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STANISLAW LEM

Solaris

Translated by Joanna Kilmartin and Steve Cox

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FABER & FABER

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The Arrival

At 19.00 hours, ship's time, I made my way to the launching bay. The men around the shaft stood aside to let me pass, and I climbed down into the capsule.

Inside the narrow cockpit, there was scarcely room to move. I attached the hose to the valve on my space suit and it inflated rapidly. From then on, I was incapable of making the smallest movement. There I stood, or rather hung suspended, enveloped in my pneumatic suit and yoked to the metal hull.

I looked up; through the transparent canopy I could see a smooth, polished wall and, far above, Moddard's head leaning over the top of the shaft. He vanished, and suddenly I was plunged in darkness: the heavy protective cone had been lowered into place. Eight times I heard the hum of the electric motors which turned the screws, followed by the hiss of the shock-absorbers. As my eyes grew accustomed to the dark, I could see the luminous circle of the solitary dial.

A voice echoed in my headphones:

'Ready, Kelvin?'

'Ready, Moddard,' I answered.

'Don't worry about a thing. The Station will pick you up in flight. Have a good trip!'

There was a grinding noise and the capsule swayed. My muscles tensed in spite of myself, but there was no further noise or movement.

'When is lift-off?' As I asked, I noticed a rustling outside, like a shower of fine sand.

'You're on your way, Kelvin. Good luck!' Moddard's voice sounded as close as before.

A wide slit opened at eye-level, and I could see the stars.

The *Prometheus* was orbiting in the region of Alpha in Aquarius and I tried in vain to orient myself; a glittering dust filled my porthole. I could not recognize a single constellation; in this region of the galaxy the sky was unfamiliar to me. I waited for the moment when I would pass near the first distinct star, but I was unable to isolate any one of them. Their brightness was fading; they receded, merging into a vague, purplish glimmer, the sole indication of the distance I had already travelled. My body rigid, sealed in its pneumatic envelope, I was knifing through space with the impression of standing still in the void, my only distraction the steadily mounting heat.

Suddenly, there was a shrill, grating sound, like a steel blade being drawn across a sheet of wet glass. This was it, the descent. If I had not seen the figures racing across the dial, I would not have noticed the change in direction. The stars having vanished long since, my gaze was swallowed up on the pale reddish glow of infinity. I could hear my heart thudding heavily. I could feel the coolness from the air-conditioning on my neck, although my face seemed to be on fire. I regretted not having caught a glimpse of the *Prometheus*, but the ship must have been out of sight by the time the automatic controls had raised the shutter of my porthole.

The capsule was shaken by a sudden jolt, then another. The whole vehicle began to vibrate. Filtered through the insulating layers of the outer skins, penetrating my pneumatic cocoon, the vibration reached me, and ran through my entire body. The image of the dial shivered and multiplied, and its phosphorescence spread out in all directions. I felt no fear. I had not undertaken this long voyage only to overshoot my target!

I called into the microphone:

'Station Solaris! Station Solaris! Station Solaris! I think I am leaving the flight-path, correct my course! Station Solaris, this is the *Prometheus* capsule. Over.'

I had missed the precious moment when the planet first

came into view. Now it was spread out before my eyes; flat, and already immense. Nevertheless, from the appearance of its surface, I judged that I was still at a great height above it, since I had passed that imperceptible frontier after which we measure the distance that separates us from a celestial body in terms of altitude. I was falling. Now I had the sensation of falling, even with my eyes closed. (I quickly reopened them: I did not want to miss anything there was to be seen.)

I waited a moment in silence before trying once more to make contact. No response. Successive bursts of static came through the headphones, against a background of deep, low-pitched murmuring, which seemed to me the very voice of the planet itself. A veil of mist covered the orange-coloured sky, obscuring the porthole. Instinctively, I hunched myself up as much as my inflated suit would allow, but almost at once I realized that I was passing through cloud. Then, as though sucked upwards, the cloud-mass lifted; I was gliding, half in light, half in shadow, the capsule revolving upon its own vertical axis. At last, through the porthole, the gigantic ball of the sun appeared, looming up on the left and disappearing to the right.

A distant voice reached me through the murmuring and crackling.

'Station Solaris calling! Station Solaris calling! The capsule will land at zero-hour. I repeat, the capsule will land at zero-hour. Stand by for count-down. Two hundred and fifty, two hundred and forty-nine, two hundred and forty-eight . . .'

