

AN AB DISCOVERY SHORT STORY

ORBITAL MECHANICS

WHAT DO THEY WEAR INSIDE A SPACESUIT?



MAXWELL VOSS

Orbital Mechanics

by
Maxwell Voss

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Author: Maxwell Voss

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Samantha had been on the Valles Marineris platform for eleven weeks before she admitted to herself that the ache in her chest most evenings had very little to do with homesickness.

She had expected homesickness. Everyone had warned her about it, in the mild, faintly bored way senior staff warned junior transfers about things they'd stopped feeling themselves years ago. The strangeness of a sky that never quite looked right, the low simmering claustrophobia of pressurised corridors, the particular loneliness of a two-year rotation on a platform that housed forty people and felt, most days, like considerably fewer than that. She had braced for all of it, packed for it almost, the way a person packs an extra jacket for weather they've been told to expect, and had been mildly, privately proud of herself when the first month passed, and none of it had landed with the force she'd been promised.

What she had not expected, and had no ready name for when it arrived, was the particular feeling that settled into her most evenings around the ninth or tenth week, after a full shift in a spacesuit, when she peeled the thing off in the ready room and stood for a moment in the thick, unglamorous undergarment beneath it and felt something in her chest go quiet in a way it hadn't gone quiet in a very long time. It was a nappy, of course, but a plain white functional item, the same as all the others wore.

The spacesuit work itself was, by any objective measure, unremarkable. Valles Marineris platform ran atmospheric processing and mineral survey out of a cluster of habitats strung along the canyon's northern rim, and Samantha's rotation had her out on EVA three, sometimes four days a week, running diagnostics on the processing arrays and doing the slow, careful maintenance that kept forty people breathing air that hadn't existed, in any usable form, on this planet in several billion years. A shift ran six hours, sometimes eight, and the spacesuit, heavy, self-contained, engineered for a body that would not be permitted to step out of it for

anything short of genuine emergency, took for granted, in its design, the same fact every long-duration EVA suit had taken for granted since the earliest days of orbital work. The person inside it would, at some point during those six or eight hours or longer, need somewhere for their body's ordinary business to go.

The garment they issued for this was efficient and entirely without romance, a high-absorbency undersuit layer that every EVA-certified worker on the platform wore as a simple, unremarkable fact of the job, filed away in most people's minds somewhere alongside the suit's oxygen scrubbers and its thermal regulation as one more piece of equipment that made the work possible. Samantha had worn a version of it during her certification training on Earth, briefly, clinically, without feeling anything about it beyond the faint, practical relief of a problem solved before it could become one, and she had expected, boarding the transport out to Valles Marineris, that her relationship to it would remain exactly that: functional, unremarkable, a fact of the job and nothing more. It was, however, still a nappy, and nothing about it could convince her of anything different.

It had taken about six weeks for that expectation to come apart.

She could not, afterwards, point to a single shift where it had changed. It had crept in the way most true things crept into her life, sideways, through repetition rather than event. Six hours in the spacesuit becoming eight, becoming a fully unremarkable part of her week, until one evening in her seventh week on the platform, alone in the small personal quarters she'd been assigned, peeling off her undersuit after a long shift on the number four array, she had caught herself pausing before she stripped the last of it away, and had sat, for a full minute, on the edge of her narrow bunk, simply feeling the thick, familiar weight of it, before she made herself finish undressing and told herself, briskly, that she was tired, and that tiredness made

people notice strange things about their own bodies that meant nothing at all.

She had believed that explanation for perhaps two more weeks.

What broke it, in the end, was not a single dramatic realisation but a memory, arriving unbidden and with startling clarity one evening in her ninth week, while she sat on her bunk in exactly the position she'd caught herself in before, nappy still on, in no particular hurry to take it off. She was seven years old again, suddenly and completely, in the small back bedroom of a terraced house on the edge of a city she hadn't thought about with this much sensory detail in over a decade. She recalled the specific pattern of the wallpaper, faded roses on a cream ground, the particular look of morning light through curtains that never fully closed. She remembered her mother's hands, brisk and unhurried, fastening the tapes of a nappy with the same unremarkable competence she brought to packing school lunches or paying the electric bill, no more emotional about the task than she was about either of those things, and Samantha, small and sleepy and entirely unbothered, simply lying there and letting it happen, because it was Tuesday, or Wednesday, or any ordinary morning of any ordinary week in a childhood where this had been, for the first eleven years of her life, exactly as unremarkable as it had been for her mother.

