

"REMEMBER ME TO THE MOTHERLAND"

By Joe Tripician

When Igor stepped inside the capsule, he had two thoughts: the cramped tin can would either become his victory chariot, or his funeral casket. He hadn't counted on a third option -- that the R-7-based launched Vostok, the glory of the Soviet space program, the fear of the capitalist world, and the envy of the rest -- would become Igor's personal time machine.

By 1964, the Soviets were shooting off more rockets than a Chinese teenager on New Year's, yet the Communist-controlled press reported only a fraction of them. It was not just for military secrecy that they were tight-lipped. A great many launches were failures, and some of those held human cargo.

It takes a certain person to be a Cosmonaut. Once you pass through the security clearance, training, the physical and mental exams, only then does the political selection begin. But Igor Ashirov was no cousin to any Politburo member, or drinking buddy of Krushchev; Igor was the classic farm boy with a dream. Unlike other country bumpkins, this one was a natural cosmonaut. And his loyalty was beyond reproach -- or reason. His superiors had told him that the prior launch, the one that shot his friend Nicoli into space, had never left the launch pad, had not hurled Nicoli's body into orbit. Cosmonaut Nicoli Grachev, Igor was told in a hastily-arranged briefing, had never been scheduled to fly, had never actually been a cosmonaut, had in fact never even existed. Igor thought that this would come as news to his parents who had pinned so much hope on their squat, stocky red-cheeked son, who loved rockets more than his pet dog Pchelka, whom Nicoli

had bravely sacrificed to the program, who died like him in a fiery ball in a botched reentry.

Sergei Korolev, their leader and Chief Designer, remembered the two dogs -- Pchelka and his furry palymate Mushka -- often in his talks to the corps, more than he remembered Nicoli Grachev, whose face was thereafter permanently erased from all official photographs. Failures were never acknowledged within the corps, as if the shame of them would collectively weigh down the unit, and with it the Soviet space program, the entire military, and indeed the very Motherland herself.

Somehow, thought Igor, only the gray-haired pot-bellied Politburo would manage to survive, living out the Republic's last days feeding on shashliki in their countryside villas. So rather than ruin the land he loved, Igor and his comrades never spoke of Nicoli, never traded gossip, even covertly. Did the courage that made these men born heroes falter when it came to the KGB? Or did the common sense that failed to stop them from sitting inside a tin sphere on top of over 15,000 kilograms of liquid oxygen and kerosene finally surface when faced with the more immediate danger of being "disappeared"? You and your family being erased overnight, like the photo of Nicoli and those two miserable dogs.

These thoughts plagued Igor as he squeezed his small frame inside the Vostok capsule. "Remember me to the Motherland," he told Feydor, as the young engineer bolted the iron-cast door.

When the R-7 ICBM lifted, its thrust powerful enough to flatten the beloved country village of his birth, the image of Pchelka's burnt body jolted into Igor's brain, and he flushed in embarrassment. "How selfish," he thought. "I carry the glory of socialism and the good will of the people with me and still my brain returns to poor Pchelka."

The ride up was as rough as Yuri and the others had described, but Igor was still unprepared for the battering his body took. He traveled upward, reaching for space, fighting against earth's gravity and the heaviness of the already sorrowful longing for his family. Dear Leva, his wife of two years, by the stove, her moist hair sticking to her joyful face, and sweet Mamma, secretly crying for her only boy, the strong shy cosmonaut.

His thoughts slowed down as the capsule finally broke free of the atmosphere and glided into orbit, the stars now his living companions, so cold; the earth, his wife, his Mamma, all lonely, so cold, nestled below under the milky air-white blanket, so very cold, something wrong, his head lighter than space, voices crackling, but cold and peaceful, gauges blinking madly, and the deep dark quiet of the slow, slow cold...

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Seaman Howard G. Jamison was sprawled on the deck of the USS Port Royal diligently working on his tan. Just 48 hours 'till shore leave, and he'd be back in the arms of Anne - or Hannah, then maybe Vickie -- and, if he had time, Toni. Why do guys ever get married, he wondered. It's a big, bad beautiful world of babes out there, and he was in no rush.

"What the-- " Jamison raised his head and peered at the shooting star, or whatever the hell it was that just dropped from out of god-damn-nowhere, like a bullet shot by God into the drink.

It was an ugly cast-iron cannonball that the crew fished out at the urgent insistence of their Commander Bruce Clark and the ever-present agency men. As soon as

it hit the deck Clark ordered all non-essential personnel down below. Ever since the stern National Security Agency men boarded at an unannounced stopover in San Diego, the crew couldn't even count the night stars without asking permission. Well, maybe by the time the agency men tore it apart, Jamison muttered, they'd make shore and he'd have enough time to spend with Chrissie, the foxy brunette who said he looked like Leonardo DiCaprio.

