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**Jo Lendle**  
**The Cosmonaut**

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*“Nose cone separated. I see Earth! It’s so beautiful!  
I feel fine. Gravitational load growing. I see forests, clouds.”*

Yuri Gagarin

## **I. Little Finger**

The road was straight, its only movement the ups and downs as it followed the hilly lay of the land. Built midway through the previous century by a brigade of fifty men and a horse-drawn roller, the road had at no point altered the natural order of the landscape. With its two lanes either side of a grassy median strip, it stretched away over the rolling terrain like the dust cloud thrown up by the passing of a long, gray trek, remaining clearly visible for a while, then gradually blowing away until it is erased without a trace by the doggedness of time. Five summers long the brigade had worked its way out into the steppe, here and there the barely decayed remnants of their efforts lay around like lateral moraines, lone man-size tires, oil drums faded to pastel shades, old equipment. The few graves might just as well have been more recent, perhaps containing travelers who, overpowered by the uniformity of the drive, had come off the tarmac and collided haplessly with one of the few stunted trees. At the point, some hours back, where the construction work had ended, the abandoned roller still lay beside the crossing, a dull red relic, shockingly small in diameter, as if such a slender object could never have been weighty enough to level this route whose opening was celebrated as a historical moment. Or as if even a roller such as this, forged from tons of steel, had been ground down by the rigors of the task.

The elevations over which the road ran were slight, each hollow quickly followed by a new rise, offering only the hint of a view. But the flanks were sufficiently steep that as soon as the car began descending into the next trough, it could be accelerated into the upward slope and then left hanging for a moment, for the length of a heartbeat, between heaven and earth. Lifted free, without gravity, without weight.

Hella couldn’t stop doing this. For hours, since turning off onto this deserted twoway track, at every rise in the road she had floored the gas pedal until the engine shifted down a gear with a howl and the momentum launched her from the crest of each hill, making her dizzy, a controlled nausea, a leaping in her stomach as if there

was no seatbelt, no waistband, no confinement. She didn't speak, she didn't sing, she didn't even think, for hours she had contented herself in the gathering dusk with driving a small car loaded with nothing but food and some luggage with clothes and a few keepsakes to the verge of weightlessness.

The dawn came as such a relief that it scared her. Once again, she had driven all night, tired and with the recurring thought that she could stop and rest a little at any time. But she had disregarded this voice each time, driving faster still in reply, hunched forward, eyes wide open, as if she could give her yearning the slip, in a panic-stricken state of wakefulness, while the need for sleep might doze off itself eventually. She had not admitted it to herself, but in these hours of total darkness she sensed that had she surrendered to this need for recuperation, she might not have known, on waking up in the morning, which way to set off in this empty, directionless expanse. It would have been far too easy to turn back.

Now the light returned, first as a blue sheen, a premonition of the new day, growing more certain as the dawn rose. While the bushes at the roadside still crouched in the last remnants of night, the mountain range to the north had begun to glow like an orangey red warning against something that had yet to show itself in the surrounding half-light. Then it had got light like any first day, and at the moment when the topmost sliver of sun slid up over the edge of the world, she had shut her eyes, dazzled and dazed with relief, and driven on blind for a few breaths in the same direction she'd been driving for days.

When she opened her eyes again, there was a cow standing on the median strip. It was grazing. Hella saw it from far off, slowed down, out of amazement at first, then out of caution, before deciding to stop the car. Now she was glad of a break. She pulled off the tarmac and parked at the side of the road where there were clumps of low, dry bushes. Her hands were burning with cold or numbness. In the rear-view mirror she could see the animal, it looked up. A man was sat there with it. She got out and stood beside the car, and it felt quiet and solid, like being on land again. Both of them looked over at her, the animal and the man, and finally the cow was the first to lower its eyes again.

