, still sounding too bewildered to get really angry. “Probably an absent-minded professor.”

“He won the Nobel Prize, Dad.”

“There's money in that, isn't there? Did he put it into some good investments?”

“He used some of it to buy a beach house in Mexico.”

“Well, Hillary, if you'd told me you were marrying some hillbilly from the Ozarks, I couldn't be more surprised.” Hugh Rodham heaved a sigh. “You're of age. I can't stop you. I just hope you know what you're doing.”

“You will finish your doctorate, won't you?” her mother asked. “You won't drop out.”

“Of course I'll finish it,” Hillary replied. Her marriage, unlike that of her parents, would be a true partnership, a relationship of equals, a meeting of minds. It occurred to her only later that being the wife of Richard Feynman would automatically give her a status it might otherwise have taken her years to attain.

* * * *

“Shit,” Victoria Cho said, not for the first time.

Hillary floated up from her chair as the *Sacajawea* /g fell around Venus. They had been in free fall for almost thirty-six hours now, and had launched the two probes, one toward the area of Maxwell Montes, the other toward an unusual volcano near Artemis Chasma. Both probes had failed less than an hour after entering the atmosphere.

Over by the viewscreen above the pilot's station, Evelyn Holder was listening to Sally Ride, the capcom for this mission. “The imaging team isn't happy about the probes, either,” Sally was saying, “but we'll still have the radar mapping, and the most important thing is...everything else is nominal, everything else is a-okay.”

The *Sacajawea* /g had begun to decelerate on schedule, gradually slowing during the second leg of their journey to Venus. They had been orbiting Venus for less than an hour before congratulatory messages

were coming in from the president and the two surviving former presidents, John Glenn and Robert Dole.

“Everything's a-okay,” Victoria muttered, “except for the fucking probes. I was really looking forward to what those babies might tell us.”

Hillary drifted over to the disappointed geologist. “Look at it this way,” she said. “At least you weren't the poor bastard who had to go to the Kremlin and give Commander Lebed the bad news.” The Russians had designed and built the two probes. “And there's bound to be another Venus mission before too long, with everything going this well.”

Victoria smiled, then propelled herself toward the small screen showing the radar imaging of the Venusian surface. Hillary's stomach lurched, then grew calmer. Evelyn was apparently over the worst of her spacesickness. Victoria, also trained as a pilot, would not have to bring them home.

They were all falling inside the *Sacajawea* /g as the ship fell around Venus. Hillary found herself thinking of how Dick had explained gravity to the five-year old Chelsea with a long stick and two lead balls dangling from a slowly twisting fiber.

Dick had not been the kind of father that Hugh Rodham had been to her; she could not imagine her own father crawling around on the floor with her or telling her detailed stories about an imaginary world of people so small that they could live in the cracks of wooden planks. “Remember, kiddo,” Dick had said to his daughter in what Hillary always thought of as his Brooklyn cabdriver's voice, “there's always plenty of room at the bottom of things. You'd be amazed how much room there is, as long as something's tiny enough.” Hugh Rodham, with his reverence for authority, would never have told her what Dick had told Chelsea about her arithmetic. “I don't care what the teacher told you,” he had said. “There isn't just one right way to figure out the answer, there's a lot of ways. You want to solve the problem, you gotta try to do it different ways and see what works. If it isn't the teacher's way, so what?” Sometimes, after delivering yet another criticism of accepted wisdom, he would stare at Hillary, as if daring her to object.

She knew he considered her stodgy and conservative. He could indulge his curiosity by skinny-dipping in Esalen's hot tubs, attending an est conference on quantum field theory, or floating around in a sensory deprivation tank, but somebody had to deal with practical matters. Someone had to study what investments to make, make certain Dick got paid what he deserved for his lectures, consulting jobs, and books, and placate the Caltech administrators and faculty he annoyed with his refusal to tend to the mundane and distracting business of writing grant proposals and attending faculty meetings. Someone had to take care of all that if he was to be free to ponder the nature of the universe. She had been, to use a metaphor drawn from her Methodist youth, the Martha to his Mary.

He was a child, still free to question and wonder, a child who was a genius, who outshone even the brilliant minds of his Caltech colleagues. As she swam weightlessly toward the *Sacajawea* /g's starboard side, Hillary remembered how her husband had floated above the constraints that bound others. A partnership, a bond between equals—that was the kind of marriage she had sought, but it was clear from the start that Richard Feynman had few mental equals.

It was a privilege, an honor, to be married to such a genius. Sometimes she had believed that. At other times, she had seen it as the kind of rationalization women had always grasped at for consolation.