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Cosmonaut Igor Ashirov never saw the rapid turmoil below, out of reach of his frozen fingers, and beyond the will of his loyal comrades. The world would never get to marvel or tremble beneath Battlestar Krushev, his ex-leader's dream of a giant space station; and although Brezhnev was no fan of the space program, he continued to sanction it with a suspicious neglect that left Igor stranded when his biomedical vitals no longer transmitted his existence to the command center.

He became non-personed, just like Nicoli Grachev, his friend and brave cosmonaut who disappeared from history when the failure of his flight would have shamed the motherland. No statue or plaque would memorialize Igor Ashirov, and so his comrades kept his memory alive in their hearts, and never through their lips.

Death becomes fluid the moment we challenge it, tricking us into beliefs as wild and varied as our religions. Humans with the courage to face death may survive a small reprieve, but ultimately lose. For thirty-eight years Igor and death faced each other, locked in a celestial Mexican standoff. The cold of space, which took too many of his fellow cosmonauts, instead preserved Igor cryogenically. The freak occurrence of a

sudden leak in the Vostok capsule at a critical point during its entry into space essentially flash-froze Igor inside his space suit before the danger of a rapid depressurization caused his fluids to boil him from the inside. Miraculously, no damage was done to a single cell of his body. In fact, when the NSA men pried him out of the capsule for the first time in almost half a century, they remarked how very young he looked and how superbly space had preserved him.

Back in 2002, when a CIA operative in Armenia passed purloined information from a retired KGB officer from Moscow, it made its way to a Russian mobster in Brighton Beach, and from there to a Columbian drug runner in Bogotá who was intercepted by the FBI in Lima, Peru. In a rare occurrence of inter-agency cooperation, the FBI passed the files on to the CIA who enlisted the NSA in tracking Igor's long-forgotten orbiting capsule.

Long-since erased from the files of the Russians, and living only in the faint memory of a few, Igor's legacy now belonged solely to the Americans, his fate to be decided by the country of his once former enemy.

The decision to bring it down was solely the U.S. President's, who saw in Igor's saga a faint reminder of his own lost childhood, and a publicity bonanza of the century.

So, Igor was knocked out of orbit by a strategically tweaked spy satellite during one of its brief passes. The hit was calculated to send the capsule back to earth, shield first, and into the watery arms of the Pacific.

While Jamison was below reading *Penthouse*, the agency men were wrapping Igor's body in aluminum, like a weathered turkey. The underground lab at National Institutes of Health was a bunker of high-tech marvels where Igor received better care than at any of his medical visits in the Moscow Space Center.

From their vast library of secrets, the technicians at NIH employed a nano-bot self-healing system for reviving the cryogenically frozen. Their first human test failed and the subject became, following the tradition of their Soviet counterparts, non-personed. In spite of, or because of, this failure the agency's program was given all-out carte blanche: a bio-medical Manhattan Project, the dark details of which have not been disclosed. And so, on August 25, 2004, Igor Ashirov was revived.

During the long months, Igor's body responded slowly but well to his rebirth; progressing from an infant's utter dependence, to a child's wondrous and frightened curiosity, to a teenager's angst in stunning rapidity. No one knew whether he would suddenly lapse into madness, become comatose, or sustain a massive heart failure (although there was much unsanctioned office betting.) When the defrosted cosmonaut regained use of his tongue, the long-bottled fear and pride also revived.

At first he could not accept the descriptions of his new world, but the abundance of images from the last half-century finally convinced him. For Igor, the joint cooperation between Russia and America in the International Space Station was more heartening than one would think.

"Battlestar Krushev finally lives!" he shouted, leaping from the examination table and landing on his face when his long-unused legs gave beneath him.

Henry Sterling, his debriefer, a short and stylish man whose days at the Moscow Embassy taught him to appreciate a finely tailored Italian suit, and a finely tuned female Russian leg, picked him off the floor.

"Russia is also taking paying tourists up to the Station," Henry told Igor, after helping him to a chair. He carefully observed Igor's reaction. Henry had mastered enough psychological assessment and manipulation skills to impress his colleagues at

Langley, and to fight against encroaching retirement as he pushed 64. Igor had been shown the TV newscasts of the fall of the Berlin wall, the Yelstin coup, and the battling in Afghanistan and Chechnya; but none of those events so staggered him as the sight of an American businessman and a ragged pop star paying \$20 million each for a tourist ticket to be lifted into space.

