

The tape plays, with Tom Jackson taking no formalities or time before beginning.

TOM

Hi. Everyone. Tom Jackson. I'm kinda. . . tired today, honestly. It took a lot out of me to talk at all today. I don't think it's the lowering oxygen levels either, I think it's just where I'm at. It's pretty late at night right now, but, you know, who cares about the time here cause. . . when day and night are both artificial, it's hard to tell when time is passing, and-. It's a struggle to do much more than let time pass.

I feel angry and alone and I think I've felt like this for a long time.

Tom says that last bit like a confession. Hallelujah, he supposes.

TOM

And that all makes this countdown hard. Oh, speaking of, I've been out here 527 days now, so I've got. . .

He leans away from the tape recorder to see check.

TOM

. . . let's see, the oxygen tanks say 6 more days left.

What's that old Dr. Seuss quote? "How did it get to be so late so soon? It's night before it's afternoon."

He repeats, no longer quoting, now truly asking.

TOM

How did it get to be so late so soon?

It's really odd to be up here like this. I know, I know. I keep saying it, but there's nothing really real to compare it to.

It's like . . . a- the drive up a really long hill and your car is working so hard to get there, and you're goin', "Come on, baby, come on, you can make it". But you're not sure when it ends, or if there's a drop off or if it just levels out that high. You just don't know what's over the hill. Or it's like, the day after New Year's, where you're sitting in anticipation of the wonderful possibilities, but you're just doing the same thing you've always done anyway; the same you. And for some reason, that's more disappointing than it was just a few days ago. Or it's like when someone hands you a flower as you're walking and it's sweet that they- that they thought of you and they picked this for you and you're holding it, but then you start to wonder how long you have to hold it for and why they gave it to you cause now it's just this problem and this burden. None of those make any sense, and it's not really like those but. . . it is? And it's a combination of all of that. I don't know how to

explain it. It's a lot of moments that- it's a lot of moments that go on forever and make you sadder than you should be. A lot of moments that make you feel small and. . .

There's a long enough pause to wonder whether he's going to finish that sentence.

TOM

. . . dead already.

(through a yawn)

You know, the more time that passes up here, the more I wonder what brought me here.

Like, how did I get up here? How far back would I have to go to make a decision differently that would change *this*? Was I always on this path, or could I have lived my life different? I don't even know if I believe everyone is set on a path, or if we all just make random decisions that lead us down certain ones on accident. I think that I was meant for something, but I don't think it's this. I refuse to think that I was always meant to die up here, alone and unremembered. No one gets any chance to even try to know me anymore, I mean, what the f-! How-!

I mean, I didn't even get a chance to-!

(whispered)

Damnit.

But could I have changed this? Could I have, say, not become an astronaut? Would I have had to give that up to avoid this being the end? Would I have chosen this path had I known how it ended for me? Did I, in some way, already know this was where I was gonna end up?

I decided I wanted to be an astrophysicist pretty early on, after taking a couple courses in college. I remember astronomy was so easy for me, and that was the first class. When we were kids, David used to point out the constellations for me at night back home in Missouri. Way out at our place, you could almost see the *whole* Milky Way. It wasn't just the couple stars you get in California, it was. . . swirls of color and- and dust sprayed all over the sky and. I knew everything up there like the back of my hand. Whenever we'd learn about it in school, I just had to picture David lying next to me on the grass, pointing it all out, just had to follow the line of his finger all the way out to the stars, and I would know it just as he taught me. Course, no one knew about David, so I just said I read a lot of books growing up. No one really cared though, so. Didn't really matter.

A moment.

TOM

I could've been done with that whole thing after that class ended, but I forgot how much I like learning about the stars, so I- I kept going. I took some astrophysics classes- just fell in love with the way people in them talked about our universe. There was so much. . . respect and curiosity and there was this ability to admit we didn't know everything. You know, I think I- I missed being able to say, "I don't know." And the reverence for how small we all were? I- It was this impossibly tender subject, and I was completely enamored from the start. I declared it as my major and went all the way through college chasing that passion.

I worked as a. . .

He laughs at himself before continuing.

TOM

Well, technically, I was a radio astronomical instrumentation specialist working on the Deep Space Network at the Jet Propulsion Lab for NASA. But I just fixed things for engineers who didn't wanna figure it out, mainly. It was a fun job, you know, Pasadena was a nice place to settle down for a bit. Working at JPL was good for me. I- I played baseball with a bunch of the guys that I worked with on Sunday mornings and it was- it

was actually one of them who taught me to fly.

On weekends, after the games, we would all drive out to this little private airport - which, by the way, are way too common all over California - and he would teach us how to fly these little airplanes. I just sort of went along with it, cause it seemed like he really cared about these outings, but eventually, I started to care about them and enjoy them, too. I was never scared of heights and loved the feeling of being in control like that, you know, hand on the gear shift. I got my pilot's license after about a year and kept flying on weekends with some ex-Air Force buddies of his.

It was after about three years of the routine of this job, maybe a little bit longer, NASA was- well, there were rumors going around that NASA was asking for applications internally for some special astronaut training. I had no interest in it-

He laughs at himself again.