The memory had arrived with no warning, and considerably more force than its content seemed to warrant. Samantha had sat on her bunk on Valles Marineris platform, twenty-four years old and four hundred million kilometres from that back bedroom, and found herself, without entirely deciding to, crying, not from sadness, not exactly, though there was something adjacent to grief tangled up in it, but from the sheer unexpected intensity of feeling something she'd spent thirteen years telling herself she'd fully finished feeling.

She had not, in the aftermath of that evening, immediately understood what to do with the discovery. She understood, dimly, that the spacesuit's thick nappy had done something the disposables of her teenage years never had. It had restored, through pure physical repetition, a sensation her body had apparently never actually stopped associating with safety, however thoroughly her adult mind had insisted otherwise. She understood, with rather more discomfort, that this meant the whole careful structure of her adult self, competent and unbothered and entirely put together, had been resting, this whole time, on a foundation she'd never actually finished examining.

She had, of course, been a long-time bedwetter. This was not new information; it was simply information she had spent a very long time filing under a heading marked *finished*, alongside other unremarkable childhood facts. Outgrown allergies, a stint of asthma that had resolved by adolescence, a fear of dogs that had faded somewhere around age nine. She had wet the bed nightly from as far back as she could remember until she was nearly sixteen, and her mother, for the first eleven of those years, had managed it with the same brisk, unbothered practicality she brought to everything else in a household that ran, by necessity, on practicality rather than sentiment. She had four children, a husband who worked long hours at a maintenance depot on the edge of town, not much time or emotional bandwidth left over for treating an ordinary bodily fact as anything more dramatic than it needed to be.

Samantha had liked it, as a child, in the plain and uncomplicated way children like things that make them feel safe. She had liked the routine of it, the fact that every single morning, regardless of what else had happened the day before, her mother's hands would appear, brisk and reliable, and set the small matter of the wet night right before the day's business began. She had liked, though she had not had the vocabulary at seven or eight or nine to

describe it this way, the particular experience of being cared for that required no thinking on her part at all. She did not have to earn it, or ask for it, or be good enough to deserve it. It simply happened, the way the sun came up, and it was, in a household not otherwise given to visible affection, the single most reliable evidence she had that someone was looking after her.

It had begun to feel different somewhere around eleven or twelve, in the ordinary, unremarkable way that childhood things begin to feel different when a child starts noticing, for the first time, that other children don't share them. She remembered the exact conversation that had done it, at a sleepover, age eleven, a friend's bemused and not unkind question about the nappy Samantha had packed without thinking twice, and the sudden, vertiginous understanding that this thing she had never once considered strange was, in fact, considered strange by nearly everyone she knew. She had told the friend it was for a medical thing, a bladder condition, and the friend had accepted this without further comment, and Samantha had gone home from that sleepover having learned, in the space of one evening, both a useful lie and a genuinely painful new fact about herself, and had spent the several years afterward doing everything a resourceful, embarrassed twelve-year-old could do to manage the gap between the two.

Her mother's remarriage, when Samantha was fourteen, had arrived at almost exactly the point where that gap had become, in Samantha's own private accounting, close to unbearable, and Gerald's arrival in the household, reasonable, patient, entirely convinced of his own good sense, had ended the whole matter with a speed and a totality that had left her, at fifteen, essentially untrained in managing her own body's nighttime habits with anything other than sheer terror. She had stopped wetting the bed within a month of the nappies being taken away, not because her body had finally, conveniently caught up with everyone else's, but because she had

trained herself, through several genuinely miserable weeks of interrupted sleep and cold, wet mornings and the specific dread of Gerald's mild, disappointed voice, to wake herself before it happened.

She had told herself, in the years since, a story about all of this that she had come to believe with real conviction. The nappies had simply been a childhood habit she'd taken slightly longer than most to outgrow, that the outgrowing, however unpleasant, had ultimately been correct and necessary, and that whatever residue of feeling remained about the whole business was nothing more than ordinary, faintly embarrassing nostalgia, no more significant than anyone's complicated feelings about any other piece of childhood left behind.

Sitting on her bunk on Valles Marineris platform at twenty-four, wet nappy still fastened, tears drying on her face, she understood, for what felt like the first time in thirteen years, that this story had never been entirely true.

She did not, in the weeks that followed, do anything dramatic with the discovery. This was, she told herself, not a crisis. It did not require a crisis response. She continued her shifts, continued her EVA rotation, continued being, in every visible respect to the thirty-nine other people on the platform, the same competent, well-liked, entirely unremarkable engineer she had been since her first day aboard.

