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# Return Flight

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When the government closed the national space program, some people were elated. There was a whole segment of the population who didn't want to be taxed so other people could go to space. Naturally, they cheered the loudest. Still others, lacking the immediate fear of a hostile superpower becoming more technologically advanced, simply stopped caring. What it did was cause others to band together to step in where the government had failed. Several commercial space enterprises were formed, all with their specific goals.

Destination Space was the most successful of these ventures, raising significant amounts of capital. The board of Destination Space was convinced, although early space ventures had brought back little of value, further investigation would yield a profit. They cited the first voyage of Columbus as an example. It had brought back little real wealth, but repeated journeys eventually made Spain one of the most powerful empires of the Age of Discovery. Its 'Return to the Moon' missions followed exactly the described format. Little return from the first two voyages, but with the discovery and subsequent mining of rare earth materials used in semiconductor manufacture, profits boomed. Turns out the moon was a mineral wonderland covered in 100 feet of useless gray dust.

It was even able to launch its most far-reaching effort, a manned spaceflight to the planet Mars. They used social media to name the ship. The board rejected the most popular suggestion, SpaceshipMacSpaceFace. In its place, they used the second most popular entry and christened the ship the Nina, after Columbus' smallest ship. The name seemed appropriate, with the limited amount of space available for the trip. So small was the crew quarters it could only accommodate three occupants for the journey. Colonel William James Harrison, Major John Herschel, and Captain Donald Kent, all of whom were anxious to be the first humans to walk on another planet.

The Nina took five years to build in orbit, but more people viewed the crew launch than watched the Saturn 5 launch of Apollo 11. The boosters were not as powerful as originally intended and it would take a full twenty-four months for the crew to arrive in Mars orbit. Yet after the launch, the public's interest waned even faster than their loss of interest in moon landings. What made matters worse was the scandal.

It came out only four months after the launch, the minerals found on the moon had been a sham. Destination Space had been secretly buying materials from Earth-based sources. The board, under increasing pressure to show something for the investor's efforts, faked the materials as having come from the moon. The moon was just as barren as the early Apollo missions had shown. The company had taken huge losses which it could no longer hide. Within two months, things had advanced to a terminal state. Around the middle of September, the executives started talking to the flight ground controllers in California.

The meeting occurred via telephone conference call between the office in California and corporate headquarters in Oxford, England. "Hans," Nelson Taylor told the director coldly, "as you know the company finances are not going well. Things have not gone as we had planned them. We are going to have to let some people go."

Hans Albert had been expecting this. He'd even assembled a list of people he thought he might be able to live without. Still, he retained some hope we could save as many of the names on his list as possible. After all, they had families to support. "How many," He asked tentatively.

"All of them," Taylor replied with an aloofness bordering on Stalinism.

"Are you kidding?" Hans screamed, losing all sense of decorum. "There are people up there, depending on us to keep them alive! Real people with no other options but to receive support from people on the ground!"

"Not anymore," Taylor's voice was emotionless. "We've sent them a message this morning terminating their employment. They are on their own."

The blood was slowly draining from Hans' face. He looked more than pale, he looked ill. "You can't be serious."

"We don't have any other choice. Because of the scandal, the government had refused to bail us out. This is basically the way modern business works now. You can't expect to keep your job forever. There are market forces at work. Sometimes a business must let people go, regardless of their loyalty, their service and regardless of their outstanding abilities. It's the way things work now. Employees will be paid one week's salary for each year of service. You'll also be entered into a program to help you find a new job in the marketplace. Again, one week for each year of service to the company." Taylor said the last statements as if he was proud and fully expected Hans to be equally pleased with the corporation's generous concession.

Hans was anxious, fringing on desperate. "What if I could get some volunteers together, we'll monitor the flight on our own time?"

"Sorry, Hans," the voice on the other end of the line didn't seem in the least bit apologetic, "but we couldn't afford the electric bills. Besides we need to sell off all the equipment in the office to cover our outstanding debts. We've already sold the building to World-Mart, they'll be moving in next week." There was a long, silent pause, where only a crackle could be heard over the speakerphone. "We'll need you to get everyone out of the build this morning. No exceptions."

"Nelson," Hans declared, "You get all four of my white feathers for firing everyone over the phone."