The words were punctuated by sharp screeching sounds; automatic equipment was intoning the phrases of the reception-drill. This was surprising, to say the least. As a rule, men on space stations were eager to greet a newcomer, especially if he was arriving direct from Earth. I did not have long to ponder this, for the sun's orbit, which had so far encircled me, shifted unexpectedly, and the incandescent disc appeared now to the right, now to the left, seeming to dance on the planet's horizon. I was swinging like a giant

pendulum while the planet, its surface wrinkled with purplish-blue and black furrows, rose up in front of me like a wall. As my head began to spin, I caught sight of a tiny pattern of green and white dots; it was the station's positioning-marker. Something detached itself with a snap from the cone of the capsule; with a fierce jerk, the long parachute collar released its hoops, and the noise which followed reminded me irresistibly of Earth: for the first time after so many months, the moaning of the wind.

Everything went quickly after this. So far, I had known that I must be falling; now I could see it for myself. The green and white chequer-board grew rapidly larger and I could see that it was painted on an elongated silvery body, shaped like a whale, its flanks bristling with radar antennae. This metal colossus, which was pierced with several rows of shadowy apertures, was not resting on the planet itself but suspended above it, casting upon the inky surface beneath an ellipsoidal shadow of even deeper blackness. I could make out the slate-coloured ripples of the ocean, stirring with a faint motion. Suddenly, the clouds rose to a great height, rimmed with a blinding crimson glare; the lurid sky became grey, distant and flat; everything was blotted out; I was falling in a spin.

A sharp jolt, and the capsule righted itself. Through the porthole, I could see the ocean once more, the waves like crests of glittering quicksilver. The hoops of the parachute, their cords snapped, flapped furiously over the waves, carried on the wind. The capsule gently descended, swaying with a peculiar slow-motion rhythm imposed on it by the artificial magnetic field; there was just time to glimpse the launching pads and the parabolic reflectors of two radio-telescopes on top of their pierced steel towers.

With the clang of steel rebounding against steel, the capsule came to a stop. A hatch opened, and with a long, harsh sigh, the metal shell which imprisoned me reached the end of its voyage.

I heard the mechanical voice from the control centre:

'Station Solaris. Zero and zero. The capsule has landed. Out.'

Feeling a vague pressure on my chest and a disagreeable heaviness in the pit of my stomach, I seized the control levers with both hands and cut the contacts. A green indicator lit up: 'ARRIVAL.' The capsule opened, and the pneumatic padding shoved me gently from behind, so that, in order to keep my balance, I had to take a step forward.

With a muffled sigh of resignation, the spacesuit expelled its air. I was free.

I found myself inside a vast, silver funnel, as high as a cathedral nave. A cluster of coloured pipes ran down the sloping walls and disappeared into rounded orifices. I turned round. The ventilation shafts were roaring, sucking in the poisonous gases from the planet's atmosphere which had infiltrated when my capsule had landed inside the Station. Empty, resembling a burst cocoon, the cigar-shaped capsule stood upright, enfolded by a calyx mounted on a steel base. The outer casing, scorched during flight, had turned a dirty brown.

I went down a small stairway. The metal floor below had been coated with a heavy-duty plastic. In places, the wheels of trolleys carrying rockets had worn through this plastic covering to expose the bare steel beneath.

The throbbing of the ventilators ceased abruptly and there was total silence. I looked around me, a little uncertain, waiting for someone to appear; but there was no sign of life. Only a neon arrow glowed, pointing towards a moving walkway which was silently unreeling. I allowed myself to be carried forward.

The ceiling of the hall descended in a fine parabolic arc until it reached the entrance to a gallery, in whose recesses gas cylinders, gauges, parachutes, crates and a quantity of other objects were scattered about in untidy heaps.

The moving walkway set me down at the far end of the

gallery, on the threshold of a dome. Here there was an even greater disorder. A pool of oily liquid spread out from beneath a pile of oil-drums; a nauseating smell hung in the air; footprints, in a series of glutinous smears, went off in all directions. The oil-drums were covered with a tangle of tickertape, torn paper and other waste.

Another green arrow directed me to the central door. Behind this stretched a narrow corridor, hardly wide enough for two men to walk side by side, lit by slabs of glass let into the ceiling. Then another door, painted in green and white squares, which was ajar; I went in.

The cabin had concave walls and a big panoramic window, which a glowing mist had tinged with purple. Outside the murky waves slid silently past. Open cupboards lined the walls, filled with instruments, books, dirty glasses, vacuum flasks – all covered with dust. Five or six small trolleys and some collapsible chairs cluttered up the stained floor. One chair alone was inflated, its back raised. In this armchair there was a little thin man, his face burnt by the sun, the skin on his nose and cheeks coming away in large flakes. I recognized him as Snow, a cybernetics expert and Gibarian's deputy. In his time he had published articles of great originality in the *Solarist Annual*. It so happened that I had never had the opportunity of meeting him. He was wearing a mesh shirt which allowed the grey hairs of his sunken chest to poke through here and there, and canvas trousers with a great many pockets, mechanic's trousers, which had once been white but now were stained at the knees and covered with holes from chemical burns. He was holding one of those pear-shaped plastic flasks which are used in spaceships not equipped with internal gravitational systems. Snow's eyes widened in amazement as he looked up and saw me. The flask dropped from his fingers and bounced several times, spilling a few drops of transparent liquid. Blood drained from his face. I was too astonished to speak, and this dumbshow continued for so long that Snow's terror

gradually communicated itself to me. I took a step forward. He cringed in his chair.