After acquiring her Ph.D., Hillary had accepted a position in the biology department of U.C.L.A., content to be removed from the more competitive, high-powered, and intellectually demanding atmosphere of Caltech. It was easier to use her political skills to manage the practical side of Dick's career while being on the faculty of another university, if only to avoid conflict of interest. She was free to

teach her classes and do her research without having to feel that those she worked with might be comparing her more conventional mind with the brilliance of her husband's.

* * * *

"It's still experimental eye surgery," Hillary had told Dick one summer evening in 1977, as they sat on a Mexican beach with Chelsea, "but I've read all the medical studies. With photorefractive keratectomy, there is a risk—I could end up with even worse vision—but there's about a two-thirds chance of ending up with twenty-twenty vision, and even twenty-forty would be good enough."

He was listening to her with his characteristic mixed expression of curiosity and amusement. "Is it worth it?" he asked.

"Well, it isn't cheap."

"I wasn't asking about the cost, I was asking about the risk. Is it worth taking the chance and spending all that dough just so you won't have to wear contacts?"

Hillary watched as their three-year-old daughter patted down another section of a sand structure that was beginning to look like a cyclotron. "That isn't why I want the surgery," she murmured. "NASA wouldn't accept anybody as nearsighted as I am for astronaut training. If the operations are successful, I'll have a chance."

That was the first time she had confessed her long-held ambition to him. President John Glenn's recent speech, in which he had recanted the testimony he had given before a Congressional committee in 1962, had made her old dream flower inside her once more. "I argued back then," the president had said, "that women shouldn't go into space, that it was the job of men to take risks exploring the unknown. As my wife and daughter recently reminded me, I can be mighty short-sighted for a guy who used to be a pilot. It's time for women to join men in exploring the frontier of space."

"We'd have to move to Houston if they accepted me," Hillary went on, "but any university in Texas would jump at the chance to have you on the faculty. They'd probably pay you a lot more than Caltech."

Her husband said, "Let's see how your eye surgery goes first."

That night, he ran for the bathroom in their beach house and vomited. That autumn, still recovering from the first operation on her left eye, she finally persuaded him to consult his doctor, who found nothing. In the spring of 1978, with 20/20 vision in her left eye and her right eye healing rapidly, Hillary finally got him to a specialist recommended by her colleagues at U.C.L.A.

Dick had a tumor of the abdomen. The surgeon who operated on him told her it was myxoid liposarcoma, a rare form of cancer that had already destroyed his spleen and one of his kidneys. He had an 11 to 41 per cent chance of surviving five years, depending on which study she looked at. It was highly unlikely that he would live another ten years.

Hillary forced herself to ignore two possibilities, neither of which she would ever mention to him. The first was that his work at Los Alamos on the atomic bomb might have been responsible for his disease. The second was that, had she not been so preoccupied with her eye surgery and her applications and interviews with NASA, she might have noticed the slight bulge at his waist earlier, might have pushed him into seeing the physicians and specialists soon enough for them to have saved him.

* * * *

Hillary had not dreamed of her husband for some time, but now, drifting between sleep and wakefulness as the *Sacajawea* /g orbited Venus, she found herself standing on a sunlit beach, watching him as he waded in the surf. She had dreamed of him almost every night after his death, and the dreams had convinced her that he was still alive, that the recurring tumors and the second rare type of cancer that had struck at his bone marrow and the failure of his remaining kidney had never happened, had been mistaken diagnoses, until she woke up and once again remembered.

Everything she knew, all the research she had done, was powerless to help him. That he had lived for another ten years after his diagnosis had been beating the odds. What had kept him going was his work, his feeling that there was still so much to teach and to learn, so many more ways to find and use the language of mathematics to convey the simple and beautiful laws of physical reality.

She had withdrawn her application to NASA, devoting herself to making his remaining time as carefree as possible. The thought that NASA might be unlikely to welcome as an astronaut a woman who would disrupt the life of a stricken man, especially a man who was one of the world's greatest physicists, crossed her mind for only a moment, and made her despise herself for thinking it.

“You know,” he had told her a few years before his death, “I don't think we'd still be married if we didn't have Chelsea. There wouldn't have been enough to hold us together.” Cruel as the statement seemed, she knew it to be the truth. Rooted in conventionality, toiling at her own work and taking care of all the practical matters he saw as distractions, she knew that they had begun to drift apart even in the earliest days of their marriage. Having their daughter had linked his quicksilver brilliance to her stolidity; he had loved Chelsea enough to again feel some love for Hillary. She could look at their child and see what she herself might have become growing up in a different world, a world of sun and sand and a father who could reveal the wonder and beauty of that world.