"What?" Taylor responded, for the first time sounding confused and disoriented, as if he'd been forced to go off script.

"Your English," Hans announced, "You should know what four feathers mean. It's a mark of cowardliness."

"Sorry, Hans, there is nothing I can do," Taylor seemed quickly able to regain his feet. His coldness and uncaring businesslike demeanor were clear, even over the phone. "It's the only deal we could work out. If we don't close down now, the entire company could be liable for fraud charges and most of us could spend time in jail."

Hans had trouble disguising his anger, "I suppose that's a good thing. If our team survives the journey, which is unlikely at best, they won't have to serve any jail time once they make it back."

“Sarcasm doesn’t become you,” Taylor decreed as if he was passing sentence over the director’s attitude.

“Well, stupidity does become you either. At least tomorrow I will be unemployed, but you’ll still be stupid Nelson.” Hans hung up the phone. Then he picked it back up again, only to hang it up in the next instant, but this time slamming the receiver down for good measure.

Laurel Jefferson, the corporate flight center manager, was outside the conference room. She’d been placed there by the board to ensure that Hans fulfilled his mandate. The two stood up before the assembled staff. Laurel read a statement which was both poorly written and filled with pointless generalities. Needless to say, the staff was disappointed and understandably a bit angry.

“Do you have an MBA?” Hans asked Ms. Jefferson.

“Yes,” she replied in a mouse-like voice.

“You need to go back there and ask for your money back,” Hans declared. “I never heard a weaker or more poorly presented point of view. If this is standard business practice, they need to do a much better job preparing you for this kind of thing.” It was a harsh remark to be sure, but it was obvious Laurel had voiced no objection to the proposal. It was clear when she had been informed, she had made no protest, had no care the decision would be affecting the lives of three people. Hans would have been willing to bet she’d not offered, nor even thought of, any alternatives.

In less than a week, Destination Space was a ghost town. Only six months after the Mars mission launch. Two days later, the US Air Force announced they’d lost the spacecraft on the radar. In addition, the ship was no longer sending back telemetry signals. It was as if the very fabric of space had swallowed them whole.

There was a cry from the public, led by military veterans. The ‘Leave No Man Behind’ campaign turned into a bitter feud between politicians of the various parties, each accusing the other of gross negligence. It was a war of words and none of the participants seemed to have any desire to see something done. The President refused to address the issue, saying only the situation would provide a useful lesson to other corporations and he pushed the fact his administration had added over 80,000 jobs since Destination Space had closed its doors. But proud as he seemed, it was less than half the number Destination Space had originally employed. 200,000 protestors marched down the mall in Washington DC to demand Congress act. The administration defined them as cranks, leftists, a clear minority and people who didn’t appreciate the effort the government was making on their behalf. As if declaring them such would create truth out of thin air.

In an authoritarian state, a decision would have been made quickly, even if it meant the government ordering the crew to walk out an airlock. But the wheels of democracy turn at a very slow rate. The administration, who had been elected on the platform the previous administration had done nothing, stood impotent. It became a major issue of the mid-term congressional elections.

In the end, it took congress over six months to order NASA to take over the ground control of the Mars mission. It took several more days for NASA to find the Nina. When they did find her, the world was shocked. What they found was impossible, the Nina was on a trajectory to return to Earth. They were heading home. Scientists were scratching their heads in unison. Everyone had agreed the ship didn’t

carry enough fuel for a direct turnabout. Destination Space had planned to send a second ship to recover the crew and bring them back to Earth. But it was unfinished when the company sank. Now it would never be completed. It took two more days for the Air Force to get access to the onboard video feed. Half the cameras were out and not transmitting. It appeared as if the ship had suffered a catastrophic hull breach, but there was no sign of the crew. Yet without bodies, no one could state for sure that had befallen Harrison, Herschel, and Kent. The news media went on a reporting blitz. Status reports were put up on social media hourly.

Every pundit on the planet had examined every square inch of the video feed for clues to the crew's fate. There were more arguments and conflicting opinions than there had been at OJ's murder trial. More attention was paid to the six-month journey home of the Nina than to all the other planetary space programs put together. China even organized a rescue mission. But the effort, mostly propaganda, was abandoned once it was realized the Nina would be back in orbit before the rescue operation could be launched.

