

## The Pioneer

My Stonewall godmothers were probably rolling in their graves, but I kind of enjoyed being in the closet. I'd been out since birth, demanding a Snow White cake for my second birthday and planning my wedding to Chad, our local lifeguard, at four. I'd had plenty of secret boyfriends, but it'd been *their* secret. My job had always been to stay away from them in public while they pretended to be straight.

When I'd married Jake, I'd still been the gay one. Since Jake was an athlete, had a deeper voice, and buzzed his hair, people assumed he was the "man" in the relationship, which was infuriating. It had been worse since we'd broken up, at least among our mutual friends, because his "new wife" Bobby was also demonstrably gay, so everyone just thought I'd need to go find a capital M *Man* to replace the void Jake had left in my life.

So even though they hadn't formally asked me to stay in the closet, I didn't realize how much easier it was to be straight. When someone knows you're gay, the conversation almost always turns to sex at some point. Especially when your name is Rider.

During my days on the International Space Station, though, I got to talk about jigsaw puzzles and video games with Yoshida, about how both of our dads did the household cooking with Ramsey, about trail running with De Vroom. Nalley asked me daily about my research, in part because it was his job, but I also got the impression that he was genuinely interested. I realized that I barely ever got to actually talk about my research. Even students just wanted to use my data for their own work or wanted to joke around.

I didn't act any straighter, but everyone just seemed to assume I was. And even if my colleagues didn't think I was straight, but they treated me like I was straight, which simply meant

not talking about it. There was no, “when did you know you were straight?” or “how did you meet other straight people growing up?”

I didn't have any illusions over astronauts simply being especially polite. I mean, all five of my colleagues were nothing if not professional, but they all had biases, some that simply made them human others that made me dislike them. De Vroom, despite being mixed race himself, had quite a few opinions about African Americans. He asked Ramsey if she'd grown up in the “ghetto,” and another time insinuated that she'd had to have been raised by a single mother. Nalley asked a nonplussed Yoshida what the best kind of rice was, to which she answered dryly, “I try to avoid carbs.”

Yev was the most polite of anyone. That's if, by polite, you mean silent. He was not one for small talk or any kind of interpersonal conversation. Yev's idea of conversation was allowing you to spend time in the same Node. Of course, whenever Yev and I ended up alone in a Node together we ended up making out.

We saved most of our kissing for the Cupola. Kissing in space became less and less like Earth kissing as we became more familiar with it, and that in itself was a thrill. We were some of the first to do this. Maybe even the first. Not kissers - surely someone else had kissed in space - but it was possible that we were the first men to make out in space. I thought it unlikely, though to Yev it was certainly, as he “couldn't imagine a homosexual astronaut.” I didn't address the fact that I was, indeed, a homosexual astronaut.

On Skype, I could tell that keeping my space voyage to themselves was taking a toll on my family. My mother acted as if having to keep it a secret rendered me unemployed, and then spoke about all the great jobs her friends' children had.

“Meera Chowdhury’s son Vinay is chief resident at that fancy hospital out in California!” she said one day. “Were you ever a resident sweetie, or did you just go straight into teaching? I can’t remember!”

“Do you remember Becky Banff? Didn’t you go to a middle school dance with her? She’s an actual cowboy. Can you believe it? She herds cattle in New Zealand! Imagine going all the way to New Zealand!”

I’d made it all the way to outer space so yes, mother, I could imagine Becky Banff the cowgirl – cowperson? – wrangler? – getting to New Zealand.

“Maybe when you get back you can do something overseas?” she added, her frizzy red hair bouncing as she worked on her crossword puzzle.

My father, for his part, used this as an occasion to remind me of just how supportive he’d always been, as if now it was time for me to do something for him in return.

“Remember when I took you to that pride parade when you were thirteen, sweetie?” he asked. “That, for me, was like going into outer space. Like being shot into the unknown.”

Dad was a fan of metaphors.