The man sat on the ground, on a piece of faded red cloth. He had the cow's rope wound round his leg, beside them lay a stick and several pots, the smallest farm

imaginable. The man beckoned her over. Before joining him, she plucked a few blades of grass and held them out to the cow on the palm of her hand. The animal was skinny, a colorless coat hanging loosely over protruding bones. With a quiet snort, the cow lifted its head, paused for a moment, and then took the grass with a wet, relaxed flick of its tongue. Hella could have hugged it. She crouched down and nodded to the herdsman. He had a piece of ochre-colored fabric tied round his head, the rest of his body down to the knees was hidden by a dark, felt-like cape. The man's eyes were set far apart. He looked at Hella, and maybe it was because of the distance between his eyes that his gaze felt more piercing, double, from more than one direction at once. He took the lid off one of the pots, scooped up some milk in a plastic cup, and held it out to her.

Hella took a gulp. The milk was warm, though this could have been a false impression caused by her own feeling of cold. She was startled by the strength of the taste, it was as if every other milk she had ever drunk had been motionless, and this milk here was suddenly alive. Although it was probably fresh from the cow, it had a definite sourness to it, like a first sign of fermentation. It didn't just taste sour, behind the sourness was a hidden bitterness that immediately conjured up images of chewing things that weren't meant to be chewed, tree bark, flowers, moss. She noticed that this drink evoked a far clearer idea of an animal than the large cow at her side. More than this: She discovered in the taste an idea of earth that was more tangible than the ground on which she sat. Knowing that once she put the cup down she would not be able to force herself to take another gulp, she shut her eyes tight and knocked back the rest.

The man watched her. He didn't drink, he had probably already eaten his morning meal. He waved in the direction from which she had come, calmly and evenly, until Hella understood and said the name of her country, in English, Spanish, Turkish, Arabic, Russian, as it occurred to her. She would have liked to wave too. He lowered his hand and smiled at her, before turning round with a small movement and waving in the other direction, where she was headed. Hella did not smile. Station, she said, in German now, waving in the same direction, and then she said cosmonaut, and tapped herself on the chest. The man thought for a moment, then he picked up a twig, took it between two fingers, and placed it upright on the ground. He looked at her and didn't stop looking as he made the stick rise slowly up into the air, lifting it between them with a smooth movement. Hella followed his hand with her eyes, it was a very small,

very thin stick. When the man had stretched his arm to its full height, he left it there against the empty, dark blue sky for a few moments before laying his hand back in his lap. Yes, she said into the sky, and left her gaze up there in the open space, until she suddenly saw that it was there, she could actually point to her destination. Broad, turned towards the sun, it hung above the horizon, a pale unmoving eye that was half shut. She pointed upwards. The man looked at her. It was impossible to say what he was thinking. Then he nodded. They had, insofar as it was possible, understood one another.

He gave her nothing to take with her, and she left nothing behind, setting off, after an hour spent together in silence, the same way she had arrived. As she was leaving, she already missed him. She stretched out her hand, he took it, as if he had never shaken hands with anyone before, held it in both hands and pressed it for a moment to his chest, that was all. For months she had thought she needed someone to talk to, and now she no longer believed it.

On the road, she switched on the car radio for the first time during the journey and found a shortwave station playing Schubert lieder. Between the pieces, a man and a woman spoke, presumably about the music, she could hardly understand a thing.

In Klov she turned off the highway for the first time since she had set off. Her departure had been the same as usual, she had hesitated, as she did every time, over whether to take the route through town, finally taking the route through the countryside, the last few kilometers on a road running parallel to the highway through fields of bright yellow rapeseed, with occasional glimpses of signage and the swift stream of vehicles, of which she was not yet part, as if she was on a long and excessively slow feeder lane. Then she had reached the short access road, really just a makeshift entry point for the highway maintenance authority, and joined the flow.

The first day, any interruption had made her inexplicably scared. She had only left the highway at rest areas if she had to, to check the oil, once the exhaust had sounded strange, mostly just for gas. She had stayed inside the car, listening to the sounds of the pump attendant, loud and distant, carried to her and dully amplified by the bodywork, registered with her whole body rather than just heard, like the inescapable noises at the dentist's. The bang of the flap, the crunch as he opened the gas cap, the hard shaking of the nozzle in single blows, reminding her of an airplane lowering its

landing gear, a noise that could have been calming but that came as a shock nonetheless. Only on the morning of the second day had she suddenly taken an exit for no particular reason. She remained seated in the car, her hands on the wheel, still now, although for a while she thought she could still feel it moving. She had shut her eyes. After that, she had done the same thing a few times, on parking lots, once right on the shoulder. With every stop, she had put more distance between herself and where she had come from. All the hours she just kept driving didn't take her as far away as this motionlessness. Each of these moments closed something behind her, an entrance, until finally it became increasingly difficult to imagine turning back, more and more of these doors slammed shut behind her, she couldn't have said for anything in the world whether the imaginary corridor formed by all these doors was leading out of something or into something. At the end of each rest, she had felt blindly for the ignition key, had started the engine, then blinked and driven off, awake again now and sighted, it was impossible, much as she regretted the fact, to drive with one's eyes shut.