What she did, privately, in the evenings, was allow herself, cautiously, and with a great deal of internal negotiation, to simply sit with the feeling rather than immediately correcting it. She began, without quite deciding to, staying in the wet nappy a little longer after each shift than the practical business of hygiene required, sitting on her bunk in the quiet of her quarters and letting herself notice, without judgment, what it felt like to be held that way, snug and thick and entirely accounted for. She eventually made herself get up and shower and become, for the rest of the evening, the ordinary self that

ate dinner in the mess hall and made conversation with her crewmates about processing yields and equipment failures.

It was on one such evening, perhaps three weeks after the memory of her mother's hands had first arrived unbidden, that the rest of it came looking for her. Not gradually this time, but all at once, the way a held breath finally lets go.

She had been thinking, idly, about nothing in particular, when her mind produced, with the same startling clarity as the earlier memory, an image of a small stuffed rabbit she had owned until she was nine or ten, worn soft with love, one ear gone thin from years of being chewed on in her sleep, which her mother had eventually, gently, suggested she might like to put away now that she was getting older. She had put it away. She had not thought about it, she realised, sitting on her bunk with the memory sitting fresh and unwelcome in her chest, in at least fifteen years.

She thought, next, unbidden and with a fresh wave of the same vertiginous feeling, of a dummy. It was hers, specifically, kept until an age she was now, as an adult, faintly embarrassed to put a number to, surrendered not because she had stopped wanting it but because her mother had, one ordinary afternoon amid the general business of raising four children, simply decided that enough was enough and taken it away with a briskness that had brooked no negotiation. She remembered, with an intensity that startled her, the specific comfort of it. Not merely the physical sensation but the entire accompanying feeling of being small enough, still, that comfort was allowed to be simple, that she did not yet have to manage her own distress through the elaborate adult machinery of reasoning and perspective and *getting on with things*, that she could simply want a thing and have it soothe her and that this was, at that age, entirely sufficient.

And then, last and most unsettling of all, because it arrived with none of the softening distance of nostalgia and instead with

something closer to genuine, present-tense longing, came the plain, physical memory of her own crib. It was dismantled and given away before she was old enough to properly remember using it, known to her now only through a single photograph her mother kept in an old album with herself at perhaps two years old, standing at the rail, one hand reaching up toward whoever held the camera, an expression of pure, uncomplicated trust on her small round face that Samantha, at twenty-four, found she wanted, with an intensity that frightened her rather more than the nappy ever had, to feel again.

She sat with all of it for a long time that evening, wet nappy still on, the platform's recycled air humming faintly through the vents, and understood, with a clarity she hadn't managed to summon in thirteen years of careful avoidance, that the nappy had never been the whole of it. It had simply been the door. Behind it stood the entire history of a childhood self she had put away not because that self had finished, or grown up correctly, or resolved itself the way childhood things were supposed to resolve, but because the people around her had decided, on her behalf and without much regard for what she actually felt, that she should be finished with it. She had spent thirteen years since then building an adult life on top of that unfinished foundation without ever once going back to check whether it had actually settled.

She did not tell anyone on the platform. This was not, she told herself, cowardice so much as simple pragmatism. Valles Marineris was a small, close-knit posting, forty people who ate together and worked together and knew, within a few weeks of anyone's arrival, most of the ordinary facts of each other's lives, and there was no version of this particular fact that Samantha could imagine surviving that kind of proximity intact. She kept it, instead, entirely to herself, confined to the quiet hour or two each evening when she allowed herself, cautiously, to simply be with it, the nappy worn a little longer than strictly necessary, the memories permitted to surface rather

than immediately suppressed, the occasional evening when she allowed herself, in the total privacy of her own quarters, to hold a rolled-up jacket the way she might once have held a stuffed rabbit, and to feel, doing so, considerably less foolish than she'd expected to.

She thought, more than once during those months, about what it would mean to go further, to actually acquire the things she found herself wanting, rather than simply sitting with the wanting itself. The platform's small personal allowance and its limited resupply schedule made anything elaborate essentially impossible. There was no discreet way to order a stuffed animal or a dummy through channels that logged every requisition against a crew manifest forty people effectively had access to, and Samantha, however much the wanting had grown, was not yet ready to risk the particular vulnerability of anyone else knowing. She contented herself, instead, with small private substitutions. A soft scarf, worn thin with age, that she began keeping folded on her pillow and occasionally, in the deep privacy of night, holding the way she imagined she might once have held something softer and more specifically shaped for the purpose. An old habit, revived without much conscious decision, of humming to herself in the last minutes before sleep, a fragment of a lullaby she couldn't place the origin of but which arrived, when she needed it, with the same unbidden clarity as everything else that season.