My brothers viewed it as if I’d gone back into the closet, which horrified them.

“So are you, like, *hiding* hiding your sexuality, or are you just not talking about it?”

Glenn asked.

“I’m not hiding anything,” I snapped. “I’m just not supposed to distract from the mission.”

Buzzy thought it was bigger than that. “They don’t want any out astronauts because they want all of that space tourism money. They don’t want to risk the Russians and the Arabs and the Republicans backing out because they let gays in space.”

“I’m sure it’s not that. All of those people still go to New York and it’s at least 75% gay,” I joked, but Buzzy didn’t laugh.

If I was being completely honest, I agreed with them, at least on some level. I hadn’t fought my whole life just to start hiding in my early forties. But some of the fight had left me in the divorce. My big gay statement had been gay marriage, and I’d failed at that. So who was I to wave the flag for the gays? Plus, Sally Ride had had to be the best at everything she did to be the first American woman in space. As far as astronauting went, I’d come as close as you could to falling into the job. I was no pioneer.

My kids liked the secret aspect of it. My daughter, Serena, even made up a secret gesture for us to do at the beginning and end of each Skype session, which was really just us doing the Batusi three times – right, left, right – while staring at the screen. Her twin brother, Roger, was a loner outside of being basically being joined to Serena at the hip when they weren’t in school, so he said he didn’t really have anyone he liked enough to tell. This worried me, but then I remembered being 13. I hadn’t had any friends then, either. Of course I’d been in the closet, and now I was again. Which was disconcerting.

My hope was that Jake was struggling to keep it a secret because he was so proud and couldn’t believe that he’d let me slip away from him, but in our rare chats - when we’d Skype so that I could confirm that the kids were as “fine” as they said they were – he just told me about any emails or calls from the school and then hang up. From where his eyes fell on the screen, I could tell he spent our calls watching how he looked in the camera instead of looking at me in the *International Space Station*.

He’d get a few occasional barbs in, like, “the kids’ teachers keep asking how they are handling the divorce, and I can’t really answer because it’s basically the same as it was before.

You're working, I'm either home or trying to arrange for someone to drive them around. Thank God for Bobby's flexible schedule."

Bobby's schedule was flexible because he was a *student*. That was the nature of being a student. My schedule was inflexible because I was a fucking *astronaut*. Plus, the only part of Bobby's flexibility Jake cared about was how he could do the splits on top of a cock, I'm sure.

I was more worried about the kids spending so much time with Bobby and Jake and forgetting all about me than I was about the kids themselves. I'd spoken at length with Serena and Roger about going, and the three of us had all decided that what we'd all benefit more from me being an astronaut than we would spending every weekend together playing Smash Brothers until our fingers bled and watching vintage tennis championship matches on YouTube.

The other element that made seeming "straight" pretty easy was that none of us really talked that much. The ISS was a mess for the senses. Though we kept a strict schedule - particularly regarding eating, hydration, exercise, and sleep - we all, for the most part, had our own things to work on. I'd completed my adjustments of the exercise equipment during my first two weeks on the station, and now my responsibilities now involved a lot of data processing, which I did in Destiny. Nalley mostly worked out of Destiny as well, as did Ramsey, while Yoshida spent the majority of her time in Kibo. De Vroom had Columbus to himself, and Yev hardly ever left Zvezda, except when he went to Tranquility to exercise or met me in the Cupola to make out and rub against each other.

You would think that this meant Ramsey, Nalley, and I would have plenty of time for workplace banter, but as all of us were involved in high stakes (financially) missions, we were focused and often not at our designated workstations. Ramsey had been tasked with studying BEAM, which had been sent to the ISS by one of our private partners in 2016 and had been

meant to serve as a temporary module. The inflatable BEAM, however, had far exceeded expectations and had turned out to not only be sturdy but also exceptionally durable. This was a boon for tourism, as inflatable, temporary, but still safe modules would allow for third party tourism vendors to send up their own modules to suit the tastes of their billionaire clientele.

