

## **Flying in the Face of God**

**Nina Allan**

**Anita Schleif:** *Have you thought about what you'll do if you're not passed fit to take part in the mission? There have been media reports of how difficult it is for discharged fliers to be accepted back into society, of how women fliers especially have been treated as pariahs. How does it make you feel as a woman, knowing that the Kushnev drain will make you permanently infertile?*

**Rachel Alvin:** *I don't ever think about failure. I don't see the point. I want to put all my efforts into succeeding. As for becoming infertile, it's a decision you take, like any other, like having children or not having them. Life is all about making choices, and in making one choice you inevitably close the door on another. Fliers find it hard to fit in because being a flier is a vocation. Anyone who chooses to follow a vocation finds ordinary life difficult and mystifying, whether they're an artist or a missionary or a mathematician. The Kushnev drain is only a part of it. Mainly it's a question of focus, of intense focus on only one thing.*

**From the transcript of *Shooting the Albatross: The Women of the Aurora Space Program*, a film by Anita Schleif**

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The outward effects of the Kushnev drain were many and varied; with Rachel it had exaggerated her freckles. They looked darker than before and slightly inflamed, standing out on her face like divots of rust. It was hot in the carriage, and Rachel's brackish, slightly acrid body odour was particularly noticeable. Anita watched the man in the opposite seat wipe sweat from his upper lip with the back of his hand then hoist his briefcase onto his knees and take out *The Times*. She saw him staring at Rachel over his newspaper, the way civilians always did with fliers, especially the women. Two stops down the line he left the train, leaving Anita and Rachel with the carriage to themselves.

Rachel stood up and tried to open the window but the sealing-catch, with its rusted-down hasps, proved too much for her. It was an antiquated design, something Anita remembered from her school days. She was surprised to see it. She had thought all the old-style compartment trains had been decommissioned years ago.

She got to her feet and opened the window, releasing the sticky catch with the heel of her hand. Warm air rushed in, filling the carriage with the smell of dried grass.

“You mustn't put your muscles under strain,” said Anita. “Remember what the

doctors have said.”

“I just feel so useless. I can hardly do anything now.”

“The things you can do are different, that’s all. You know that better than anyone. Stop giving yourself a hard time.”

Rachel turned to face the window. Her thinning hair blew back a little from her face. Anita wondered if Rachel would be allowed to keep what remained of her hair, or whether it would have to be shaved off, or whether it would fall out soon anyway. She thought of asking for the sake of the film, then realised she didn’t want to know. When compared with other aspects of the process it was a small matter. But she had always loved Rachel’s red hair.

“I went to the supermarket with Serge last night,” said Rachel suddenly. “Just after you left. I wanted to help him stock up. It was no good though, it was all too much. I had to go and sit in the car. It’s hard to explain, it’s like you’re drowning in colour and noise. The sight of all that food makes me feel ill.” She paused. “We tried to make love but it was hopeless. When he tried to go inside me it hurt so much I had to tell him to stop. They gave us this special lubricant but it’s useless, at least it was for me. Serge told me it didn’t matter and I made it all right for him of course but I could tell how upset he was. He was ages getting to sleep.” She turned back towards Anita. Her eyes, once dark blue, were now a faded turquoise, opaque as chalk. “Will you go and see him once I’ve gone? I know he likes talking to you.”

Anita nodded. “Of course I will.” She wondered if this was some covert way of

Rachel giving her permission to sleep with Serge, to take him over, perhaps. She knew it would be tempting for both of them, but she must not allow it to happen. She loved Serge, but as a brother. To try and alter things could be disastrous. They would do better to behave as they always did, by going to films together and cooking curries and talking about Rachel. In the end Serge would meet someone else and that would be painful but at least their friendship would still be intact.

In the last six months, both during Rachel's leave and immediately before, Anita had tried to concentrate all her energies on the film she was making about the women fliers. The idea for the film had arisen directly out of her early conversations with Rachel and she had begun the project almost without realising it. In many ways she still felt uneasy about it. She didn't like the idea that people might see the work as in some way connected with her own life, as a comment on the death of her mother. She found such notions intrusive and unwelcome. But now she had started work it was impossible for her to draw back. She even supposed that at some level people would be right to assume that the film had a personal context, although its subject was not her mother of course but Rachel.

Rachel was now producing less than ten millilitres of urine a day. Her skin had increased in thickness and had lost most of its elasticity. She was eating next to nothing and sleeping little. The sleep she had would be feverish and noisy with dreams.

Anita's researches had made her an expert on the Kushnev process. Rachel had

pulled a few strings and she had been allowed in to see Clement Anderson, the team doctor. He refused her request to film him, but he had agreed to a taped interview, and she had been allowed to shoot a few brief sequences around the base. There was some footage of the fliers in the team canteen that she knew would come across very well.

“The drain triggers a permanent change in the way cells grow,” Anderson had told her. “Crudely put it’s a form of cancer.” He had given her a folder of printed material and a DVD of Valery Kushnev explaining his theories. Kushnev’s accent was so strong they’d had to include subtitles. The Kushnev process derived from cockroaches. Cockroaches, Kushnev explained, were the hardiest of species. They could endure the harshest of conditions and subsist on next to nothing. If necessary they could shut down most of their functions, regressing to a state of suspended animation until an improvement in external circumstances allowed them to continue with their lives.