It was already October when the entire world watched, with bated breath, as the external cameras showed the reentry module leave the Nina. By this time, almost all of the internal monitors had failed, and no one was sure if the craft was even manned. News anchors on every channel reminded everyone the tiny ship may simply be running on automatic. Things seemed to go from bad to worse as the ship drifted off course. It had been plotted to come down in the Pacific Ocean, but it was now headed for the Gobi Desert. Flights were dispatched from all over, with the intention of picking up remains of the crashed capsule.

Without any telemetry, no one knew the parachutes had deployed early and the reentry ship came down in a lake in China. It took almost eighteen hours of searching by helicopter to find the capsule's crash site. All three of the crew had suffered serious injuries, from a broken arm and bruised ribs to a crushed hand. The three were flown to Walter Reed hospital for treatment. One the way in, the astronauts were treated with live coverage of every move they made in the hospital which as being displayed on every streaming screen across the planet.

Taken to a hanger in Nevada, Scientists started pouring over the wreckage of the reentry craft, looking for clues as to what happened. Although it attracted much attention, the ship was carefully covered by a series of canvas tarps. As a result, all over social media, the only thing which could be seen was the scientists going in and out of whatever was covered by the canvas.

Colonel Harrison's damaged ribs were the first to be repaired and he was soon up and around. He fought his way through the press to get to Captain Kent's room. The man's hand was still a mess and doctors were off considering what to do next. A huge argument had ensued when the hospital made note of the fact the three were without medical coverage since Destination Space had folded. Finally, the two were joined by Major Herschel, who also had to fight his way through the press with his arm in a cast.

Harrison took off his dark blue Air Force cap once the door shut. "What are we going to tell them?"

"We tell them the truth," Herschel remarked.

Harrison looked disappointed. "You want to tell everyone we blacked out? We have no idea how we moved all the supplies into the reentry vehicle, so we could survive for the next six months?"

"I'm not looking forward to it," Kent remarked, "No one is going to believe us when we tell them we have no idea how the spacecraft got turned around."

"But it's the truth," Herschel complained.

"I don't think the truth matters to anyone." Kent replied, "They're looking for answers and expecting us to come up with some."

The argument went on for some time, as the astronauts had little more answers than the public. Eventually, the argument dissipated, with only Herschel and Kent continuing. "Something wrong, skipper?" Kent inquired.

"Isn't it odd no one had been here to debrief us or ask us any of these questions?" He seemed disturbed as if the world had lost its foundations. Herschel returned his dark glance, "We're no longer employees of Destination Space," he remarked bitterly. "I used to dream about going to Mars," Herschel remarked sadly. "It used to be all I thought about. Now I'm just glad to be home. But it's the end of a dream."

"It's as if we're living on the borrowed time. The dreams over all right. What happens when we wake up?" Harrison brooded. He looked up at the monitor in Kent's room, busily showing their capsule for the 40<sup>th</sup> time today. Harrison noted their pre-launch picture was always shown at the end. All three of them, smiling in their spacesuits. "It's as if we've been granted a reprieve by people watching us on social media. I guess they shared the dream as well."

"If it hadn't of been for them," Kent remarked, "We probably wouldn't be here. Heck, I only joined the company a few years ago. My medical coverage lapsed weeks ago." He smiled, referring the fact they'd been let into the hospital at all.

"It's not just that," Harrison remarked, "I have the strangest feeling something is slipping away. There something inevitable out there we can't avoid. Something closing in. I just can't seem to shake it. Maybe the reason why we can't remember what happened is because ... it didn't. Nothing happened. We're still up there somehow. That's why none of us can remember anything. There's nothing to remember."

"What you need," Herschel responded, "is a good cup of coffee."

"I can't even remember the last time I had a good cup of fresh coffee," Harrison's mood seemed to improve. "I think there's a coffee shop off the lobby." Now he even sounded atypically excited.

"Bring me back a Latte," Kent shouted as the two exited out of his room and headed for the elevator. The hospital corridors were strangely empty, but there was definitely a crowd in the coffee shop. "Give me two of your best decafs," Harrison demanded when he got to the front of the line.

"Thirsty, are we?" the barista asked.

"One's for my friend here. Have you met the famous Major Herschel?" Harrison smiled, "He's the one with the cast around his arm."