After his death, she gave him the simple burial he had wanted, with no ritual and only herself, their daughter, and Dick's sister and one of his cousins to mourn him at the graveside. A month after that, his friends and colleagues at Caltech held a memorial gathering in his honor. Hillary found herself in a large auditorium packed with fellow physicists, graduate students, former students, engineers from the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, old girl friends, and eccentrics Dick had met on the beach or in bars and cafes while playing his bongo drums. The written eulogy she had prepared suddenly seemed inadequate; it was conventional, sentimental, stodgy—all the things her husband was not.

She was to be the first to speak. She left her written remembrance on her chair; she would speak from her heart.

Chelsea watched her with Dick's eyes as Hillary walked to the podium, looked into the sea of faces, and said, “Toward the end of Dick's life, my dear husband and I used to talk about—pardon the cliché—the meaning of life. I can think of nothing more appropriate now than to offer some of his own remarks on that topic.” He had expressed such sentiments often enough, and the outlook they expressed was so central to his life, that she could easily recall his words. “He would say, ‘I have approximate answers and different degrees of certainty about things, but I'm not totally sure of anything and there's a lot I don't know, such as whether it means anything at all to ask why we're here. But I can live with that, and die with it, too. I'm not scared by not knowing, by being in a universe without any purpose, and as far as I can tell, that's how it is. It doesn't frighten me. I'd rather admit I don't know than grab at some answer that might be wrong.’”

Hillary paused, afraid for a moment that she might cry again. “That was how he lived his life, and that's what he believed right up to the end.” The certainties of her Methodist youth were of little use now; Dick would have been furious at her and disappointed in her if she had invoked them. Over the years, some of

his doubt and uncertainty had crept into her view of the universe. Her occasional prayers and Scriptural readings were more a nostalgic reminder of a comfort her spiritual beliefs had once provided than an affirmation of faith. She wondered if she ever would have come to that kind of agnosticism without her husband's influence. Against everything she had been taught in childhood, she could even believe that her doubts might have made her a better person. There had always existed in her a tendency to self-righteousness; doubt made her more conscious of her failings.

Hillary bowed her head. She would honor her husband's memory by not praying for him.

* * * *

Hillary strapped herself into her seat. "I don't know about you," Evelyn said from her pilot's seat, "but I'm a little scared." It was an admission none of them would have made had any male astronauts been present. The ship's drive might fail, stranding them in orbit around Venus. The *Sacajawea* /g might accelerate until the midpoint of their return journey and never decelerate. If the mission failed, it would almost make certain that they would all have Venusian geological features named after themselves, which wasn't exactly consoling.

"Maybe someday, people will settle Venus," Chelsea had told Hillary in a phone call from M.I.T. a couple of months ago.

"No way," Hillary had said. "You'd need a completely different planet."

"That's what I meant, Mom." Chelsea had gone on to speak of terraforming—engineering algae to seed the sulfuric clouds, finding a way to shield Venus from the sun so that it could cool, maybe even using the nanotechnology Richard Feynman had envisioned, twenty years before there was even a name for that field, to build microscopic machines capable of altering the planetary environment on a molecular level. Hillary had suddenly wished that Chelsea's father could have seen what his daughter had become, how much of him there still was in her.

She was suddenly overwhelmed by a vision of Venus as a future home for humankind. A terraformed Venus would not isolate colonists and their descendants from Earth, as a colonized Mars would through the necessary adaptation to a much lower gravity. People would come and go freely. She remembered all the stories of Venus she had read as a girl, from the swampy planet of the earliest tales to the vision of hell transformed into a new garden.

"All systems go," Evelyn murmured. "Girls, we're ready to roll." For a moment, Hillary had the sensation of being outside herself, as though everything around her were no more than a dimly imagined possibility that had never come to pass, and then the thrust of the *Sacajawea* /g's engines pressed her against her seat.

They were on their way home—but with the success of this mission, Hillary was sure that Earth would not remain humankind's only home for long. The Moon's research outposts would soon welcome settlers, and there would be Mars to explore. As Venus shrank on the rear view screen, Hillary recalled the fifteen-year-old girl in Park Ridge who had dreamed of becoming an astronaut, and knew that in spite of the setbacks and delays, the years of postponing her dream and finally winning a place as an astronaut and then of waiting for a chance at a mission, that all of the hard work and the sacrifices and the disappointments had been worth it.

She had kept faith with her younger self.

* * * *

Evelyn Holder had brought her husband to the White House reception and dinner in honor of the four astronauts. Judith Resnik was accompanied by Senator Bob Kerrey, who was rumored to be getting more serious about her; if he did decide to run for president, having an astronaut as a wife could only help. Victoria Cho had her good friend Ellison Onizuka, fellow astronaut and space station veteran, in tow.

Hillary stood with her daughter, smiling and nodding as she shook hands and exchanged pleasantries with the other guests. Chelsea Feynman, who had given up her usual uniform of jeans and sweatshirts for a long blue silk dress, was holding the medal that the president had presented to Hillary. She proudly opened the small box to show the medal to the vice-president, as she had earlier when former president Glenn had asked to see it.