*“During the journey itself our fliers will exist in a half-life,”* said Valery Kushnev on the video. *“A kind of para-existence, in which there is full intellectual function but without the accompanying stress of biological need. In this way we cross the emptiness of space. Our fliers are the new pioneers. In a very real sense they are following in the footsteps of Columbus.”*

At this point he chuckled, showing teeth that were eroded and stained with nicotine. Anita had watched the film more than a dozen times.

“How’s Meredith?” said Rachel. “Did you call her last night?”

Anita started in her seat. For a moment she had almost forgotten where she was.

“She’s fine,” said Anita. “She asked after you.” It was becoming increasingly difficult to talk to her grandmother on the phone. They had unlimited free calls at Southwater House, but she refused to have the webcam on and disembodied voices seemed only to confuse her more.

“How is that friend of yours?” she had said. “Are you bringing her down to see me?”

“You mean Rachel, Gran,” said Anita. “Her name is Rachel. We came down to see you last week.”

Her grandmother’s short-term memory was becoming increasingly erratic but on some days Meredith Sheener was as sharp as ever, keen to read the newspapers at breakfast time as she had always done and even able to complete a small section of the crossword puzzle. She was still a demon at cards. Anita had tried talking to the visiting consultant about this, asking him if the card playing might help to stimulate other areas of her brain, but he brushed her words aside, shaking his head as though she had asked him if her grandmother might perhaps one day take up deep-sea diving or decide to learn a second language.

“Oh, they all have something,” he said. “With some it’s cards or backgammon, with others it’s a photographic memory for Shakespeare. It doesn’t mean anything.

An old person's brain is like a capsized steam freighter: you'll find pockets of air here and there but the ship is going to sink in the end. Nothing to set much store by, I'm afraid."

Anita remembered the look on his face, the tight, harassed expression of a man with too many demands on his time. He was tall, grey, and gaunt, his fingers slightly twisted from arthritis.

"He's a good-looking man, that doctor, don't you think?" This was something her grandmother said every time Anita visited. Anita knew she fretted about her not being settled with anyone. She wished she could reassure her in some way, explain how her love for Rachel sustained her as much as it caused her pain. She touched the pendant around her neck, feeling its bumpy contours through the thin green material of her blouse. It was something she often did at times of stress or uncertainty. The pendant seemed to act as a lodestone, bringing her back in touch with who she was.

It hung on a silver chain, a small, finely-worked figurine in the form of a dodo. Her grandmother had once taken her to see the dodo skeleton on display at the Natural History Museum. Anita had gazed at it with intense curiosity, almost with reverence.

"Why are there no real dodos?" she asked. She had been about eight at the time.

"The dodo forgot how to fly," said her grandmother. "It lived on the island of

Mauritius, right in the middle of the Indian Ocean. There were no people there, and no other big animals either, so it was perfectly safe. It didn't really need its wings at all. But when hunters finally came to the island the dodo couldn't get away from them. They were shot and killed in their thousands. In less than a hundred years they were extinct."

Anita thought it was terribly sad. She felt a huge anger towards the hunters, with their ridiculous feathered hats and their carefully-oiled fowling pieces. Later, when they got home, her grandmother had shown her Mauritius on the map.

"It was like a paradise island when sailors first discovered it," she said. "So much of the world was still unknown then. Imagine how it must have felt, to set foot in a place that no one had ever seen before."

As a child she was allowed to wear the pendant occasionally as a treat, but when Anita turned sixteen her grandmother gave her the silver dodo and told her it was hers to keep.

"It belonged to your mother," she said. "She wore it until the day before she died."

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When they got to Charing Cross they had a minor argument. Anita wanted to go with Rachel all the way out to Northolt but Rachel insisted on continuing with the



journey by herself.

“How are you going to manage?” said Anita. “What about your luggage?”

Rachel couldn't carry anything heavy because her bones were still at the brittle stage. There was also the question of safety. There had been a couple of attacks on fliers in recent months, supposedly by tube gangs, although on all but one occasion the incidents had happened at night.

“I've only got one suitcase,” said Rachel. “Nothing is going to happen.” She laid her hand on Anita's arm, her fingers brownish, a bunch of dry twigs. “I need some time to get adjusted. If you follow me right to the wire I'll blub like a girl.”

Anita tried to laugh. She remembered another conversation they had had, the argument that had erupted between them on the morning Rachel received her commission.

“It's too late for this, don't you see that?” Rachel had screamed at her. “It's been too late from the day I had the first course of injections. Don't you think I could do with some support? Has it ever occurred to you I might be scared, too?”

In the end Anita went with her as far as the Underground. They went to a café just off Leicester Square. From the outside it looked coolly inviting, but there was something wrong with the air conditioning and Anita's neck and armpits were soon streaming with sweat. Rachel of course hardly registered temperature changes any more. She wet her lips with small sips of mineral water while Anita drank a glass of orange juice, feeling it slip down her throat in freezing gouts. At the end of twenty

minutes Rachel called for the bill and then stood up to go.

“It’s time,” she said. “The longer we put it off the worse it will be.” She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed at her eyes, although Anita was sure this was just out of habit; Rachel’s tear ducts had dried up some time ago.