It was, she thought sometimes, a strange kind of loneliness, not the ordinary homesickness she'd been warned to expect, but something considerably more specific: the loneliness of wanting a particular kind of care that she had no reasonable expectation of ever finding, on a research platform four hundred million kilometres from anyone who might have understood it. She was surrounded by thirty-nine competent, capable adults who would, she was fairly certain,

greet the actual content of her evenings with anything from polite bafflement to genuine alarm.

She wondered, in her more honest moments, whether this was simply what the rest of her life would look like, a private, carefully bounded corner of feeling, indulged only in secret, managed rather than resolved, permanently at odds with the competent, put-together woman she presented to every single person who thought they knew her. She did not, in her twenty-fourth year, have any better answer than that, and she made her peace, as best she could, with the possibility that this might simply be the shape of things from here on.

And then it occurred to her that while she could never have a dummy or teddy bear or the like, she could have nappies. The supply of the plain white nappies was very large, as so many people wore them under their space suits just as she did. But she could wear one at night again and enjoy its snug fit, and while awake could wet it, remembering her not that distant years as a bedwetter.

And so she did.

It was simple to take an extra nappy after her EVA shift and after removing the wet one and showering, retape herself into a welcoming nappy once again. She felt the old familiar feelings, and it was a mere week in night nappies that she woke one morning to her surprise. The nappy was much wetter than it had been when she went to sleep.

She was wetting at night again. Accidentally. Like a child. Like a baby.

Both fearing and welcoming the return of bedwetting, it took only a few weeks before it was every night. And she found that she felt smugly happy about it as if it were a return to where she truly belonged. She had been terrorised into stopping bedwetting, and now she was a bedwetter again, as she truly felt she had never stopped being.

Her rotation on Valles Marineris ended, in the ordinary course of things, a year and eleven months after it began, with a transfer board that reviewed her record, found it, as expected, spotless, and offered her, among several options, a berth on one of the fleet's long-haul faster-than-light maintenance cruisers, the kind of posting that meant weeks of enforced suspended animation between short bursts of intense work, a posting she suspected most transfer candidates weighed carefully against its evident drawbacks before accepting.

Samantha accepted it within a day of the offer, with an eagerness she did not fully examine at the time and would only properly understand much later, once she'd had a corridor collision with the ship's pilot and a long series of quiet conversations to help her see it clearly. Some part of her, still holding the unfinished business of that back bedroom and that stuffed rabbit and that photograph of a trusting two-year-old reaching up from her crib, had heard *weeks of enforced unconsciousness at a stretch* and *short bursts of work punctuated by long private stretches with almost no one else awake* and recognized, without quite being able to say why, that this might be the first genuinely private space she had been offered since she was eleven years old.

She packed the worn scarf carefully among her few personal effects, tucked at the bottom of one duffel bag where a routine inspection would read it as nothing more than sentiment, and did not examine too closely, boarding the transport that would eventually deliver her to Kessler Station and the cruiser *Ellipse*, why her hands were faintly unsteady with something that felt considerably more like hope than like the ordinary nervousness of a new posting.

She did not know, boarding that transport, what waited for her on the other end of the crossing. A corridor, and a woman in a pink dress with a teddy bear under one arm, and the slow, careful unfolding of everything she had spent two years on Mars learning to

want and had no idea, yet, how she might ever be permitted to have. She knew only that something in her chest, quiet and patient and considerably older than twenty-six, was still waiting, the way it had been waiting since she was fifteen years old and had woken for the first time to an empty, unfamiliar bed, for someone's hands to come back and set the small matter of the night right again.

She would not have to wait very much longer. But she did not know that yet, and so she sat, through the long transport out to Kessler, turning the worn scarf over in her hands and wondering, with the particular ache of a question she had never once let herself ask aloud, what the rest of her life might actually look like, if she ever found the courage to stop managing the wanting and simply let herself, at last, be small.

Samantha was a bedwetter once again, and that fact brought a smile to her face that the nappy she wore every night was actually needed and not some kind of artefact.

And she wondered what her new posting would be like, where she could be just another engineer who had developed nappy-dependence, as happened to small numbers of others who had worn nappies for 8 hours at a time in space suits.

She was excited at the possibilities.

The End

NOTE: This story is also a prequel to the Maxwell Voss novel: Space Baby.