Want a tiki bar in space? We'll send one up in cargo!

How about a replica of the bridge from the Starship Enterprise? Or the Millennium Falcon?

So Ramsey spent a lot of her time in BEAM, while Nalley, as the official Space Force representative, had been tasked with doing a full audit of the station to come up with an appraisal of how much the US government could charge our partners for "leasing" ISS space.

As a result, I spend most of my time in Destiny alone.

Unless I was with Yev.

I'd never been involved – if that's even the word for it – with someone who could be so clearly into me and so clearly *not* into me, often within the space of a few seconds. He'd drag me to the Cupola just to stare into my eyes, or to trace my space-dry lips with his tongue, which seemed *so* pink against his pale skin, and then, moments later, he'd ignore me the first *six* times I'd ask him to move so I could get to the coffee machine.

He'd taken to floating around in his miniscule black shorts at night and I knew it was only a matter of time until I managed to coax him back into my sleeping cabin. What we'd do in there and how was a mystery, but I wanted it and I knew he did, too, at least part of the time. He hadn't been back in there since my first night in space, when he'd kissed me and put his head on my chest and then told me there was no such thing as a "gay Russian" and refused to answer my

question about whether or not he had a girlfriend or wife or (however unlikely) boyfriend back on Earth.

Since then, I'd remained firmly and happily in denial, even though I heard him say *Ya lyublyu tebya* at the end of the Skype call he made every evening. He wore a headset, thank God, so I could imagine his grandmother on the other end, holding his dog (who I'd also imagined, a Borzoi named Valentina) up to the screen to kiss *Bat'ka* goodnight.

By my fourth week in space, we'd all pretty much settled in. In typical ISS fashion, everyone was working on pretty much the same thing, but separately, which made dinner conversation a fun mixture of idea exchange and pissing contest.

Yev was doing something with the Russian docking ports, though it was all very secret though because there were some slight differences between the adjustments made to the Russian ports and the ones made to the others, whose design had been agreed upon by the ESA, JAXA, and NASA. Nalley had privately explained to me that Russia, even in areas demanding collaboration, liked to do its own thing. Its space program was still one of the nation's crown jewels and outsourcing anything to another country was out of the question.

As a result, Yev was left doing about twice as much work as the rest of us in addition to serving as the station's representative for all Russian interests. This meant that he was pretty tense most of the time, including the few moments we managed to cobble together to make out in the Cupola.

We were up there one evening after dinner, ostensibly talking about the COLBERT again, though the treadmill didn't need any more attention that we'd already given it.

All he had to do was look at me and say "Come here" in that icy voice and I'd drop everything.

I had my hand down the front of his pants, and he'd looped his left arm around my head to keep us together while we kissed. The rhythm was fun; there was no falling into a space kiss, no simply falling into make-out autopilot. Because of the way each weightless kiss pushed us back from one another, our kisses needed to be a constant, intentional coming together, a swim upstream to each other's mouths.

On some level, I resented how intoxicating Yev's attention was. If he'd been nicer in our everyday lives, his laser focus on me in our more romantic moments would have meant so much less. But to have such an asshole so obviously into me was such a rush.

I moved my hand around in his pants. I just liked having it there, another sign of how into me he was. Then I thought, and not for the first time, that perhaps he was only into me because of the lack of other interested parties. Yoshida and Ramsey were more attractive than me, but if Yev only swung towards men they wouldn't interest him. And even if he were bi, or fluid, neither Yoshida nor Ramsey seemed to be the kind of gal who would sacrifice professional integrity for a fling with a hot cosmonaut.

I, however, was willing to throw it all away. I couldn't think about anything but Yev. I even looked forward to monotonously entering my data into the computer in Destiny so that I could daydream about him. I thought what it would be like to go on a date with him, about how it would be like Ninotchka, how he'd Garbo-glare at me throughout our meal together in some hole in the wall until I did something charming and stupid and then he'd laugh and the Sun would come up with his smile. I daydreamed about being caught in the rain together, about how his face would look wet.