Once they were outside on the street Anita turned and took her in her arms.

“I love you,” she said. “I love you so much.”

“I know,” said Rachel. “I know you do.”

They went down the escalators to the Piccadilly Line. A youth with tattooed black mambas encircling both forearms helped Rachel onto the train.

“Going up soon then, are you?” he said. “I think you’re the business.” He steered her gently, almost tenderly towards a seat. The train doors slid closed. Anita raised her hand, meaning to wave, but Rachel’s face was angled away from her, talking to the boy with the snake tattoos. As Anita watched he threw his head back, his green eyes crinkled closed in a soundless laugh.

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Once Anita was back at Charing Cross she telephoned Serge. He sounded distant and preoccupied and for the first time it occurred to Anita that he might have started seeing someone else. Anita had never talked to Rachel directly about Serge. She had taken his continued presence as proof of his devotion. It was something she

admired, something that softened the worst pangs of her jealousy. Now she wondered if she had simply been blind.

“I won’t be at home for a while,” she said to him. “I’m going down to visit my grandmother. I’ll probably be away for a couple of days.”

She didn’t know why she was telling him this. The decision to go and see her grandmother had come upon her spontaneously, almost while she was having the conversation. She pressed the phone hard to her ear, trying to catch every nuance, any suspicious change in his tone of voice.

“I’ll see you in a couple of days then,” he said. “Are you OK, Anita? Are you sure you wouldn’t like to come round?”

“I’m fine,” she said. Quite suddenly he was the last person she wanted near her. “I’ll come and see you as soon as I get back.”

She changed trains at London Bridge and then again at East Croydon. The fields either side of the tracks were yellow and cracked. There had been no rain to speak of since April. Drought-summers were common now and were said to be becoming more common, though Anita remembered them even from her childhood, the standpipes in the streets, the ‘dry hours’ between eleven and four. One of her friends from school then, Rowland Parker, had once gone six whole months without washing.

“It’s my patriotic duty,” he said. His friends egged him on, placing bets on how long he could hold out. He stank like a muskrat, but the skin beneath his clothes

had been smooth and clean. His smell had attracted her: feral and vital and somehow other. Anita remembered touching his penis, its immediate and startling response.

It had been Rowland Parker who had first told her about her mother.

“Your mum died in that fire, didn’t she?” he said. “That explosion on board the rocket. There’s stuff about her on the Internet. My brother told me.”

They had been sitting out by the Old Pond, side by side on the concrete platform that people had once used to dive from into the lake. There was no water now, of course, just a foot or so sometimes in winter. In summer the lake was a dense mass of greenery, of hogweed and bramble and dead nettle mostly, but other things too, poppies and foxgloves, plants that didn’t grow much anywhere else. Her grandmother said it was because the soil under the Old Pond always stayed slightly damp. The concrete was burning hot beneath the soles of her feet. She squinted through her lashes at the three o’clock sun.

“My mother died in an air crash,” she said. It was what she had always been told.

“Oh,” said Rowland Parker. “Sorry. My brother must have got it wrong.” He glanced at her sideways then looked down at his hands. His feet were dangling over the rim of the dried up lake. She thought he had beautiful feet, long and narrow, like a gipsy boy’s. He had three large mosquito bites just above his ankle bone. They formed an almost-straight line, three pinky-red full stops.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Anita. “I never knew her. I was a baby when she died. I don’t remember anything about her.”

She didn’t know what to think, and this, at nine years old, was her first real experience of uncertainty. If what Rowland said was true then what she had been told before was not true, or at least not the whole truth. The world, previously a place of straight lines and lighted spaces, became suddenly darker and full of crooked shadows. When she got home that evening she found herself looking at her grandmother, studying her almost, and wondering *who exactly she was*. Meredith Sheener, a young woman still at only fifty, her thick hair piled high on top of her head. Was Meredith her grandmother at all, or some impostor sent to lie to her? The idea was frightening but Anita could not deny there was also an element of excitement to it. She ate her supper in silence, thinking hard. She wondered what would happen if she forgot how to speak, just as the dodo had forgotten how to fly. She wondered what it would be like to spend the rest of her life as a mute.

They had a mute at school, Leonie Coffin, though she was teased more for her name than for her silence.

It was her grandmother who spoke first.

“Are you all right, my darling? Did something bad happen today?”

She was briefly tempted to say nothing, because that would be more enigmatic and more in keeping with the seriousness of the situation but in the end the directness of her grandmother’s question made her unable to resist answering it.

“Rowland said mum died on a rocket. Is that true?”

Meredith Sheener had answered at once and without prevarication. It was that, more than anything else, that persuaded Anita that Meredith was telling the truth. She said that Anita’s mother Melanie had died on board a rocket called the *Aurora One*. The rocket had been sabotaged, and exploded on take-off. Everyone on board had been killed instantly, and several ground staff had died in the fire that destroyed the launch site. Anita’s father had been one of them.

“The papers wouldn’t leave us alone,” said Meredith. “It was terrible for everyone, of course, but it was Melanie they were most interested in because she was the only woman.”

“But who would want to blow up a rocket when they knew there were people inside?” In spite of her determination to be detached and grown up about it Anita could feel her heart clench in her chest.