Of course there had been friends. Before her departure, she had been to see Karola, hoping for understanding, aware that understanding might only be possible or even appropriate to a certain degree. And finally Karola had paused in her cooking and turned to her. That's how it had always been, every decision in her life had started with her friend taking her apron from the hook behind the door and starting to prepare all the ingredients in her kitchen. She laid them out in front of her on the work surface in a wild, shapeless mosaic, and once everything had been cleaned, peeled, boned, blanched, cored, and skinned, she began with the cutting. She chopped for a long time, extremely finely, until the various ingredients gradually became indistinguishable. As she bent over her work, it seemed as if her attention did not extend beyond the small surface of the cutting board. But at the end, when Hella, on her chair by the window, her hands unmoving on the wooden armrests, had finished telling her story to the kitchen, to herself, or to the piece of sky framed by the window, Karola turned round.

“Well,” she said, “go then.” As if it had all been a question and as if this was a satisfactory answer. “But you'll have to make your will first.” Hella had been taken aback, unable to reply, so great was her aversion to the idea. Why now? Why only now, or why so soon? “People used to make their wills when they expected to be

away overnight. And your journey looks like being a long one.”

She knew that. But wasn't the idea to make one's will when there was someone to come into the inheritance? She couldn't start leaving something behind just when there was no one left to receive it. “That's the whole point,” Karola interjected, “you don't make your will to leave something behind.” Why then? “As a sign that you're ready to stay away.”

Hella had turned in her chair to face the window, she saw everything he no longer saw, the roofs of the houses opposite and everything that protruded above them from behind, a row of poplars, church steeples, transmitter masts, far away the chimneys of the power station, topped in this cold weather by motionless plumes of bright white. And above all this the sky, of course, which was already coloring up, even if she didn't want to see it. Everything was constantly pointing upwards.

It got flatter. The mountain ranges to the left and right leveled out, she drove into a plain that extended as far as the eye could see. Slight elevations formed a horizon. A tumbledown shack in open country, a pipeline, the low shrubs either side of the road which, Hella now noticed, were dog rose bushes, their small white flowers hardly open. She had no idea what their purpose might have been. She drove. When it got too much, she switched on the radio, tried to sing along with the songs, or repeated single spoken words and sentences, in whatever language. At midday she made a halt, it was a place with maybe five hundred houses that had been making its presence felt for quite a while. On the approach, she had felt a nervousness, more birds, more tire marks on the asphalt. The number of bags at the roadside had increased, now there were sometimes dogs beside them, interrupted in their searching they looked up at her. Later there were men on bicycles with their wives on the carrying rack, in colored windbreakers, with protruding tool handles, with buckets hung from the handlebars. Hella drove over huge letters painted onto the road surface in white, a slogan perhaps, or a greeting. A different color to the air, here and there goats tethered to stakes. Rows of trees began to line the road, with posters hung on their trunks, obviously candidates for an election. From far off, a bell-shaped water tower, then the first houses, a name sign in two languages, neither of which she knew, and when she stopped next to a small fountain to check, she couldn't find the place on the map.

She got out, there was no one around. Most of the houses were low, some were

built of wood and decorated with elaborate, weather-beaten carvings. Opposite the fountain stood a low, gray stone building with wide stairs leading up to the door, a town hall or school, the flag mounts beside the entrance were empty. Above the portal, the round opening for a clock stood empty. Two wires hung out from the center to the sides, one long and one short, they said just before half past eight, which was about right.

Here and there among the closely packed wooden houses stood stone buildings, the end of the row was marked by a high-rise block, the facade sections shone in a rusty red, there was laundry drying everywhere. One balcony had come loose on one side and hung down at a dangerous angle from the wall, resting on the balcony below, whose occupants had had to move their laundry rack right over to one side. There were curtains at every window. On the grass beside the entrance, a donkey was grazing.