One thing I hadn't been prepared for was the lack of weather on the ISS. I missed the rain, I missed wind, even though I hated wind. I missed clouds crossing the Sun and making



shapes on green grass. In my current situation, the Sun was the Earth's golden tear, rolling along the surface and then splashing off every day before falling away, only to return when we'd spun around one more time.

We kept kissing, my face soar from his stubble, which only made it more visceral, more wonderful. Occasionally we looked down through the Cupola's central window, like the gods staring down from Mount Olympus. The Earth should have looked small from up here, but instead it appeared huge and important. It all felt *so* significant.

We passed over a mountain range and Yev stopped kissing me for a moment.

"Is it calling you back yet?" he asked.

"What? Earth?"

"Yes. It's like I told you, I think it wants us back. The longer we're away, the more worried it grows, and it calls for us more."

"I think so," I said, but with his arms around me I couldn't think of being anywhere else. He was so solid, even while we floated there.

"I miss the snow," I said. "I miss fresh air."

He smiled, which rarely looked natural on him.

"I miss the ocean. I miss big sounds," he said, and then he put his hand on my chest, over my heart. "Though I hear one big sound now. Here."

He thumped his hand on my chest along with my heartbeat.

"This is a good big sound. It's enough."

It was so unexpectedly tender. Yev, who barely looked at me for 23 hours of the day, drumming along to my heartbeat. *Listening* to my heartbeat.

Below us, mountain shifted to forest then to desert, and we stayed like that, linked together, until the lights of the station told us it was time to turn down.

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Yoshida was training to do the first Iron Man in space, as the legendary Sunny Williams had done the first marathon and triathlon. I was helping her train and I'd also volunteered to create a series of exercises on the RED, mimicking the way Williams had "swam" in space for her triathlon.

I was having Yoshida do a horizontal shoulder press while doing a squat and taking measurements to see what distance that would equal with the resistance I'd set into the machine, which I'd picked to imitate water resistance, when Nalley floated in, looking flustered.

"Rider, can I speak with you in private?" he asked.

I'd shoved my face back up into the controls of the RED, so I just called up, "I trust Yoshida not to betray my secrets, boss."

Outside of my sexuality, which I was tasked with ignoring rather than hiding, I didn't really have any secrets to worry about.

"It's sensitive," Nalley said.

I pushed myself out and up. Nalley turned and went into Leonardo, one of the larger ISS's larger cargo bays.

"I'll be right back," I said to Yoshida, and pulled myself through the doorway and into Leonardo.

Nalley looked super uncomfortable.

"What's up, sir?" I asked.

“I’m just going to cut right to the chase,” Nalley said, and a hint of a scarlet blush appeared along the lines of his dark cheekbones.

“Cut away,” I said, starting to feel a little nervous. “Is everyone back home okay? My kids?”

“Yes, yes, of course. Sorry. Of course you’d think that with me acting like this. Sorry, this isn’t just the sort of thing I’m involved in. I try to stay out of...politics.”

“Politics?”

“Rider, you’ve been ‘outed,’ for lack of a better word. Not just it being out there that you’re gay, but it’s on the front of the newspapers, the lead story on CNN, that sort of thing. All of the ‘First Openly Gay Astronaut’ stories you can imagine.”

I kind of felt the blood drain from my face, but it was different in space. Itchy.

“Buck Swinson’s shitting himself. The President is livid. Putin called him and reamed him out. They’ve shut down your NASA email for the moment because you were getting too many media requests.”

Oh shit.

“Are my kids okay?” I asked. “Is there like, *paparazzi* after them?”

I felt so fancy. Paparazzi! But I worried about the kids.

“They’re on a government-funded holiday with your parents.”

“My parents? Why not Jake?”