"If you say so," the barista looked nervous as if Harrison belonged in the psycho ward. Harrison turned to point out his friend, but he was nowhere in sight. "Where did he go?"

"Beats me fella," the woman handed him two cups of coffee, "you came in alone."

Harrison took the two cups of coffee and started looking around the crowded room. The major was nowhere in sight. During his frantic search, his eyes fell upon the same wall monitor which seemed to be in every room of the hospital. The anchor was busily reviewing the story of the crash. Harrison attempted to ignore him until he quite clearly heard him say both astronauts had returned. When he looked up. There he was with Kent in the pre-launch picture, but Herschel was nowhere to be seen. Harrison dropped both his cups of coffee.

Before the staff even had time to bring up a mop, the colonel was rushing for the elevator. He was almost out of breath when he arrived in Kent's room. "What's the matter with you, boss?" Kent asked. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Have you seen John?" He asked, trying to catch his breath.

"Who?" Kent looked confused. Then Harrison looked up at the monitor in the room. There was that same pre-launch picture he'd seen downstairs, with just him and Kent.

"John Herschel," Harrison's voice rose distinctly, "Major John Herschel, he was with us on the Nina."

"Boss," Kent looked distressed, "You know perfectly well we argued for three seats on the ship, but Destination Space could only afford two." Donald appeared distressed at his skipper sudden loss of memory. "Did you get hit on the head when we landed?" Kent was becoming concerned his commander had more than a few cracked ribs. Worse yet, he could have had something which was affecting both of them. While his commander had been gone, he'd been starting to feel the same ominous dread Harrison had expressed to him before he left. It was like they were still out there and there was no rescue coming.

"Jesus shit," Harrison remarked. He turned away from the captain and pulled out his phone. He had Herschel's wife's number in his smartphone. He scrolled to the H's. Harbour, Henry, Hispano ... wait a minute. He scrolled through all the H's again. Next, he scrolled through at every phone number in the device. Nothing. He checked his recent calls. He'd called John at least a hundred times before the launch. Nothing. In a panic, he turned to Kent.

The bed was empty. The sheets clean. Where once the top of the bed had been elevated, it now lay flat. Looking at the pillow, Harrison couldn't see any evidence of his friend and co-pilot. Only the monitor showed any signs of life. There was the commentator, relating the story of the crash of the reentry vehicle in China as he had done so many times before. In the end, he put up the picture of the crew from before the launch. Harrison stood there wide-eyed, staring at a picture of himself in a spacesuit.

Then, without warning the picture changed. The anchor went on to say, "And in other news ..." the station went on to discuss the football scores between a series of local colleges. A doctor and a group of nurses entered the room through the door. It was empty, except for the bed and the ever-present monitor. As they assembled, the news reporter as showing a hanger in Nevada. Scientists were pouring over a series of mysterious canvas tarps. What had once been hidden under it, no one could say.

The doctor turned soberly to the group of nurses. “I feel I have to warn you, the hospital is planning on making some serious cuts. It’s best if you find new jobs, this is permanent. The hospital will not be rehiring anyone. The hospital has agreed to pay one week’s salary for each year of service. You’ll also be entered into a program to help you find a new job in the marketplace. The hospital will pay for one week for each year ...”

Even in the days of Columbus, the Santa Maria had been lost. Her crew, like these space-age mariners, had been left to fend for themselves far from home. The maritime company who had hired them terminated their employment with little humanity. When Columbus returned almost a year later, they were all gone. Subsumed by the forest, as if they had never been there in the first place. They had once existed, but don't any longer. Someone ... or something ... took them.

Positions are never permanent. Employees have suffered these same kinds of fates for hundreds of years. What is new is the emotionless and uncaring way in which these events are now treated. Even Columbus had more feeling for his lost sailors than even the lowest of today’s corporate management. Hunger can be solved, diseases can be cured, what seems to be beyond the reach of man is how we treat each other.

So, if any of you have any questions concerning a spacecraft and three men who flew her, speak loudly of them and often ... for it may be the only way they continue to exist is become someone else cares. Maybe it was all a dream. Maybe all our lives are nothing but the dreams of others. But, if that is the case, it’s vital we remember the old aboriginal saying ... those who lose dreaming are lost.