

Roll Over, Dead Old Me

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People often hear ‘mixed-gender spaceflight’ and think – well, there’s an intergalactic gangbang just *waiting* to happen! – but what they don’t get is that space is an actual sexual suppressant, like a total boner-killer, because there’s nothing more gross than doing a full-twist Yurchenko into the zonal gas-cloud of someone else’s farts.

Nope, it just doesn’t work like that.

Also, lol, it’s like, gay people are astronauts too! No-one has ever said, hey, will you and Celeste get it on? In the deep slick of space, will you and Celeste, not you and Leonard, be the ones to fall in love?

Anyway, a lot of this is moot, because I am generally so sexless that nothing can save me from the fact that, if we played *Which Sister Are YOU?*, out of Princess Anna and Princess Elsa from the Disney franchise *Frozen*, I would 100% be Princess Elsa, because all the men I have ever loved tend to freeze to death in the perma-tundra of my dead old heart.

I have always been thus. It’s like when I feel something for a human male, it also feels terrible? Like I’m flooded with dark water? Like I fall in love with them, but I also just can’t be affectionate, can’t get properly *juiced*? Then, of course, they dump me *fast*, because who wouldn’t? Who wouldn’t?

Which is a shame, really, because I’ve decided I want a baby. In fact, making babies is the only thing at thirty-eight I really *want* to do. But my inner relational Arctic is just not conducive to making babies, and so instead I’m up here, hunting Baxylite with Celeste and Leonard, two people I do not know, do not love, and who have no care for me.

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Three weeks in, some distance from Earth, I start my first cosmic period. On every space flight I've ever taken, I've always taken the pill, one blister pack after the next, but I've read it takes 6-12 months for it to clear the system, so my prep starts now.

Up here, though, the period is terrible: beyond anything I've experienced on Earth. The pain is intense. My ovaries churn. My diarrhoea is awful. I cannot work.

'Just leave it to us,' says Celeste. 'We'll do your jobs for you, shall we?'

'Hey,' says Leonard, 'maybe we could be sympathetic here?'

'All this *waste*,' Celeste says, gagging. 'These *smells*. You make it difficult to be around you.'

I don't even know if what Celeste is saying is legal: whether I could report it, or whether I am the thing to be reported. Later I vomit into the vacuum tube. 'Sorry, Leonard,' I say, holding back my own hair. 'Sorry, Celeste.'

That night Celeste picks up my box of Tampax. 'You know, if you were on the pill you wouldn't have to have a period?' she says. 'Why *aren't* you on the pill? Is it babies, or something? Is it babies you want?'

I don't say anything even though the desire for babies is like the actual alien in *Alien* pushing its way out of me.

Celeste says that I can't be thinking about babies because I don't even have a boyfriend.

Well, yeah, Leonard says. 'There's this thing called dating.'

I think how nice that was of him: a man standing up for me.

'I am anti-menstruation in space,' says Celeste to no-one in particular. 'You've got someone in mind? Someone specific?'

‘No,’ I say, because I have never had anyone in mind.

In fact, I have managed my whole life not to have a meaningful relationship. In fact, I am so wholly without desire that getting pregnant is probably beyond me. But, as my mother said, you don’t need desire to get pregnant – and she should know, because everything she touched turned to ice, just like Princess Elsa, just like me – and yet I am around. Men were scary to her. I do not know why. But she passed this fear on to me. Keep yourself to yourself: this was her mantra.

Overnight, though, the pain stops. It’s weird: maximum pain for a day, then total tranquillity. In the morning I’m just floating around, feeling blissed-out and chill, but then something even weirder happens: I experience an arousal I’ve never felt before. Like, the tensionless air drives me bananas; the water is silk; and Leonard is suddenly a god of the infinite night?

And it’s not the frightening feeling I get on Earth, either, which, when it happens, folds me into a small dark box. It’s nice. As if, in the cruel albumen of outer space, I’m suddenly pure ignition?!

And I think: Is this what it’s like to be normal? What every other earthbound woman takes for granted? That I might get, one day, to be Princess Anna, with a warm and lively bloodflow pumping through my hands?

Inside me there is a new fire, and Leonard is a floating tinderbox. ‘Leonard, I’m horny in space during my period. Why is that?’

‘Oh, we’re all horny in space, dear.’

‘Oh, we are?’

‘Probably the magnetosphere. Magnetosphere plus your contraceptionless hormones.’ He then tells me nematodes and Japanese rice-fish are the only things to have copulated in space. He says all humans

would need is some duct tape to stop them undocking. I am looking at him. He is looking at me. We do not look away.

The next morning, Leonard has the medical log open.

So far, he tells me, we've had a hangnail (Celeste) and a bumped head (me). 'Do you want to log any of this?' Leonard says. 'Your' – he flicks his eyes from my head to feet – 'condition?'

He is such a handsome man.

'It's not a condition, Leonard. I am menstruating in space.'

'Celeste says you won't go on the pill because you want a baby.'

'So nothing is private here, hey.'

'Why would you even *want* a baby?'

'Yes, that's what Celeste said too.'

'Who do you have in mind? A sweetheart back home? Someone from Space School?'