“Well, it was his new...partner...who got this all started, and he’s enjoying his 15 minutes of fame.”

The word partner seemed as comfortable in his mouth as a Herbst, but I gave him a pass considering he'd spent most of his professional career in or training to be in teeny little metal boxes and talking about thrusters.

“Wait. Bobby? How could he get this ‘all started?’”

“Apparently he has a ‘web series’” – he used finger quotes to describe this – “which you failed to mention,” Nalley said grimly.

“Oh you mean those YouTube things that like 5 people watch?”

“This particularly post is up to 33 million views,” Nalley said.

“Holy fuck,” I said.

“I’m waiting for a debrief from Swinson, so just chill for now. But it’s been all over email for the past bit, so the other folks up here all know, as does mission control. Obviously, everyone is fine with *it*, this is the 21<sup>st</sup> century of course, but all of the attention is a bit of a distraction, so just give them all some time.”

My kids were being harassed, everyone everywhere was suddenly interested in my personal life, and every nude photo of me ever had probably weaseled its way into public discourse by now. Not only would I be the first openly gay astronaut, I’d be the first astronaut whose asshole you could find on Google!

Nalley left me in Leonardo, and after a minute I went a rejoined Yoshida.

“What was that all about?” she asked, still doing shoulder presses.

Oh God, I was going to have to come out. I mean, I had to come out all the time – every time I taught a class, every time I mentioned my husband - ex-husband - every time I filled out a form with an emergency contact. Though I actually used my mother as my emergency contact now that Jake and I were broken up. Which was also pretty gay.

“Yoshida, I’m gay,” I said, staring at the mess of doohickeys and insulation on the wall.

“No shit, Sherlock,” Yoshida said, not even bothering to look up.

“You knew?” I asked.

She simply rolled her eyes and kept pumping.

“Well, everyone in the world apparently knows. It pissed off the Russians!”

This got her attention.

“Holy shit,” she said.

“Yeah,” I said, walking over to Tranquility’s workstation. “And apparently there’s a video.”

I went online and Googled the title of Bobby’s web series.

*The Fairy Stepfather*. God, kill me.

The most recent post was called “Don’t I Deserve Everything?”

I clicked play, and saw Bobby, his young, pale face wet with tears and snot, his floppy brown hair tangled.

His voice was high pitched and whiny. He sounded like he’d been crying, but to be fair he always sounded a little bit like he’d been crying. But his nose was red at the end, his mouth wet. I’d always thought Bobby looked like a used blow-up doll.

“Some people are settling down, some people are settling, and some people refuse to settle for anything less than butterflies,” Bobby started dramatically. It sounded vaguely familiar, but I couldn’t place it.

“That’s a quote from one of the great fictional characters, Ms. Carrie Bradshaw,” Bobby said.

“Oh Christ,” Yoshida called up from the RED. “Tell me you’re not involved with this person in some way.”

“He’s my ex-husband’s husband,” I groaned. “My kids’ stepdad?” I always said that like a question, because I usually refused to acknowledge Bobby’s existence at all.

“I’ve always thought of myself as a butterfly. When I finally emerged from my chrysalis, when I reached maturity in early 20s, my husband Jacob found me, and he refused to settle for anything less than butterflies. We had that quote on our wedding napkins,” he said, and tears spilled out and clung to his cheeks like the little pee drops that gather on public toilets.

“They didn’t,” Yoshida said. She’d stopped her exercises, the video now demanding her full attention.

“I wasn’t invited,” I said.

Bobby was still talking in the video, of course.

“...Jacob found me and suddenly couldn’t settle for anything less than a butterfly. And with him, I got my two kids, and since then I’ve been living the dream.”

*My two kids?*

My kids were not Bobby’s kids. My kids were only ten years younger than Bobby. My kids were *my* kids.