Up to now Igor had been eager to get back atop a rocket, almost as much as he wanted to see his dear wife Leva. But this crass commercialization was more appropriate for capitalist Americans than the stolid citizens of the Soviet Republic. For one fleeting moment he considered abandoning his idea of re-entering space, but not even the worldwide collapse of Socialism could pry him from that dream. The agency men, however, had other ideas.

For weeks thereafter Igor kept mostly silent. He's sinking into a deep depression, thought Henry, who often feared they'd lose him. But unlike other depressed patients, Igor displayed unrelenting and continued curiosity in this brave new world, devouring copies of newspapers, magazines, journals, and scientific reports. His one peculiarity, clipping out all the ads and habitually burning them in a nighttime ceremony, made Henry think twice.

With the smile of a practiced salesman, Henry approached Igor and offered him the thing the Russian requested more than a second trip to space.

"Your health has improved remarkably," said Henry. "How would you like to visit the Motherland?" Henry patted the cosmonaut's shoulders in a gesture meant to communicate solidarity, but merely fizzled into an awkward insolence.

Igor caressed the tiny photograph of his now aged wife, smiling absently, "How often I dreamt of my reunion with dear Leva, and yet..." Each time Igor spoke of her, his

eyes watered; mostly out of longing, but partly out of shame for his aversion to Leva's wrinkled and weathered skin. One night, drunk on Henry's smuggled vodka, Igor had confessed to wanting a divorce. But from the following day, and thereafter, Igor never again mentioned it -- and Henry never mentioned Leva's second marriage.

Plans were made to carry Leva covertly to Virginia. The entire operation was girded with security tighter than when Igor's capsule was fished out of the ocean. The NSA insisted, because the President insisted. The President changed his tune about publicizing "The Stalinstein Story", as it was unofficially known, for fear that the Russians would never admit to abandoning their own cosmonaut and hence be forced to retaliate by disclosing that unfortunate incident of the kidnapping of the Russian ballerina by an overzealous CIA agent who thought she was a money-laundering mobster. I worked too long on that deal to have it blowback, the President thought, must cramp the lid down on it tighter.

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At the bottom of the woman's hand-woven purse was the secret locket containing one of the last remaining photographs of Igor Ashirov, the future cosmonaut as a child of three proudly wearing his father's red star medal. Leva had not expected her daughter's American cousin to contact her, nor did she ever expect she would be traveling to that country, or even leaving her basement room in the outskirts of Moscow. She was only thankful that this distant and unknown relative took pity on a twice-widowed peasant whose first husband's pension never materialized.

The old woman was escorted into the empty, florescent-lit room. She sat at the table, drank from a glass of water, and gazed at her silver-haired image on the wall-size mirror. In the next room, darkened to prevent any one on the other side from seeing inside, Igor and Henry peered back at Leva through the two-way mirror.

Although endlessly conditioned for this moment by Henry and his team of psychologists, Igor was still unprepared for the sight of his dear Leva. Though just over 60, she looked like his grandmother. All that was missing was her knitting. No, here it comes from that purse. Igor turned away from the mirror and lunged at Henry, grabbing him in a headlock and pressing a steak knife against his neck.

"You did this to me! You devil-scum!"

The agents in the room drew their firearms

"Don't! Don't!" yelled Henry, commanding as much leadership in his high-pitched voice as he could. When the agents stood their ground, Henry addressed his captor. "Igor, listen carefully, you're feeling bad and acting violent."

"You're not my leaders, I will not obey you! You've taken me out of time, and I will not obey!"

"Igor, please listen, for your sake, for your wife's sake. We've given you everything you asked for. We did not do this to you. Your leaders in Moscow did this to you. They left you up there to die, but we brought you down. We saved your life. We brought your wife back, because you repeatedly asked us to. Just tell us what you want. What do you want, Igor?"

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The rocket lifted off the launch pad carrying NASA's latest passenger: a non-paying, non-military, non-person named Igor, whose love of space overcame the heartbreak over his home and his homeland. After closing his deal with the cooperative agency men, Igor nestled comfortably inside the roomy capsule, and for the second time in his life felt the sudden and rapid acceleration that signified celestial freedom. From this great height he looked down on the planet, trying to remember another world where he shared with his country the challenge of space without the moral pollution of commercialization. Before the second orbit the capsule exploded suddenly in a glorious nova.

Alone again in the heavens, and unknown to the world, neither the Russians nor the Americans would ever know the saga of this lost cosmonaut, though back on earth you could briefly see, even without telescopes, the fiery outline of a flaming red star.