TOM

-but my buds all told me that I'd be great for it. I still- I still didn't think much of it, but then. . . well, I was driving home from work one day in my little truck and the Dodgers were playing the Cardinals on the radio. It was a good game, 2-2, bottom

of the 8th, so I pulled over to the side of the road- uhhh- to hear Vinny announce the final inning. I turned the radio up and went to lay down in the bed of my truck to look at the stars and listen. And I was staring up at the evening sky and the stars started popping out, I realized how few there were compared to home, and then I had this. . . *shockingly* clear vision of a hand pointing up at the stars and going, "See those? That bunch right there? That's where Tom went up. I watched him, I saw the launch all the way up there. That's where he is."

And as soon as it came, the vision was gone and I- I didn't quite know what it meant or who that person was, but something in me clicked.

He snaps his fingers to show.

TOM

And the next day, I started filling out the application. A few months later, and I was off to Houston for this secret training, along with- I think it was- 20 other candidates?

They didn't tell the pool of us that were picked much about the mission. They wanted it under wraps until they'd made their decision on who was going up so no one could blab.

I think, no matter how much time passes, NASA's gonna always be just a little scared of the Russians.

But our training was so hush-hush, we didn't really have anyone but us 20, so we bonded pretty quickly. And then NASA started sending us home. We were just doing this regular astronaut training, but sometimes people wouldn't be strong enough swimmers, or would fail some mental assessment, and the next day, they'd say their goodbyes and go home.

I remember they made us keep journals. Looking back, they were probably just checking to see if we could do these logs I'm doing up here.

Tom laughs again.

TOM

Man, did that not work out for them.

He sniffs heavily, composing himself. The oxygen might be affecting him more than he's letting on.

TOM

I would leave these blank pages in my notebook where I- I couldn't come up with the right words. And every so often, some supervisor would come in and, after looking through my journal, try to figure out what those pauses meant. Try to analyze them. But the pauses were just that. Pauses. The



places I didn't mark were the places I didn't know how.

That should've told them enough, but eventually, I was the only person left training. I spent 3 years getting in, you know, peak physical shape, learning about all kinds of mission details, taking mental assessments to make sure I wasn't dying and could perform my duties aboard my ship. They finally sat me down and explained I'd be doing the first ever full methane-fueled mission. Usually, uh- spaceflights aren't just pure methane, cause it would be too slow. I- I think I mentioned it before that they can't get past the astroid belt. But they had this new thing to test and then uh- some back-up fuel in case something went wrong to get me back home. They said they weren't sure how it'd go, but they'd done tests where it was fairly safe. You know, for space. And because it hadn't been done before, but they needed a manned mission, they were just gonna send one man. So I agreed. I trusted NASA with my life.

And look where that got me.

He hurries to cover.

TOM

To be fair, this isn't NASA's fault. It's space, it's unpredictable. NASA's people do all they can and they work

hard and work smart. But that's one of the reasons, you know, I'm thinkin' this is just how it's supposed to be.

That's hard to figure on. That somethin' so horrible is meant to happen to you.

But you know, I. . . I took this job cause I thought. . . well, I thought it might work. It might do something for me. Maybe it was the being alone for years, maybe it was the trust NASA put in me, maybe it was that no one knew if it would work. Maybe it was the thought of getting to decide for myself if it worked or not. Turns out, I didn't get that, but hey, it was nice to think about. I felt needed.

My wife was all kinds of behind me. She was nervous, of course, and worried and cried, but knew she how hard I had worked and trained, so was the most supportive I could ask of her. I couldn't believe it. If she had said one word of caution or hesitance, I woulda stayed behind and said fuck it to all the years spent on this flight. But she said yes, said she thought it'd be good for me. That kinda surprised me and it- I think it hurt me, but I wanted it- I wanted it. So I don't know why.

I don't know what I wanted from this. Maybe this ending was what I wanted, something final, something new, some

end I couldn't find down on earth.  
Even the failure felt like success  
because it woulda ended something.  
But. . . well, what would it have been  
like if I had said no?

What would I be doing, right now, if I  
had said no to this whole mission,  
hadn't followed the path to the stars  
that seemed so laid out for me years  
and years ago, hadn't-, sai-, no-?

Would I be with my love, cleaning up  
after dinner, doing dishes in my sink?  
Would we have had kids? Would we be in  
the same house? Is he- she in the same  
house now or did- she move? It's been  
years, I suppose.

And then Tom gets quiet. As much as he's been talking  
to himself this whole time, he is now, so clearly,  
talking to only himself.

TOM

Or would she have been so ashamed of  
me, she would've left? Would I still  
work for JPL or would they have fired  
me if I refused? Would I have ever  
remembered what I have up here?

He can now barely be heard over the ambient noise of  
the spaceship.

TOM

Would I ever have wanted to go home  
the way I do now?

Would I have thought what I do now?

I don't think so. I don't think so.

Alright, I'm done.

And he's gone from this recording as quickly as he came in.