

There's a click as a tape recorder turns on. A man's voice mutters to himself.

TOM

Is it recording? Oh, god, it's recording, okay.

TOM JACKSON, mid-40s, has started an audio log. His voice is soft and hesitant. He's unsure of himself and what he's doing. And who wouldn't be, in his position?

Tom sighs heavily.

TOM (CONT'D)

Ummm... what did they want me to say?

He runs his hands over his face.

TOM (CONT'D)

It's alright, no one's ever gonna hear this, so... I can say whatever I want.

He blows air out steadily, composing himself.

TOM (CONT'D)

Hi. Um, my name is Thomas Jackson. Uh, I'm an astronaut. This is my 523rd day in space on this trip. And I'm gonna die in 10 days.

(pause)

You know, people always say that this stuff is easier once you talk about it and y-you say things out loud. God. And... uh, didn't work on this one. This still pretty much sucks.

He laughs breathlessly.

TOM (CONT'D)

Anyway, this is my first log of the trip. Ummm, I know it's sort of a bummer one to start out on. I, uh- I honestly didn't remember that I had to do these? Or I did, but I didn't really know what I was gonna say and so I kept putting it off and putting it off and, well, there's only so much longer I can keep putting stuff off to, so.

(MORE)

TOM (CONT'D)

Uh, this tape recorder is the only thing I can still get to work on this ship. All the electronics are still out. I think this thing just runs on battery, so. It should be good. Communications are still offline... umm, the warning lights that blink when something's gone wrong, they've stopped blinking- but I think that means it's worse and not better- and the oxygen levels are giving me 10 more days til they... you know.

Tom pauses. He finally said it. Well, as much as he can right now. He shakes his head and tries to stick to the facts again.

TOM (CONT'D)

Uh, the official report... can't be filed because I don't have access to any of my files. But that's fine, cause I'm not really sure what happened anyway.

(beat)

A couple days ago, I was floating around. All of a sudden-

He snaps, loud and sharp.

TOM (CONT'D)

-everything just shut off. And the lights went dead and, uh- we- yo- you know, it's funny: for a bit, it was kinda nice. I was just floating in midair and everything was dark and quiet, and I don't know, it was... it was kinda nice. And then the panic set in, because I was floating alone in space. But Mission Control called and they said that they, umm, there was a problem with some circuits and they'd, well, a couple of them had gone dead and they thought maybe it was the module I installed so they said I should check that out. And as I was floating over, they came back online and said, "Actually, you should stay put and not touch anythi-" and then the line went dead. And that was the last thing that I heard from them.

(MORE)

TOM (CONT'D)

I think I'm just sort of wrapping my brain around, you know, what that- what that really means for me.

(beat)

I don't know why NASA didn't train me for this. There were a lot of psychological tests, but nothing was like, "Hey! What are you gonna do when you're stuck out there for ten days and you realize you're gonna die?" I assume talking to yourself isn't something they recommend, but, umm, I'm gonna try it out. I'm gonna start doing these logs. You know, people tell you to talk about your problems and I think I'm finally gonna start doing that.

He laughs. Of course HE would start now, of all times.

TOM (CONT'D)

You know, there's those stages, that- that deal with death, right? Isn't it... it's like, acceptance and t- then denial and... no, that can't be right, cause that order-. I mean, that'd make it worse, right?

He runs his hands through his hair and rubs his eyes desparingly.

TOM (CONT'D)

Shit. I spent all that time in that goddamn pool, NASA didn't really train me for-

(sighs)

-what I was actually gonna have to do out here. I just-. I don't know. I thought that this job might be easier, make things easier? I don't know, fix something. I really did. You've made it once you've been to space, right? I mean, when you're an astronaut. I don't know about when you're doing other jobs; I think if you're in space and you're not an astronaut, you might have some bigger problems. But, ummm... you know, when you're an astronaut, there's no need to do anything else right if you can just manage this.

(MORE)

TOM (CONT'D)

You know, you go to space, you do your job, you come back down, and you're fine. But... I don't know, do you ever feel like no matter what you're told to do, you're destined to mess things up?

(heated, getting louder)

And that's the thing, too, with this, right? I did everything I was supposed to. I flipped the right switches, I took the right samples, I said the right things, and still, somehow, I'm floating in a billion dollar hunk of junk, 746 million miles from Earth, I'm completely alone, and I'm talking into a tape recorder, recording audio that nobody will ever listen to because it's gonna be stuck up here when I die in ten days!

He takes a moment to compose himself.