Hella walked over to the small playground in front of the building and carefully sat down on the end of a yellow slide. She thought she heard music in the distance. She leaned back into the slide until she was entirely closed in by the sides and could see only the sky. She recognized the sky. It was clear except for a band of cloud stretching across from one horizon to the other, she couldn't even have said if it was the trace of an airplane or if it would have been there anyway, of its own accord, without any of them. She folded her hands on her stomach and fell asleep.

She was woken by a voice, and even when, after a while, she remembered where she was and why she was sitting among all this red, yellow, and blue playground equipment with Mickey Mouse faces laughing over at her from each item, the source of the voice remained a mystery. One could hear that it was coming from a loudspeaker, a sustained singsong, slightly distorted in transmission, constantly circling a single, insistent tone, demanding or inviting. It sounded as if it was detached from the requirements of a human body that would occasionally have slacked off for moment, would have had to pause for breath at least once. Hella had to remind herself to breathe again. For an instant she thought it was a muezzin with his call to prayer, but it was too sweet for that, too solicitous. Whoever was speaking, they didn't mean it entirely seriously.

She rubbed her eyes and ran her hand through her hair. Then she stood up and walked in the direction from which the voice seemed to be coming.



Dusk was already beginning to fall. The low houses with their closed doors hid in their shadows, now lower still, as if they had lost their roofs. But the sky was clear, turning yellow and green at the edges, as if in high spirits. The streetlamps on the corners illuminated themselves or the festoons of wires attached to them. From the door of one house came a dark torrent of washing water, landing in the middle of the dusty sidewalk and quickly running off to all sides, on its bow wave a white crest of foam, leaving behind a circle of dull, wet black.

Groups of children came towards her, tiredly holding hands. They wore leather bags round their necks, from which protruded plastic roses, feathers, and sticks of candy, some of them hadn't even been able to do up the buckle, holding their treasures together with a free hand. There were couples leaning on hydrants, smoking and looking into the sky. The singing got louder.

The festivities were taking place on the edge of town, on an open piece of ground that looked like a parking lot but was probably the market square. Fathers carried their dressed-up children on their shoulders; up in the arms of the lampposts that stood around the square, teenagers held on tight and waved in all directions. On the margins, women bent over their prams, some boys had bottles of drink lined up in front of them for sale, between the stands with corn on the cob, candy, and jewelry, the occasional motor scooter drove at walking pace with its lights on.

It was a rose fair. Through the legs of the crowd the petal-strewn ground could be seen, here and there the bunches in which they had been delivered were still intact, dense packets tied with string. The flowers formed a pale pink layer that traced people's movements like a viscous liquid, becoming flatter where activity was busier, piling up into great cushions in the corners of the entrances. Hella was surprised how faint the smell seemed to her, she could only identify a hint of sweetness, perhaps she was already too deeply immersed in the perfume to perceive it, her nose numbed by the presence of an impression she could only imagine as a gigantic pink cloud spanning the whole place.

At one end of the site, a single man stood singing on the back of a truck. He was dressed all in white, in a loose-fitting suit that made him look like a folk singer. Around his neck hung a wreath of pale roses, his long hair was tied back, he didn't move. While his voice rang out from loudspeaker stacks around the edge of the fair,

there seemed to be no sound coming from his direction, so that although his voice was everywhere, he looked silent. People looked towards him, many of them moving to the rhythm of his monotonous singing, now and again someone would climb up to join him, a young man who swung himself onto the stage with deliberate ease, groups of women helped each other up, a father lifted his children up in order of size to their waiting mother. Once on the stage, they stood beside the singer, some put their arms round him, someone gave him a few coins, they beamed smiles at a particular spot point in the crowd where, moments later, the flash of a camera indicated that they had been seen and that they could now begin clambering down again. The man took no notice of all this.

He reminded Hella of the cowherd, which may have been because he his face was paler and rounder than those of the other people at the fair. Maybe she just wanted them to resemble one another. Only now did she realize that she hadn't been able to make out any hair under the herdsman's turban.