'No-one,' I say. 'Genuinely, no-one. I'm just in prep mode. Getting ready. Doing a juice-cleanse?'

'Not even a random lay who might help?'

'No.' And, as is normal during these long missions of intense co-created living, I tell him my story: how all my relationships ended because each man wanted to be with a woman who, sometimes, maybe once or twice, actually put out; how I could only ever simulate desire rather than feel it, and how it seems impossible to think of myself as ever conceiving a baby, given I have zero desire on Earth, except, weirdly, while cosmically menstruating...

'Did something happen to you?'

'No,' I say, 'I'm just more Elsa than Anna.'

Leonard nods, understanding immediately. 'Perhaps you're not attracted to men?'

‘I think I am,’ I say, looking at Celeste.

‘Maybe my boyfriend and I could help you out on Earth.’

‘For real?’

‘Sure. He’d have to be the one to do it, though.’ He looks at me and shivers. ‘I personally could not.’

Period Two is exactly the same – read: cramps as a gateway to the land of paradise, newfound desire, and a belief in unconditional love, though Leonard is obviously not interested, what with his attraction to actual men, and Celeste is irritated that I’m still, in her words, relentlessly polluting the airwaves, and that I still won’t take the pill.

It’s fun, though, the new me. Racy! Bouncy! Lustful! A mischievous glint to the eye; a saltiness to my vibe. Here, Mother, I want to say. Look at what I was, and what I have become!

Because there’s nowhere to put these feelings – certainly not Leonard, certainly not Celeste, who is long bored with my inconvenient shedding – I start writing poetry. A sonnet? Maybe. Certainly there are mentions of roses and summer fruits. Then I write a letter, a eulogy, a funeral speech to my old frigid self: *Goodbye!* I write. *Auf **weidesehen!** Adieu!* Roll over, dead old me!

Just as the second period is done, we reach the asteroid. While Celeste maps it for minerals, Leonard and I haul in the Baxylite. I am glad for the task, the physical exertion, to put my body to work.

Leonard too is happy in our labours. We are completely trusting of one another vis-à-vis our safety, and are as cheerful as miners. When we finish we are exhausted, but in a resplendent way, and Leonard tells me how strong I am, how capable, how much he loves me, and that I can always, always be Princess Anna if I want.

He too is perhaps high on all this heavy labour.

‘Oh, give it a break, lovebirds,’ says Celeste, cracking open the locked-away sherry, though she too seems happy we have got what we came for.

When we’re done, we descend: fish-nets of stars disappear in our wake, black space a velveteen sea, Earth getting closer. There’s just one last time for a cosmic period, and I’m hopeful: like maybe I might continue with these feelings on Earth? Become the woman I’m meant to be?

Leonard has become my bona fide life coach this past month, and we have become very close. I have learnt to trust a real human man! And a plan is in place for when we get home: I will sleep with Leonard’s boyfriend, conceive a child, and start our new modern *familias*.

It will all be just perfect.

But during Menses Three something different happens, i.e. the fun goes. The period starts, stops, no cramps, no fanfare, no personality-modifying effects, no salt, no sass. Just a normal woman casually shedding her uterine lining in space. It’s all disappeared.

Where have the feelings gone? The long rope of desire? The air is fine; the water, liquid; and beautiful Leonard, not even that hot.

Was I kidding myself, all along? It is so so sad. It turns out the dead old me **was always** actually fully alive.

‘It’s gone,’ I say to Leonard. ‘I’m too close to Earth’s magnetic field. Oh God! I’ll be just who I always was. I know it.’

‘You’re freaking out,’ says Leonard tenderly. ‘You need to take a breath.’

‘Oh, thank God,’ says Celeste. ‘We can all stop listening to your cosmic journey into midlife womanhood.’

‘Oh, I’m so sad, Celeste, I’m so sad for me!’

‘Look at the Earth, look at its beauty, its majesty,’ Leonard says, as the blue planet appears as a tiny dot, and Leonard physically turns my head toward it. ‘Doesn’t that in itself turn you on?’

‘No, our planet doesn’t *turn me on*, Leonard. And please don’t say the feeling is inside you.’

‘The feeling *is* inside you. Well, it’s certainly not out here in the vacuum. Or in your crazy little ovaries. Remember who you are.’

‘Oh, sure, thanks for that, Mufasa,’ says Celeste.

‘Wrong movie, darling,’ says Leonard.

He squares my shoulders toward him.

‘What are you doing, Leonard? Lenny? Len?’

‘Remember *Frozen*? It’s platonic love that awakens Elsa from the frozen coma. Not romantic. That’s what melts away the ice. Her trust in her sister. Do you remember?’ he says. ‘You have to remember.’

‘Okay, Horatio,’ I say. ‘I remember.’

‘No,’ he says. ‘Be serious. I am here for you. I am holding you. That is my touch you can feel, and it is not a threat. Trust me.’ His rosebud lips kiss mine. ‘I am your sister. You are here. You are still right here.’

Gently, the feeling in my hands returns. Earth gets bigger, whizzing toward us, the blue tip of a gas fire, and inside me, there is a small flame too, ready and significant, and waiting to catch.