TOM (CONT'D)

I don't even know why I'm starting the logs now, you know, if no one's gonna hear 'em. They're gonna be, like I said, stuck up here with me when I die. Like a-. It reminds me of those pharaohs that you'd read about right, who- they'd die and get buried, but in these little jars next to them, their organs would be stored and kept. I don't remember why, but it had something to do with the afterlife? Maybe their body had to be light enough to... go to the afterlife? I don't remember, I didn't pay much attention when we learned about that, honestly. But, uh, I feel like that. I feel like a teenage girl with a diary:

(mockingly shrill at first, fading to normal)

"My parents don't understand me! Matt talked to me in class today! I have to confront my own mortality because the power shut off on my spaceship and I have to deal with my past."

(pause)

I never had a diary.

Tom clears his throat.

TOM (CONT'D)

But yeah, I don't know, am I- you know, if- is there a point to me even doin' this sort of... this assignment, these logs, if they're not gonna reach anybody? You know, I'm not quite sure what I'm hoping for. Am I- am I trying to talk about my past cause I'm tryin' to remember a time that I was alive, and prove to myself that I was once alive, or... am I really just whistlin' Dixie? I'm not sure.

Another pause. And why should he rush? Who's out there to impress anymore?

TOM (CONT'D)

It's funny, I'm talkin' to myself right now, and I'm remembering when I would talk to myself growing up, as a kid, my dad would always get super worried and anxious about it. Even if I was just, um, sitting at the kitchen table and doing math homework and muttering these numbers to myself, he would come over an- and include himself in the conversation so it wouldn't look like I was talkin' to myself. I think he was pretty worried about, you know, what I was gonna turn into and how other people saw me.

There's a slight chuckle. For the first time, there's a smile coming through in Tom's voice.

TOM (CONT'D)

Hmm. I was- uh, I was thinkin' about dad- I was a mechanic before I ever went to college. This was back in Missouri, so I must've been- what, 14, 15?- when I started, and I kept being a mechanic all the way through my senior year of high school. You know, I worked in this garage where my dad worked. Uh, b-because it was a small town, I was really just makin' repairs on neighbor's Fords and Chevys, these old trucks, saving what I could to get out.

(MORE)

TOM (CONT'D)

You know, the classic small town story. And I... I just remember the best part of that job was that it seemed so simple. And not easy, it was hard work, but it was simple. All the cars had a fix. There was some place to get back to; there was a way that they were supposed to be, right? And I would look and see that wires had gone loose or a U-joint had failed or, you know, there was a blown gasket, but there was always a way to... to know that and diagnose it and fix it and get back to that place. And I could always get there; I always knew just what to fix and how to do it. Up here in space, it- it's different. There's no pattern, no constant, no way things are supposed to be and- and things just go wrong. And when they go wrong, I have no idea what to do. Some things just aren't broken like that. And what the hell am I supposed to do with something broken I don't know how to fix? Do I have to find a use for it? Is that what I'm...?

Tom trails off, exasperated. He lets out a breath he didn't realize he was holding and all the building anger goes out of him with it.

TOM (CONT'D)

My... my wife would laugh, she would, umm... she would always make fun of me cause I would do these little projects around the house. You know, these were the highlight of my weekend: repairing the tile that had cracked in the backsplash, caning a chair for our dining room table, rewiring our electronics t- to be more efficient. And I would get so completely absorbed in these and everything else would just sort of fade away into background noise. And she would always come up behind me and have a full conversation with my back like it was a brick wall, cause I just wouldn't even realize she was there and-.

(MORE)

TOM (CONT'D)

She would bring me a water or a lemonade, and she would have to rub the cold glass with the condensation on the back of my neck to kinda shock me back to reality so she could talk to me. She once told me that she liked to watch me work on that stuff, she liked to watch me love something so deeply. She said it, uh, it "reassured her". I still don't know what she meant by that. There was a lot of that, though.

He takes a deep breath. Plunges ahead.

TOM (CONT'D)

And no one's gonna listen to this, so I can-. You know, I wasn't a great husband. If I'm gonna be totally honest in these last few days. I just... couldn't be, and I had a million little reasons and little excuses that added up. I love my wife, very much, but I just- I felt like- you know, I think- you know how in all those movies, someone is skating on some frozen pond and then the ice will crack and they'll fall in and then the ice seals up back above them and then they're- they have to get back up to breathe and they're pounding their fists on the sheet of ice above them, but they- the bottom of the pond is so far away that they don't have anything to push up from. So no matter how strong they are, they can't break through that sheet of ice so that they can breathe again. And all that's to say, I think I didn't- don't- have a bottom of a pond to push up from to break back through.

(pause)

I was gonna say that that's super dramatic-

He laughs.