“People who are no good at all,” said her grandmother. She sighed and bowed her head, rubbing at her eyes with the back of her hand. “There were some people who thought it was bad to send human beings into space. They complained about the money it cost, and said it should be spent on feeding poor people and building schools and hospitals and churches here on Earth. But that wasn’t the main thing. Mostly they thought that human beings shouldn’t get above themselves, that if people were meant to fly they would have been born with wings. A blasphemy, they called it, flying in the face of God. They called themselves the Guardian Angels, but

what they actually did was kill people.”

Anita fell silent again. The feelings inside her jostled for attention. It was exciting that her mother had been a space woman. It was also exciting, in a way that she would not have admitted to anyone except perhaps Rowland Parker, that her mother had been someone important enough for people to want to kill. It was exciting but it was also terrifying. She felt suddenly exposed, as if her life too might be in danger.

She wondered if it were possible to feel grief for someone she did not remember, who was connected to her by fact but not by actuality.

She asked her grandmother if she could have a photograph of her mother to keep in her room. She had seen photographs of course, plenty of them, images that had become so familiar they seemed to her now like film stills, pictures that made her mother common property, like an actress or a politician. She thought that owning one of these photographs might make her mother seem more real. Meredith Sheener went into her bedroom and a little while later came back with a red cardboard wallet. It contained two photographs, a duplicate of the one of her mother graduating from Oxford that her grandmother kept on her dressing table and another, previously unknown to her, showing Melanie in a checked shirt with a baby in her arms.

“That’s you at eight weeks old,” said her grandmother. “It’s the only picture I have of the two of you together.”

Anita's throat felt tight and closed, as if a large weight was pressing down on her windpipe. When she asked tentatively if there were any photographs of her father her grandmother shook her head.

"I'm sorry dear, but I just don't have any. I hardly knew Malcolm really. They had only been married six weeks."

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*AS: Can you tell me something about how you got involved in the space program? You already had a good career as an industrial chemist, a lot of respect from your colleagues, plenty to look forward to. Some people would say you've sacrificed your humanity for the sake of the Aurora project. What made you want to do this in the first place?*

*RA: This is something I remember quite clearly. When I was eleven years old I saw a film called Voyage to the Sun, which wasn't about space travel at all but about the first sea transits to America and the West Indies. I'd learned these things at school of course, but seeing the film made everything seem more real. I'd never been more excited by anything in my life. What excited me most was the idea that our world had once been dangerous, that huge areas of our planet were still unknown. The men who set off on those sea voyages didn't know where they were going, much less*



*if they would ever return. They risked their lives for the sake of an adventure and the idea of that just thrilled me to the bone. Later on I started to read about the early space pioneers and all those thoughts and feelings came back to me. I suppose they'd never really gone away.*

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Rachel Alvin had emailed Anita to say how much she had enjoyed Anita's short film *Moon Dogs*, based around a greyhound track in Hackney. They had corresponded for a while and then arranged to meet for lunch at an Italian restaurant in Soho. Anita was bowled over by Rachel. She was small and quietly spoken, her features too angular to be conventionally beautiful but there was something fearless about her, an audacity in her way of thinking that made her compelling. They seemed to form an immediate bond. It was not until later, when Rachel asked her if she was related to Melanie Schleif, that Anita realised it had not been her film that had drawn Rachel to her in the first instance but the simple fact of her surname.

"She was my mother," Anita said. "I was eight months old when she died."

"I don't believe it," said Rachel. "She's been a hero to me since I was small." She had gone quite pale, and her blue eyes filled up with tears. Anita felt a surge of jealousy and then repressed it immediately. Her mother was dead, after all. The important thing was not how she had met Rachel, but that they had met at all.

“I have some things of hers,” she said. “I could show them to you, if you like.”

The following Sunday Rachel had come to Anita’s flat in Woolwich and Anita had shown her the photographs she had, as well as a painted tin piggy bank, a wooden globe, a biography of Tereshkova with *Melanie Muriel Sheener* written across the flyleaf in blue biro.

“My grandmother got rid of most of her stuff because she said it was too upsetting to keep it, that it was like having a ghost in the house,” said Anita. “These few things are all that’s left.” Later in the afternoon they took the bus up to Shooter’s Hill and Anita showed Rachel the house she had grown up in and where Melanie also had spent her childhood. It faced the main road, a large Victorian villa that had once been a school but had later been divided into flats. Anita had not been there since she and her grandmother had moved out eighteen months before. She saw that the outside had been repainted. It made the place seem different, newer, almost as if her time there had been erased.

“The house is enormous inside,” she said. “There’s a lane at the back that runs all the way to Oxleas Woods. There were foxgloves. I played there all the time when I was a child.”

She would have liked to have shown Rachel the garden, but the side gate had been padlocked shut. It made her feel chagrined, angry almost, to be treated as an intruder in a place that had been her home for so long, even though she knew such feelings were illogical. She suddenly found herself wishing she had made more of an

effort to buy the flat.

“I loved it here,” she said. “It was somewhere I always felt safe.”