'Snow?'

He quivered as though I had struck him. Gazing at me in indescribable horror, he gasped out:

'I don't know you . . .' His voice croaked. 'I don't know you . . . What do you want?'

The spilt liquid was quickly evaporating; I caught a whiff of alcohol. Had he been drinking? Was he drunk? What was he so terrified of? I stood in the middle of the room; my legs were trembling; my ears roared, as though they were stuffed with cotton-wool. I had the impression that the ground was giving way beneath my feet. Beyond the curved window, the ocean rose and fell with regularity. Snow's bloodshot eyes never left me. His terror seemed to have abated, but his expression of invincible disgust remained.

'What's the matter? Are you ill?' I whispered.

'You seem worried,' he said, his voice hollow. 'You actually seem worried . . . So it's like that now, is it? But why concern yourself about me? I don't know you.'

'Where's Gibarian?' I asked.

He gave a gasp and his glassy eyes lit up for an instant.

'Gi . . . Giba . . . No! No!'

His whole frame shook with stifled, hysterical laughter; then he seemed to calm down a little.

'So it's Gibarian you've come for, is it? Poor old Gibarian. What do you want with him?'

His words, or rather his tone of voice, expressed hatred and defiance; it was as though I had suddenly ceased to represent a threat to him.

Bewildered, I mumbled:

'What . . . Where is he?'

'Don't you know?'

Obviously he was drunk and raving. My anger rose. I should have controlled myself and left the room, but I had lost patience. I shouted:

'That's enough! How could I know where he is since I've only just arrived? Snow! What's going on here?'

His jaw dropped. Once again he caught his breath and his eyes gleamed with a different light. He seized the arms of his chair with both hands and stood up with difficulty. His knees were trembling.

'What? You've just arrived ... Where have you come from?' he asked, almost sober.

'From Earth!' I retorted angrily. 'Maybe you've heard of it? Not that anyone would ever guess it.'

'From Earth? Good God! Then you must be Kelvin.'

'Of course. Why are you looking at me like that? What's so startling about me?'

He blinked rapidly.

'Nothing,' he said, wiping his forehead, 'nothing. Forgive me, Kelvin, it's nothing, I assure you. I was simply surprised, I didn't expect to see you.'

'What do you mean, you didn't expect to see me? You were notified months ago, and Moddard radioed only today from the *Prometheus*.'

'Yes; yes, indeed. Only, you see, we're a bit disorganized at the moment.'

'So I see,' I answered dryly.

Snow walked around me, inspecting my atmosphere suit, which was standard issue with the usual harness of wires and cables attached to the chest. He coughed, and rubbed his bony nose:

'Perhaps you would like a bath? It would do you good. It's the blue door, on the other side.'

'Thanks - I know the Station layout.'

'You must be hungry.'

'No. Where's Gibarian?'

Without answering, he went over to the window. From behind he looked considerably older. His close-cropped hair was grey, and deep wrinkles creased his sunburnt neck.

The wave-crests glinted through the window, the colossal

rollers rising and falling in slow-motion. Watching the ocean like this one had the illusion – it was surely an illusion – that the Station was moving imperceptibly, as though teetering on an invisible base; then it would seem to recover its equilibrium, only to lean the opposite way with the same lazy movement. Thick foam, the colour of blood, gathered in the troughs of the waves. For a fraction of a second, my throat tightened and I thought longingly of the *Prometheus* and its strict discipline; the memory of an existence which suddenly seemed a happy one, now gone for ever.

Snow turned round, nervously rubbing his hands together.

‘Listen,’ he said abruptly, ‘except for me there’s no one around for the moment. You’ll have to make do with my company for today. Call me Ratface; don’t argue. You know me by my photograph, just imagine we’re old friends. Everyone calls me Ratface, there’s nothing I can do about it.’

Obstinately, I repeated my question:

‘Where is Gibarian?’

He blinked again.

‘I’m sorry to have received you like that. It’s ... it’s not exactly my fault. I had completely forgotten ... A lot has been happening here, you see ...’

‘It’s all right. But what about Gibarian? Isn’t he on the Station? Is he on an observation flight?’

Snow was gazing at a tangled mass of cables.

‘No, he hasn’t left the Station. And he won’t be flying. The fact is ...’

My ears were still blocked, and I was finding it more and more difficult to hear.

‘What? What do you mean? Where is he then?’

‘I should think you might guess,’ he answered in a changed voice, looking me coldly in the eyes. I shivered. He was drunk, but he knew what he was saying.

‘There’s been an accident?’