TOM (CONT'D)

-and sad and not even really what I was trying to say, but I don't know why I'd be censoring myself when I know these aren't gonna reach anyone. I'm so used to being very aware of eyes on me that, when there aren't... I don't quite know what to do.

(pause)

It's funny how casually I've started to talk about dying. It's interesting what you get used to, even when you probably shouldn't get used to it. You know, you'd think it'd be scarier, you know, be- being up in space alone and dying and knowing you're gonna die. It's not that bad, I guess. I think for so long I was terrified of dying and losing things and now I am and it... turns out it doesn't really matter. I'm recording this log from the observation deck on board, it's a pretty big ship, and I'm sittin' in the porthole window lookin' down, lookin' out at Earth. This is one of the only times I've managed to look at it. I've kinda been avoiding it, if I'm honest. The only other time when I've looked down at this planet has been, uh, the first time, when I launched and got to see Earth for the first time from space. It's interesting, because everybody tells you you'll look down at this- this planet and realize that's where everyone you know lives and there aren't any boundaries and you have this sort of religious experience. And I was so ready for that, so I- I ran to the window and looked down and- I didn't feel anything. I got kinda guilty and scared. I didn't tell anyone that until now, but... it was like I looked down at this little marble where everyone I love lives and it was like my mind just went blank.

(MORE)

TOM (CONT'D)

And I just kept looking at it and going, "God, there should be something there that I remember, but I don't- I don't know that place." It was so unfamiliar. I almost felt more when I looked at- at Mars for the first time, because at least then I was aware that it was space, and that many people don't see this, and... yeah, so I haven't really looked for Earth until now. I didn't- I didn't see the need to.

Something in Tom's voice says he does now. After all, like he said, he's looking through the window saying all this.

TOM (CONT'D)

I do remember that night, though: my first night in space. After seeing Earth, I was feeling a little bit guilty. I'd lied to NASA and said, you know, "Oh, I cried and I had this big emotional experience." And I was trying to go to bed and I couldn't sleep. I just kept replaying this-

Tom laughs.

TOM (CONT'D)

-this memory I had of- I must've been 14, maybe? I was a teenager, for sure- and I was standing in our little kitchen in Missouri and I had asked my mom from the other room how long I was supposed to microwave something and she threw out a number and it turned out that number wasn't enough and... I sort of froze and I realized that parents are just making up how long you put things in the microwave for when you ask them and that they don't really know. And I kept replaying that feeling of standing in the kitchen and thinking about how we can pretend that we know everything, and we can tell our loved ones we know everything, but we don't even know enough to get us out of our own kitchens.

(pause)

(MORE)

TOM (CONT'D)

And I just kept replaying this memory and, you know, when you sleep in space you're on the wall and- all of a sudden, I reached up to touch my face and there were tears, the tears that hadn't- hadn't come earlier and... I started laughing. I was really glad that NASA monitors you a little less when you're sleeping, because if someone had seen me laughing and crying while strapped to a wall, I might've been sent back down to Earth. Although, you know, maybe that would've been better.

He laughs again, very differently.

TOM (CONT'D)

Sometimes, when I- when I couldn't sleep back home- and this is how you know I think no one's ever gonna listen to this- um, I would pull out this old baby blanket I had that was in a chest in the living room and sleep with it. I didn't need it or anything, I wasn't Linus, but I was- it was just the softest thing and it was kinda comforting. And I had this... stupid dream of having it sewn into the pocket of my wife's coat or a suit jacket of mine. I needed it to have an ending. But, you know, when it would come time to cut it up, and I would have a wedding or, uh, when I got married or there was some big event, I just- I could never do it. And the strings started coming out from it and the weave of it got a little bit looser as time went on. And I think somewhere down the line, I noticed that, and I... maybe I decided that it needed to fall apart instead of being put to a use. I think maybe that's what I need to do now.

(MORE)

TOM (CONT'D)

I think maybe I just need that time
and I think that's what these logs
will be, somewhere I can talk
through everything I'm thinking
about as I slowly die and drift off
to space and don't get to come back
down again. Should be a blast!

You can practically hear Tom roll his eyes at himself.

TOM (CONT'D)

Oh, god. Yeah, but maybe I'll go
into the next life a bit lighter.

(pause)

It feels weird to hang up this call
or hit stop record and say goodbye
when there's nobody that's on the
other line and... once I stop
talking it gets really quiet in
here again, and... well, I guess I
have to. God, this feels so weird.
Okay. Well, I guess, til tomorrow.
Ugh, this is so dumb. Bye. I miss
you. Bye.