The flat had been sold, and the money invested to pay the fees for her grandmother’s retirement home. Because of its large size the apartment had been priced out of her range, although its tired condition meant that in the end it had gone to developers. Anita thought now that if she had fought harder she might have found a way to afford it. She looked at Rachel, taking pictures with her phone and gazing about herself like a tourist at a world heritage site. She touched the dodo pendant through her dress and thought how curious it was that Rachel’s presence had made it possible not only for her to return to the house but to feel nostalgia for it.

It was as if her growing feelings for Rachel had opened some special compartment in her mind. She wondered then why it was that she hadn’t told her the whole truth about her mother’s relics, that as well as the handful of harmless possessions she had shown her there were several cardboard boxes of letters, diaries and photographs, things she had found among her grandmother’s papers and taken with her to her new flat in Woolwich.

She had never been through them properly. When she was a child she supposed she had hero-worshipped her mother, much the way that Rachel did now. But by the time she went away to college she had begun to feel an increasing need not to be defined by her.

Her grandmother's illness had changed that for a while but now what Anita wanted was to have her mother out of the way again. She wanted Rachel all to herself.

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By the time the train reached Shoreham it was almost empty. Anita stepped down onto the platform, slamming the train door shut with a hollow bang. Sallow grass grew up between the paving slabs. The sun beat down. There was an acrid reek of seaweed and brine.

Rachel had loved this place. As a child she had rarely been out of London and so the idea of the seaside had never lost its enchantment. The first time Anita had taken Rachel to see Meredith Rachel had been on her second course of injections and her hand to eye coordination was all over the place. She had spilled a cup of tea into her lap, scalding herself quite badly. Meredith had taken over, dabbing Savlon on Rachel's burns and finding her a clean shirt to put on, an outlandish thing with a high lace collar and diamanté buttons.

"I don't understand it," Anita said afterwards, when they were on the train back to London. "The clothes she wore at home were always so dull."

"Perhaps she feels she's free now," said Rachel. "Free to be what she wants instead of what people expect."

Anita had found this idea comforting. She felt humbled by Rachel's generosity of spirit, her ability to accept people simply for who they were. She turned her back on the sea. The tide was far out, and there was nothing to see but mudflats. Southwater House was only half a mile from the station but it was a stiff uphill climb. She supposed the view from the top was part of what made the place appealing. The retirement home catered for about thirty full-time residents, and with its tiled hallways and sloping lawns it reminded her a little of one of the 1920s seaside hotels in the old-fashioned detective stories her grandmother had once enjoyed, novels by Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers. The staff seemed to connive in the illusion; Anita privately thought that some of them were more eccentric than most of the residents. There was something chaotic about the place, and it was precisely this that had convinced her that her grandmother would be happy there. The hallway smelled of pine detergent and fermenting grass clippings, a scent that invariably reminded her of the day Meredith had come here to live. The dismantling of the Shooter's Hill flat had been very difficult for her and she had arrived at Southwater House tearful and disorientated. When Anita tried to kiss her goodbye she clung to her and called her Melanie. The next time Anita saw her grandmother she was different, but better. Anita wondered if Rachel was right, that Meredith was finally feeling the freedom to be herself.

The reception desk was unmanned. Anita hesitated, wondering if she should ring the bell or continue upstairs. Eventually someone appeared, a young woman

with peroxide hair and glasses. She was wheeling a linen cart with one hand and clutching a sheaf of newspapers in the other. Anita thought she recognised her from a previous visit but couldn't remember her name.

“Miss Sheener,” she said. “Your grandmother’s in her room. She hasn’t been feeling too bright today, I’m afraid.”

Anita felt the usual surprise at being addressed by her grandmother’s surname. It was as if in some sense she had become her grandmother. She didn’t know if the staff here were ignorant of her actual surname or whether the woman had simply forgotten.

“What do you mean?” she said. “Why didn’t you call me?”

The peroxide nurse took a step backwards. “There’s nothing to worry about,” she said. “She isn’t ill or anything, just a bit down in the dumps.”

Anita took this as a euphemism, that the woman was trying to tell her that Meredith was going through one of her confused periods. It had been less than a week since she had seen her but in Meredith Sheener’s world Anita knew that time could be an unstable commodity. Five days might slip by without notice, or they might seem to pass as slowly as five years. She smiled vaguely at the nurse and then made her way quickly upstairs.

Meredith’s room was on the first floor overlooking the sea. It was large and bright and full of things. There were things Anita remembered from Shooter’s Hill of course, but there was also much that was new: china ornaments and embroidered

cushion covers, brightly coloured alien objects that scrambled for possession of every surface. Like the ostentatious clothes, they seemed more a part of the new Meredith than the old one. Anita couldn't help noticing a certain accumulation of dust. She supposed it was impossible for the staff to keep pace with her grandmother's clutter.

Meredith was in the armchair beside the bed. Her eyes were open but there was a fixed, empty quality to her gaze that made her seem like a different person. Anita's breath caught in her throat.

"Are you all right, Gran?" she said. She knelt beside her grandmother's chair, taking both her hands in hers. Meredith's fingers gripped back tightly like an anxious child's.

"I want to talk to Rachel," she said. "There's something I need to tell her."

She seemed suddenly fully aware, as if a switch had been thrown inside her. Her eyes blazed with a furious life. It was as if she had grown younger by twenty years.

"Rachel isn't here, Gran," said Anita. "Her leave is finished. She'll be flying back to America next week. I told you this last night on the phone."