“You know,” the vice-president was saying, “I truly envy your mother. I would have loved to have been an astronaut myself. You should be very proud of your mother.”

“I am,” Chelsea said.

Hillary smiled as the vice-president turned over her medal to read the inscription on the back; he was both a space policy wonk and a big supporter of NASA, so she had resolved to be as pleasant to him as possible, despite his reputation as something of an opportunist and a hatchet man for the president. At any rate, Vice-President Newt Gingrich seemed on his best behavior tonight.

“To Hillary Rodham Feynman,” Vice-President Gingrich read from the medal, “for the courage she has shown in the exploration of space.” He beamed at her and her daughter. Hillary remembered how, a year after Dick's death, she had impulsively added his last name to her own on her application to NASA. In public, she was still known by her own name, the name she had kept throughout her marriage, but in NASA's records and any awards she received for her service as an astronaut, she would always be listed as Hillary Rodham Feynman. Her feminist soul was at peace with that; her husband, perhaps in more ways than even she realized, had helped to make a better space program possible. His consultations with the NASA scientists and engineers at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, she was sure, had saved the space agency many mistakes, perhaps even disasters.

The First Lady, taller in person than she seemed on TV and with a mass of attractive curly brown hair, bore down on them, apparently about to rescue Hillary and Chelsea from the vice-president. Mary Steenburgen Clinton might give the appearance of a soft-spoken Southern lady, but it was widely believed that her husband might never have risen to become president without her. Not long after marrying the up-and-coming young Arkansan politician William Jefferson Clinton in the early Eighties, Mary Clinton had given up a promising career as an actress to become her husband's closest advisor and unofficial campaign manager. A charming but disorganized, undisciplined, skirt-chasing, and only intermittently successful politician had gone on to win election as his state's governor, as a senator, and finally as president in 1992. Mary Clinton's gentle demeanor, it was said, was only part of a public performance that concealed a sharp political intelligence and the well-honed instincts of a female Machiavelli.

“That Bill Clinton was always a right smart young feller,” one of the president's old mentors from Arkansas had said in a television interview, after President Clinton had won a second term by a landslide, “but it was Mary who done whipped him into shape.” Hillary could well believe that. President Bill Clinton, despite his many accomplishments in office, struck her—in his public persona, anyway—as the kind of charming rogue, weak at the center, who might never have won over the American public had he not been preceded in his office by the upright John Glenn and the dour Bob Dole. He could be grateful that people had grown tired of such rectitude and now wanted to enjoy the fruits of prosperity with a

more congenial and lax chief executive.

“Ms. Rodham,” Mary Steenburgen Clinton murmured as she shook Hillary's hand, “I am so glad you and your daughter could both be with us. I must tell you that of all the dinners we've had in the White House so far, I have looked forward to this one the most.”

Hillary very much doubted that, but the sincerity and warmth in the First Lady's voice was enough to win her over. “You gave a wonderful performance in ‘Time After Time,’” she responded. “It's one of my favorite films.”

“That British dude who played H.G. Wells in it wasn't bad, either,” Chelsea added.

Hillary glanced at her daughter, who probably didn't know that it was widely rumored that Mary Steenburgen Clinton had been romantically involved with her leading man in that movie, which had been made before her marriage to Bill Clinton, but the First Lady was still smiling.

“Malcolm McDowell, you mean,” Mary Clinton said. “No, he wasn't bad at all.”

This President and his wife had a reputation for informality, and people were already moving toward the entrance to the dining room in no discernible order. Hillary lingered near her daughter, who was answering Ms. Clinton's queries about her postgraduate work and her life in Boston, uncertain of what to do now, when she felt a hand gently touch her elbow.

“Ms. Rodham?”

Hillary turned and found herself looking up into the eyes of the President of the United States. He had shaken her hand impersonally at the earlier ceremony, when the members of the Venus mission had been presented with their medals, but now his gaze was definitely focused on her. With that broad grin and that twinkle in his eye, she could almost believe that he was flirting with her, unlikely as that was with his wife standing nearby.

“Mr. President,” Hillary said.

Bill Clinton took her right hand and pressed it between both of his. “You and your sister astronauts have accomplished a wonderful thing,” he said, “traveling to Venus and back. I've always had great admiration for brave and brilliant women, and it's a privilege to have you all as our guests.”

He was a charmer, all right.

Their eyes locked...and then the moment passed.

The president moved away and gracefully took the First Lady's arm.

Chelsea glanced at Hillary and smiled.

Hillary followed her daughter toward the White House dining room, where the tables waited beneath the glittering chandeliers.

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