On the benches round the edges of the square sat old women with bathroom scales in front of them on the ground, and as no one seemed to be taking up their offer, Hella had three of them weigh her one after the other, with three different results, getting lighter every time.

A boy offered to take her picture. He carried a snake over his hands that wound its way along his arms, shiny green and white, and before Hella could resist, he had slung it round her neck. The creature was smooth and not even cold, Hella shook her head but the boy laughed and took a step back like a painter observing his work, so she lifted the heavy body from her shoulders herself and put it down in front of her. The snake only came alive again when it came into contact with the ground, where it shook itself and slithered off between some scaffolding at the edge of the stands. As she walked on, Hella saw the boy rushing after the animal, she couldn't stand snakes.

She bought a corn on the cob from a stand, sat down on the steps of the monument at the top end of the square and peeled off the charred leaves with the joy of a child unwrapping a present. She was the first to see it, and even if she had guessed what she would find inside, she was happy as she came to the fat, juicy rows of yellow kernels. It was just what she wanted.

From where she was sitting, she couldn't see what was happening on the stage, but she could see the back rows and the children charging about around her and she could hear the singing. Two women leaned against the cab of a pickup, their white and

brown patterned skirts stood out at the front, they wore brown jackets and had small fabric crowns in their hair. One of them seemed to be considerably older than the other, maybe they were mother and daughter. They looked like members of a dance troupe come from far away, but why should they be from somewhere else, and anyway, they weren't dancing. Only now did Hella notice that some of the men, too, were wearing a kind of traditional costume consisting of a beige suit and a narrow folded cap of the same color. Some of the boys were also dressed this way.

She would not have been capable of saying whether she could have felt at home here. It wasn't an issue. The man's singing could still be heard over the heads of the crowd. Hella had placed the gnawed corn cob next to her, wrapped in its leaves. She could have bought something else as a pretext for delaying her departure. She was no longer hungry, but a few yards away from her stood a man in the shadow of a dense bunch of balloons that almost hid him from view. They were all pink, a roof made of dull, pale pink balls that appeared to reflect the flower-strewn ground of the square. Hella approached him and pointed upwards. He followed the line from her finger into the pale cloud, reached for one of the strings, detached it from the skein he had wound round his wrist, and handed her the balloon. While she looked in her purse for a coin, Hella clutched the string tightly.

She went and sat back down on the same step, holding the balloon in front of her like a beautiful rose, and as her hand was still clenched into a fist, it might have looked like she was waiting for a date who never came. The balloon pulled at her, Hella felt that it made her lighter, it wanted to take off. On the ground at her feet, in among the rose petals, she found one of the pieces of string used to tie the bundles of flowers together. She picked it up and tied it to the end of her string so that the balloon rose above the people's heads. Hella kept looking among the petals, and with each piece of string she found she let her balloon rise higher, without looking to see, too occupied with looking for new pieces and adding them to the line, and when she finally did look up, it was a long chain that hung horizontally across the square, dragged down by its own weight, only rising a little towards the small, pink circle right at the end.

It was one of the boys perched in the lampposts on the other side of the square who grabbed the balloon. He snatched at it and when he held it in his hands, he looked over at her and laughed, he was proud of his catch and he knew that the string was too long for this woman at the other end to be able to get to him fast enough. He too wore

one of the pale suits, so large it looked like fancy dress. He had a smirk on his face, he pulled the balloon and Hella was startled by the sudden connection between them, she felt his pull transmitted to her through the knotted length of string, she held tight and pulled herself, they struggled like this until one of the knots came untied and Hella tumbled backwards. The boy hoisted the balloon over his head like a trophy, although no one paid him any attention, only Hella, to her own amazement, heard herself cry out. She was surprised by this cry that burst out of her, only a few faces turned her way, just for a moment, as the singing continued undiminished, and Hella fell silent. She looked over to the boy, perhaps at least he had been startled by her outburst, and indeed he pressed the balloon to his chest with one hand, detached himself from the curved arm of the lamppost, jumped to the ground, and disappeared in the bustle of the crowd. Only the balloon floating above him betrayed his path for a while, then Hella lost sight of him.