She felt full of a cold and desperate pity. She wondered if this was how her grandmother had felt when she had to explain to Anita that her mother was dead. In a small corner of her mind she envied Meredith for being able to exist in a world where Rachel was still retrievable, where the possibility existed of her imminent

return. She felt tears start at the back of her eyes. She bowed her head, hoping that her grandmother was now beyond noticing such things. She had heard that a large part of the illness was self-absorption, an inability to process events in the outside world. But Meredith wrested a hand free and grabbed at her, tilting her face towards her as she had used to do when Anita was a child.

“You look sad,” she said. “Has something bad happened to Rachel?”

Anita gazed up at her, thinking as she had often thought how strange it was they looked so little alike. Anita’s mother had been blonde and robust, taking after the Dutch sea captain, Claes Sheener, who had been her father, and from what she could tell from the photographs Anita was exactly like her. Meredith Sheener was a small, Celtic-looking woman with fine bones and heavy-lidded deep-set eyes. Her hair, once black, had begun to go grey shortly after Melanie died.

Anita felt her heart crushed by tenderness for her. She had always shown such fortitude. Even now in her helplessness she was busy thinking of others.

“No, Gran. Rachel’s fine. If there’s anything you want to say to her just you tell me. I can pass your message along next time she phones.”

Meredith’s grip relaxed and the fierceness went out of her eyes.

“Not to worry, my darling. I wanted to tell her she’s just like Melanie, but it doesn’t matter now that she’s gone.” She caressed Anita’s hair, looking suddenly tired. Anita stared at her blankly. She thought of Rachel’s gangling limbs, her flat chest and copper hair and freckled face. Before the Kushnev drain was started



Rachel had used to joke she was more than half-cockroach already. There was no way she could be compared with Melanie, who was as like Anita with her fair skin and apple cheeks as two panes of glass in a window frame. And yet she supposed after all that it was true. Rachel and Melanie were both courageous women of action, both prepared to die for what they believed in. Whereas Anita had always been content just to stand and watch.

Her mother hadn't loved her enough to stay on Earth for her and neither had Rachel. Anita began to weep.

"It's all my fault, Gran," she said. "I should have found a way to stop her but I didn't know how. I love her so much. It's almost worse than if she were dead."

If Rachel were dead she would in some sense be safe, safe to be remembered and loved. As it was she lived on as a monster, dedicated to a life where personal feeling was nothing when set against her vocation, the mysterious inner voice that told her that her place was not here, but elsewhere. Somewhere so far away that it was impossible for the normal mind to conceive it.

And yet in a hundred years from now, when Anita was dead and buried, would Rachel sometimes think of her, and remember the afternoon they had spent together on Shooter's Hill, the foxgloves bright as bunting in the overgrown grass?

She hugged her grandmother's knees and cried. She thought how furious the peroxide nurse would be if she came in and found her in such a state. She struggled to control her tears.

“I’m sorry, Gran,” she said. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I’m just tired.”

Her grandmother was silent, her eyes fixed on some invisible horizon, her hands now lying still at her sides. Anita’s heart lurched. For one impossible moment she wondered if her grandmother was dead, had died because of her crying, and for this too she would be to blame. Then at last her hands moved, rustling the stiff mauve silk of the skirt she was wearing. Anita got to her feet and stood over her anxiously. The dodo pendant swung free of her blouse. It hung in midair, twisting slowly at the end of its chain.

“Can I get you anything?” said Anita. “Would you like a cup of tea?”

Meredith Sheener looked up at her and smiled, creasing the delicate skin at the corners of her eyes. Then she reached out for the pendant, grabbing at it like a small child trying to catch a butterfly. She batted it with her fingers, making it dance and shudder, the closest it would ever get to natural flight.

“I blamed myself for years over Melanie,” she said. “We had such a terrible row the day before she left. You were so tiny still, and I told her she was a fool and selfish, that she was neglecting you for the sake of her career. She said I was jealous, that I wanted to turn her into a housewife just like I was. None of that was true, but I was using you as an excuse, just the same. She did this strange thing, you see. She asked me to look after that pendant. She had never done anything like that before, and she never took off that chain. Her best friend in college gave it to her and she always wore it, even in the shower. I got it into my head that something terrible was

going to happen. I couldn't bear the thought of losing her, you see." She took Anita's hand, squeezing her fingers with surprising strength. "I used to take photographs, too, a long time ago. There was a time when I thought I might make something of it, but what with Melanie being born and Claes leaving like that it was all so difficult, so complicated. I suppose I just let things slide. I was just beginning to think I might take it up again, pick up where I left off. But then Melanie died and it was as if the tide had gone out and left me stranded. Like walking along the beach at dusk, you know how it is here, when the tide is out and the sand is wet and shiny as a mirror. It's beautiful, the dusk, but it's the loneliest time of the day. I felt so lost, as if I'd never be able to find my way home again. I even felt some sympathy with them, you know, with the people who did it, the God people. The idea of space travel seemed so terrifying, so dangerous, like straying into a house where bad things are. It felt all wrong to me, even though I was so proud of her I could hardly breathe."

She reached for the pendant again, holding it between finger and thumb. "Your friend Rachel was so beautiful. I think she is very brave to give all that up."