This is why I didn’t watch these fucking videos. I usually made Glenn or Buzzy watch them and summarize them for me in the way that would infuriate me least. And over wine. But they’d never said anything about him claiming ownership to my children. And they hadn’t either.

“But now. NOW. Now, my husband’s asshole ex, who abandoned his children for his JOB, is a fucking saint to everyone in my house. And you want to know why? Because he’s a

goddamned, Sigourney Weaving, Bruce Willis, Tom Hanks, motherfucking  
ASTRONAUT.”

I hadn't noticed it before, but Bobby was likely drunk.

“And how can you compete with an astronaut? Tonight, I said to Jacob, I said, ‘Honey, Rider literally went as far away from his children as he can get, like tens of thousands of miles, but you all keep talking about him like he's Barack Obama. Like he's just the fucking *coolest*.’”

“Does he know that we're only like 200 miles up?” Yoshida said, looking dumbfounded.

“And Jacob YELLED at me. In our MARRIAGE BED. YELLED! He raised his voice!”

Bobby was screaming now, and his face had gotten so close to the camera that I could see the snot pulsing out of his nostril.

“This is getting really Blair Witch,” I said to Yoshida.

“I was thinking ‘Leave Britney Alone!’” Yoshida said.

Bobby was stage-whispering now as he cried, talking to the screen like he was giving out mantras during a guided meditation.

“So I've got to protect myself. I'm not staying at home tonight. I've told my children where they can find me, so that they know that *I* wouldn't abandon them, but I also need to teach them how to stand up for themselves.”

He was building my moment now, his whispers rising to shouts as he remained in extreme close up.

“I need them to know that, astronaut or movie star or Nobel Prize winner or fucking Kardashian, no man is competition for me in my marriage. I deserve respect. I deserve to be worshipped. And I,” his voice rising to a full screen, his eyes Norma Desmond wide, “REFUSE. TO. SETTLE. FOR. ANYTHING. LESS. THAN. BUTTERFLIES.”

Yoshida was laughing so hard that she was crying, her tears floating up and off her face, mixing with the droplets of sweat she'd sent into the room before.

“Namaste,” Bobby said, and the video ended.

“I have no words,” Yoshida said when she'd composed herself a bit. “Are you okay?”

I smiled at her.

“Yes, I think so. I've got to talk to my kids. But, I kind of feel like I've finally won the breakup? Is that awful?”

“It's not awful at all,” Yoshida said. “And all you had to do was go to fucking outer space. Get Kulakov to break out those little vodka baggies he has stashed. We'll toast you at dinner. The first openly gay astronaut!”

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I floated back over to Unity and entered the information I'd gathered from the RED and Yoshida into my workstation. I ran into De Vroom, who awkwardly fist bumped me as we floated.

“I saw a headline that said you put the ASS in NASA,” he said. “You're my idol.”

I was so happy. I felt even lighter than usual, as if I could just float right out of the ISS into space, like a piece of stardust. I *was* a pioneer. I was a pioneer just by being myself.

After my data entry, I floated down the passage towards Zvezda. I saw Yev there, fresh from cleaning himself off. He was beautiful, lean and long and cold. I smiled when I saw him, and when his eyes caught mine, I mouthed “Cupola?”

He stared at me for one, two, three seconds, then turned away. He floated towards his sleeping cabin, and I worried from the way he held himself, from the way he sagged even in the



zero gravity, that it was over. Even if I was right and he was wrong it could still be over, just like that.

Yev slowly pulled the curtain back and I waited, waited for him to turn and look, to smile, or wink. Which weren't things he would ever do, but I'd moved from hope to fantasy.

Instead of smiling, winking, or acknowledging me at all, he floated into his sleeping cabin, an unknowable iceberg on this great starry ocean, and pulled the curtain closed behind him.

Then, just as I'd given up the rest of my small hope, his hand emerged from the curtain,, tilted upward like an offering. That same hand that he'd held over my heart.

He held his index finger out and then flicked it quickly.

*Come here.*

THE END