

Man of the Moon

Naut often wondered about the origin of his name.

Was it misspelled because his parents were not educated? Or was it a negative expression because his parents thought of him as a mistake? *Parent*, precisely. His father abandoned the family when he was a child; partly because he wasn't a responsible man and partly because Naut was frustratingly annoying.

As a child, Naut once brought a stray cat home. When his mother asked him why, he said, "she is cute and her eyes are nice." It was adorable a reason enough, so his mother let him keep the stray animal. Few hours later, she found the cat locked inside a cardboard box; her tail wobbling about through a hole in the box. Attached to the box were two firecrackers modified with gunpowder which Naut had managed to find in the nearby Mining facilities.

"I just wanted to see if Schrödinger tested all possibilities.", Naut justified.

Fortunately, Naut's mother let the cat go but Naut's curiosity never got along with the safety of society.

No matter how notoriously Naut displayed his notoriousness, his mother was always happy about his wrong-and-right-doings. She knew he was going places; even if they weren't necessarily the right places. At least he won't be stuck with her working near the mines. When Naut gave his aptitude test to get into prestigious universities, they warned him of his rebelliousness.

"You show great aptitude and skills to understand what lies above and beyond, but you need to take care of yourself and the people around you." they said.

He wasn't particularly upset about this remark - he had learnt a great deal of humility from his mother and knew how to accept criticism. Just, not defeat.

His mother was overjoyed.

"Of course they speak of the skies and beyond! You have always adored the universe and what lies beyond our understanding. I won't be too sad, you know. Knowing you - I know you'll come back."

Tears were shed, goodbyes were said.

Naut never had any friends except his own mother. Bidding goodbye to your best friend is hard, even for geniuses.

What lay ahead was more victorious than anything; Naut was aware of this. He was leaving his home and his family but that was a step he gladly took. After all, in order to fly you need to gain momentum.

So, he enrolled - after almost a year of learning how to jump, walk and sit in space, Naut was tired of being under a simulated environment. It was time for him to taste the actual emptiness and void which lay beyond the skies. Soon, authorities let him launch into the galaxies above, starting his journey with the Moon.

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When he landed on Moon, Naut thanked the authorities below and asked them to give him some *time and space* to set things up. They replied saying he'd have plenty of both and they would keep communicating important things as the days passed. Naut's mission here was simple - understanding the mental and physical constraints of having a life on Moon.

He made it a point to set up his tiny room in his tiny space-station. The first thing was to open his bag and take out his things. Other than his clothes and equipment, he had two things which would provide him with joy, happiness and be the boon of his life on the Moon.

A pair of sunglasses - so he could look cool, even outside Earth. And a pack of M&M's - so he could snack on something while he watched stars collide and observe potential comet landings. But there was something else - deep down in his neoprene-coated nylon bag, there lay a gift.

Take care, my Astro Naut, the note on it said.

When he unpacked the present, a small digital camera took comfort in his rather small hands. A piece of paper was attached to it - handwritten with care.

My child, you've always lived in the moment. Maybe not according to how society wanted you to, but you did. I was always jealous of your free-will and brilliance. Then again, I made you. So brownie points to me?

Anyway, here's a little something for you. Take care of it and make sure you take enough pictures. Sometimes you need to live outside the moment for others to see through your eyes.

Love, always.

- Mum.

Naut held the camera close to his heart; if only it's lens and film could project his memories. He won't shed tears here, no. He knew his tears meant something only when it would hit the ground.

Days passed, weeks even.

Naut had never developed such a close bond with solitude. He missed his mother, but also wondered if his father was alive. He'd see the Earth from a great distance yet felt he was closer to his kind. That's the kind of belief he carried. So, he took pictures believing he would have people to share them with someday.

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Months passed.

He received a transmission from Earth that day - things were not particularly looking fine.

"There's... an epidemic here, Naut. You need to understand the situation. It is spreading fast and there's nothing we can do! We'll need to postpone your return for sometime."

He approved. The safety of his kind meant to him more than his discoveries and observations.

The days grew colder - inside and outside. Naut never hesitated admitting that Moon had become his home now. Still, he missed his planet.

Conditions on Earth grew worse - the pandemic spread across countries and Naut had never felt so helpless.

Another transmission showed up.

"We are collectively afraid of foreign objects and people. You need to be there for some more time."

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Was it the pandemic which destroyed the planet? Or was it paranoia? Naut could never guess. All he knew was that he was afraid of going back to Earth. He felt like an alien, if nothing else. Surrounded by machines, he had lost his sense of space and time. He lost to space and time. There were no messages from his mother. None from the authorities down there. But one fine day, another transmission arrived.

They were ready to have him back. Whatever remained of the species, anyway.

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Naut remembered watching every kind of science-fiction movie he could as a child. His mother would rent them from a nearby store - they'd often walk to it discussing Friday-night movie ideas. Though clichéd and done time-and-time again, most of these films spoke of a dystopian yet promising future. Now, Naut could feel these movies creeping up to him and his sense of reality as he saw Earth for what it had become.

Loss of hope, a limited population and sorrow surrounded every corner of every place. When he visited his house - authorities informed him that his mother couldn't survive the epidemic. However, she did leave a note behind.

My dear,

Here we are again! Me writing to you. If you read this... I am so happy you are back! I made a request to the authorities not to tell you about this message and keep it here, safely in our house so you could read it yourself. Pen and paper, the traditional stuff!

You know all about it, don't you? The 'cleansing', some of us called it. It's okay. By the time you come back, I won't be here. They found it in me too... and there's no cure.

All I need you to know is that I was happy, and I missed you a lot. But never, for a moment, think that I regret anything. You were made for things above and beyond and you succeeded!

Now, it is your duty to make sense of this new reality for you and others around you. I know you will do us proud, you always did. Remember, there's no point in answering the questions of curiosity if there's no one to answer to. So be gentle.

P.S. - Share those pictures with everyone!

Love, forever.

- Mum.

"...Sir, are you okay?"

Naut held the letter to his chest. Trying to cry, simply failing to do so.

"I'm okay. I just miss home."

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As the days passed, Naut collected stories and tales left by survivors around him. In doing so, he found the blacks, greys and whites everywhere. If there was something his days in space taught him the importance of - it was color. The gift of light. And so he decided, he would bring back color - a sense of *home* - back to his people here.

He combined shades of blue and red, tints of yellow and green, songs of magenta and cyan, dances of oranges and maroon.

When they asked him about his inspiration and the time he spent in space, he'd smugly reply, "I miss home. So I tried to bring it with me... here."

A scary statement for some, considering the recent pandemic.

But people looked through that and rejoiced; they all missed color.

No one knew about the Sunglasses, the Camera and the pack of M&M's. He knew... and he let others know, through the colors of his home in space.

-Tanay S.