"She still is beautiful, Gran," said Anita. "At least she is to me." She sat down on the edge of the bed. Her eyes felt swollen from crying. "Come on," she said. "Let's go and see who's in the dining room." She stood up and put out her hand. Her grandmother stared at it in bewilderment, as if at some miraculous apparition. Anita wondered how much of their conversation she would remember. The new

drugs showed amazing results, but the doctor had warned her not to be over-optimistic about the long-term prognosis.

“It’s like blowing on dying embers,” he said. “There’s a glow, and a little warmth, but it doesn’t last.”

It struck her how unusual it was, his mode of expression, so rich in metaphor, almost like the speech of a poet. She thought of his tired eyes, his twisted fingers, of how kind he was really, especially when delivering bad news. How he seemed to take each failure to heart, as if he were personally responsible for medicine being so powerless against death.

*I wonder if I could film him, she thought. I wonder if he would let me, if I asked.*

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The boxes were in the cupboard under the stairs, pushed right to the back behind the vacuum cleaner and her grandmother’s old ironing board. There were three of them, two large ones stamped with the logo of a well-known food company and another, half the size, which was unmarked. She opened the small box first. She had only sketchy memories of packing the crates, of what had gone into each of them, but she saw almost at once that what the third box contained was mostly her mother’s official papers – birth certificate, passport, medical – and nothing of immediate importance. The other two were more interesting. These contained

photographs and postcards, letters from old boyfriends, a fudge tin full of pin badges and a pencil sharpener in the shape of the *Apollo 13*. At the bottom of the second crate there were three cloth-bound notebooks that contained Melanie's diary for her final year at Oxford and for the months leading up to her enrolment in the space program. Anita was surprised to learn she had gone in as a ground engineer. She supposed this was how she had met Malcolm Schleif, although there was no mention of him in these pages.

Tucked into the inside cover of one of the notebooks was a postcard, a colour reproduction of Roland Savery's *Dodo in a Landscape*. A single sentence, *don't forget your wings*, was scrawled across the back in spiky black capitals. The card had been posted from Oxford, and was addressed to Melanie at the Shooter's Hill flat. It was signed *with all love from Susanne*. Anita could see from the postmark that it had been sent less than a month before her mother's death.

She searched quickly through the bundles of letters, hoping to discover some clue to Susanne's identity. After five minutes or so she found what she was looking for, a brown jiffy bag containing several dozen handwritten letters and about the same number of email printouts, all from a Susanne Behrens, who wrote sometimes from Hamburg and sometimes from Oxford but always in tones of affection and intimacy.

For some reason Susanne's letters, with their bawdy in-jokes and cosy diminutives, made her mother more real to Anita than all her grandmother's

reminiscences put together.

Her hands were filthy with dust. She wiped them against her jeans and went to put the kettle on. Just as the water boiled the phone rang. When she picked up the receiver she found herself speaking to Serge.

“I was just seeing if you were back yet,” he said. “I couldn’t get through on your mobile. I was starting to get a bit worried.”

“My phone battery went flat,” she said. “I forgot to take my charger. I only got back this morning.” All three statements were lies. She had been back in London three days, and after the fourth successive call from Serge she had simply switched off her phone. For some reason she could not define Rachel’s departure had changed everything. Also she could not forget the way he had sounded when she had last spoken to him, the sense that he had something to hide. She would have liked to put off their conversation indefinitely but she knew this was impossible. Sooner or later she would have to face up to what had happened.

She asked him how he was and he said he was fine. He asked after her grandmother and she mumbled back some stilted reply. There was a short, uncomfortable silence, and then he told her what she knew he had called about in the first place.

“Listen, Anita,” he said. “I thought I should tell you I’ve started seeing someone. I didn’t want you to hear it from someone else.”

Her name was Bella Altman and she was a composer of electronic music.

“You’ve probably heard some of her stuff, actually,” he said. “She’s done hundreds of commercials. Her work is all over the place.” He laughed, a small, tight sound that she had never heard before. She realised he had been waiting to tell her ever since their last phone call, that perhaps he had wanted to tell her even then.

“Why are you telling me this?” she said. “Don’t you think you should be telling Rachel instead?”

There was another uncomfortable silence. “Do you think she has to know?” he said finally. “She’s hardly going to find out on her own.”

He was asking her permission to treat Rachel as if she were dead. *No*, she thought suddenly. *He’s trying to find out if you mean to tell her yourself.*

She felt an anger so deep and so cold she knew there was no way back from it, that if she and Serge ever met again it would be as strangers.

“I’m not going to rat on you, if that’s what you’re afraid of,” she said. “What you do is none of my business. It’s Rachel that I care about, not you.”

She waited for a moment to see if he would say anything else and then she put down the phone. She topped up her coffee mug with boiling water and then went back to sorting Melanie’s letters. She wondered what might be the best way of trying to trace Susanne Behrens.

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Civilian flights to the States had become almost prohibitively expensive, but Clement Anderson had supported Anita's visa application, which had enabled her to claim back some of the cost in the form of a research grant.

A junior officer had met her at the airport and escorted her to a motel a short bus ride from the base. Then there were the inevitable protocols, two days of debriefing and form-filling. She had asked if she could film these processes but her request had been politely denied.

