

Fallout

“I love you.”

She stares at him on the screen for the last time. She cannot believe this is happening. It is not supposed to be like this. Everything is happening so fast. He stares back at her on the screen, the last image fixed onto it. He smiles at her, as if to console her. His eyes are a mix between sad and expecting. His hair cut short. The image flickers and she falls back into her memory.

The day they first met. It was the first week of school in one of the latter years of high school, that first day when the teacher assigned the students a desk for the rest of the semester. They were assigned next to each other. His hair was a shaggy curly mess, it was long enough to cover his eyes. It was hard to tell where he was looking. A boy already lost in the clouds. They sat next to each other for about a week both sneaking glances at each other but too afraid to talk. He finally turns to her and says, “Venus is going to be the closest to Earth as it has in 200 years and will be for 200 more tonight.”

She was dumbfounded. Of all the things he could have said to her that was the last thing she expected him to say. But, it made her so happy to hear someone say it. “I’ve been waiting months for this moment.” She responded. “All my friends think I’m nuts when I talk about it. I want to see it so bad. I hate all the lights in the city.”

“I know a nice place not too far from the city. The stars are incredible out there. Would you like to join me?”

Stars and planets; those were what had brought them together. They snuck out to that spot for the first time on that night and would do it many more as they came to know each other.

Trevor Long was his name. His family came from Cape Canaveral. He had grown up watching the launches. She could see they were one of the few things he had loved. She had just loved the freedom of space. In her city-filled life in Tennessee all she’d ever wanted was to be in open space. He didn’t ask her name that night but he got it the next day.

“Danielle Collins” was her answer, her heart lifted just a bit.

The woman comes back to the present, realizing her window of opportunity was closing. She still had so much to do, so much she wanted. She looks into the soft green eyes, they seemed to know everything. And, then, she’s gone again, this time to a later date.

They both had been in college for a couple of years, when one day he brings home a puppy as a surprise to her. He had chosen her college to go to. He gave her the puppy as a present. She could not have been more thrilled. They decided on the name Neil. He fed and gave water to the puppy. He carried it outside when it tried to pee in the apartment. He took it for a walk that night.

Later that same night, as the three of them lie asleep in bed, a large thunderstorm rolled through the town. The puppy began to whine and squeal. She knocked it off the bed. It crawled

under the bed and the man got down joining the young dog. She got up to grab a doggy treat, her way of apologizing.

She came back to the bedroom. She almost dropped the treat and screamed. Under the bed the two pairs of eyes stared out at her. One set scared and sad, the other mischievous and wide-eyed. She had never seen that look in his eyes before. At first she thought it was not him and almost kicked him in the face. She sighed when he pulled his full head out from under the bed. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing.” She replied, then handed the treat down to the puppy and patted it on the head. He got out from under the bed, kissed her good night then said he loved her. He got back under the bed. The boy and the dog lay down under the bed the rest of the night.

She would come to recognize that face. It was the same face he made when he went up. When he could float in the darkness of space.

She still had the dog; she took him for walks every so often. The thing grew to almost eighty pounds. It was getting on up in dog years now. It was no longer afraid of thunderstorms. The dog and the boy would often sit on the balcony watching storms together. She would sit in her armchair and read a book. The dog did not have quite the energy he used to.

Snapped back into reality by the sound of the people shouting around her, she continues to ignore them and stare into the lasting image on the screen. His smile, a tight thin line but for the left side where it tilted slightly upward never wavered but once.

It was the day they received the news that would change their lives. They both held the envelopes in their hands staring at each other. Both scared to open them. Neil sat between them looking from one to the other wondering what was going on.

“On three, one... Two.... Three.” She said and they tore open the envelopes. They read their letters and the woman sank to the ground in a fit of sobs. She had failed. For the first time she wasn’t good enough. She had lost what she had worked so hard to obtain and would never become what she had always wanted. She spent the rest of the week in bed, eating whatever he brought her in between bouts of long sleep and deep crying. The dog sat by the bed the entire time.

The man stayed in bed with her the entire time, he never once left her. His usually upbeat smile, nothing but a small, thin, serious line as he got up every day that week to make them both food to survive.

It was almost a month before she finally realized she had never asked him whether or not he had passed. It took quite a bit of coaxing but he reluctantly told her that he had passed. He would become what she could not. He would become an astronaut. She could not have been happier for him. But they had no celebration.

She avoided the idea of what to do now that her dream was completely out of reach, when he snapped her out of it. They headed down to that town in south Texas where their future lay. They went in together and she managed to get a job working on the ground, to support him when he could not. He left for a few missions and everything went fine. He was perfect for the job. He would spend much of his time at work, but she would always be there to assist him in any way she could. Slowly her position of importance began to increase as he was no longer a rookie.

They continued to work together and, years later, managed to persuade the right people. She got a job to help fuel her new dream. She would be in charge of the entire mission. They danced the night away after they found out.

They spent months together planning and working on every last detail. They hand-picked the engineers, and technicians. From veterans who pioneered the idea to kids fresh from college. His colleagues on board were two people he had been with before. They knew how to take care of themselves.

After years of preparation and training, the day arrived. They embraced one last time. He kissed her and said he loved her. He climbed aboard and she headed to the command post. His departure went off without a hitch. They successfully connected to the International Space Station. She had been perfect. The people she had selected had been perfect. Nothing could have gone wrong.

But, it had. For the first forty hours everything seemed perfectly fine, tranquil even. Then a piece of debris struck and they began to lose control. First a set of lights began to flash, then the sirens went off. The night shift began to look at the readings. Their eyes grew. The man in charge picked up the phone and called her.

She had been asleep in their apartment when she got the call. She couldn't understand the man on the other side very well but she knew only one thing could have happened. Lance paced around her nervously as she rushed to get ready. She drove back to work as quickly as possible. The guard into the Johnson Space Center seemed to check her I.D. much longer than usual. Even he was aware of the severity of the situation.

Her subordinates were already racing around the room running tests, diagnostics, and anything else they could think of. She managed to connect to him and had one last chat with him. And, then, the line was cut leaving her just the one lasting image of him.

It had always seemed so simple he had done it hundreds of time and she never thought of it. Why was it she could never return the favor? Maybe he already knew so he didn't need to hear it, maybe she just never wanted to say it.

She turned from the screen. Her eyes began to water so she closed them. His image slowly faded to black behind her. Her fists clinched. She dropped her head.

“I love you,” she said as the station came falling back to Earth.