She was upset as she walked back, hoping she might still find the boy somewhere and be able to chase him, she was confused by her excitement, she imagined he had long since let the balloon go, and this idea comforted her. She sat in the car for a long time without looking up before starting the engine.

It was almost night when she left the small town, without a word. Who was she supposed to say goodbye to? Beside the road leading out of town, a melon seller had stacked his fruit into a mound and laid down on top to sleep, as protection, as his own guard. At a checkpoint on the edge of town, she had to wait while the cars in front halted at the barrier, a man in uniform spoke to each driver while his colleagues paced slowly round the car. At the roadside, black and white striped obstacles lay scattered about with birds strutting among them. When Hella's turn came, the man bent down to her and looked through the window, a broad, earnest face, his mouth obscured by a thick beard, the round peak of his uniform cap turned up like a halo. He slowly screwed up one eye and then waved her through. Behind him, Hella thought she saw the others turning away, their hands in front of their mouths.

Of course it was good to be on the move again, in the numbness of driving, the noise, the vibrations, but still more in the certainty that out there beyond the windshield, dots appeared, went past, and disappeared as if of their own accord, each one representing a settlement, lights on the hilltops that might have been flickering or

just blurred with motion, each of them a possible place to stay, but none of them able to catch her travelling at this speed, leaving them behind her one after the other. But there were also things that were in the car with her that could not be escaped in this way. Simple things like the question of why a car had to have so many seats when she needed only one. She listened to the radio for a while.

The last light of day cast the shadow of the car onto the road ahead of her, the tires unnaturally elongated, between them a broad strip of sunshine that seemed to lift her into the air. She was cold, she turned on the headlamps. Beside the highway, a pair of tire tracks ran along in the dirt, as if someone had not trusted the road. In the rear-view mirror, she recognized all the colors of the sky and drove on ahead into a dark, invisible night.

In the distance was a cloud of dust or smoke, impossible to tell which. A rider in the middle of a group of horses, a few trees bent over by the wind, the bed of a stream, a railroad crossing (the rails stood so far above the gravel that Hella only just managed to get the car over them), thoughts of home, in the distance an abandoned derrick. Then this too was over. The mountains drew back leaving space that remained empty. Now there was nothing but dry, patchy soil, sandy and barren, nothing but cowering clumps of dusty sedges and grass, nothing but sky, cowering, and unending distance; how, in a place like this where one was always the center of everything, was she supposed to get away from everything?

At one point, her approach startled a flock of sparrows, a fluttering cloud that rushed up before her eyes, bursting apart and coming together again, fleeing one another and driven towards one another at the same time. Sometimes there were dry cracks in the earth, sometimes stones. She tried to imagine it was winter and everything around her was covered in snow, dissolving into endless white, but it didn't work. On the horizon in the evening, a tattered cloud that soon dispersed again. Then, a stone's throw from the road, a kind of antelope with twisted horns, frozen, staring over at her, torn between curiosity and fear. As she drove on, Hella saw the animal out the corner of her eye, disappearing with great leaps.

Together with the other documents, the route plans, the packing slips, the apologies, the travel guide, they had sent her an envelope on which someone had written "Food" by hand, as if it was an explanation. Inside she had found a pack of oblong cards that

looked like historical documents, until she flicked through and saw that only the uppermost card was yellowed, the paper of the others was still fresh, similarly discolored only at the edges where it may have stuck out a little. Each card bore the word Voucher printed in thick black letters and further down, in different languages, that the holder was entitled to exchange this voucher for a meal at the current going rate. No reimbursement was possible. At the lower edge, in smaller letters, Valid for an unlimited period.

Apart from the corn on the cob, she hadn't had a hot meal since her departure. On the passenger seat lay the basket Karola had brought her before she left, then it had been overflowing with fruit, chocolate, sandwiches, bottles of water, hardboiled eggs, and cake, as if she was setting off on a never-ending class outing. During the journey, she had reached across, more out of tiredness or for something to do than out of any real feeling of hunger. The last time she had eaten like this had been during her pregnancy, trying to cope with the nausea by eating non-stop, the way one tries to calm a shy animal with continuous whispering and stroking. The basket was still there, filled now with empty packaging, fruit peel, and sandwich wrappers, with a little rummaging she could probably have still found something in there, but she no longer felt like it.