The flight crew of the *Aurora 6* were now being kept in more or less permanent isolation. Each member was allowed one last visit prior to launch day, a final thirty minutes with a friend or family member from outside. Anita had been able to speak to Rachel several times on the telephone but she had always assumed the visit would go to Serge. The invitation came out of the blue.

Finally she was taken to a room that was bare of everything except a table and two chairs and in the corner a low sofa covered in a brown leatherette. There was a pane of smoked glass set into one wall that she guessed was a two-way mirror. At the end of some ten minutes' waiting the door opened and Rachel appeared. She was dressed in grey overalls, silk or some synthetic substitute. What remained of her hair was mostly hidden under a close-fitting cap that reminded Anita of the caps worn by surgeons in the operating theatre. The few strands of hair that were showing looked dry and brittle, almost like tufts of grass.

Her lips were the colour of beetroot. They looked stuck to her face more than



part of it, fissured and clotted as scabs.

She closed the door behind her and stepped into the room. Her wrists, poking out from the loose sleeves of the overall, were skeletal, her fingernails thickened and black. Her eyes were hard and glazed, barely human. It was only in the delicate line of her jaw, the fine, high arch of her brow, that any traces of her beauty now remained.

Anita got up from the table and went towards her. She felt a dull ache beneath her breastbone, as if she were trying to hold her breath underwater.

“Is it all right to touch you?” she said.

“Of course it is,” said Rachel. “Come here.”

They embraced. Rachel’s body felt like a bundle of glass tubes held together by strips of paper and pieces of string. She smelled like farm silage, or like the heaps of grass clippings on the compost heap at Southwater House. They sat down either side of the Formica table. Anita touched Rachel’s hand, thinking how from the other side of the two-way mirror they must look like two actors in some prison drama.

*She’s really going up*, thought Anita. For the first time the sight of her friend brought not sorrow or anger, but awe.

They talked together in quiet voices. Rachel asked about Meredith, and Anita told her about her search for Susanne Behrens.

“I want to interview her for the film,” said Anita. “From her letters it looks as if

she knew my mother better than anyone.”

“The film will be wonderful,” said Rachel. “Your mother would have been so proud.” Anita stroked the backs of her hands. As their half hour drew toward its close she unhooked the dodo pendant from around her neck and handed it to Rachel. The chain still carried the warmth of her own body.

“Take her with you, wherever you’re going,” she said. “It’s what she wanted most in the world.”

Rachel’s diamond eyes seemed to shimmer. She closed her fingers around the silver, slowly, as if to touch anything that solid was now painful for her.

“I’ll be taking you both,” she said. Her voice was a dry whisper, like long grass moving gently in the wind. “I couldn’t have done this without you.”

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It took Anita some time to track down a copy of *Voyage to the Sun*. So far as she could tell it had never been released on DVD, and when she finally located a video copy on some obscure fan site she was surprised at how much it cost to have it transferred to disc.

The print was by no means perfect, but for a VHS transfer it was more than acceptable. For Anita, *Voyage to the Sun* seemed to epitomise the epic style of film making that had reached its zenith towards the end of the twentieth century. It was

a long film, almost three hours, replete with significant imagery and spectacular if rather dated special effects.

The film's main actors were Rowan Amherst as the ship's captain, Hilary Benson as the first mate, and Aurelie Pelling as Lilian Furness, the captain's fiancée, nominated for an Oscar in her role. Anita found all three of them impressive, although for her the star was undoubtedly the young Joshua Samuelson in the part of Linden Brooks the cabin boy. It was his first major role, and he played it brilliantly. The character of Brooks was ambiguous. He was intelligent but devious, brave but duplicitous, and Samuelson brought out these contradictions with insight and flair. Anita thought it significant and appropriate that the main focus of the film's closing sequence was not the half-starved captain or the mutinous first mate but the Machiavellian cabin boy.

Alone of everyone on board he seemed to thrive on the harsh conditions. His skin was scorched almost black and there was not a spare ounce of body fat on him, and yet his pale eyes burned with a pure light that was almost ecstatic in its intensity.

He flew hand over hand up the rigging to the crow's nest, skinny and agile as a monkey. "*Land*," he screamed out. "*Land ho!*" His salt-clogged hair flamed red against an azure sky.

The images were pure Hollywood, but in the way of all great cinema they were inspiring and in their own way beautiful. Anita found she had no trouble in

understanding how the child-Rachel, her young soul already on fire with romantic ideals, would have identified with these fictional pioneers. Linden Brooks the cabin boy, with his blaze of red hair and frenzied excitement at the sight of a new continent, might easily have been her twin brother.

She ejected the disc from the machine and replaced it carefully in its clear plastic case, knowing it was a part of Rachel she could keep close to her forever. She thought of her friend, suspended in space, her inner processes as mysterious and miraculous now as those of a chrysalis, and distinctly felt a message pass between them.

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'Flying in the Face of God' is set in the same version of reality as Nina's earlier story 'Angelus', which won the Aeon Award in 2007. Nina's next appearance in *Interzone* will be in issue 233 (March) with the novella 'The Silver Wind'. Another novella, 'Wilkolak', can be found in *Crimewave: Ghosts*, out now from TTA Press.