

City of lights
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Level 4 Streamline Destinations
Units 1-80 (1250 headwords)

WASHINGTON POST

ASTRONAUT ILL

Astronaut Cathy Fox today lost her job at NASA because she is ill. Another astronaut from NASA, Helen Wilson, said Cathy was seriously ill and could never fly again. Last year, Astronaut Fox was the pilot on the first flight of the space-plane 'Space Bird One'.

I remember the day of the take-off. It was a beautiful day -sunshine, blue sky, and no clouds anywhere. I was so excited, I thought it was the best day of my life.

There was a warm, soft wind, blowing across the desert. I remember that because, as we were walking towards the plane, the wind blew Mary's hair across her face. The cameramen loved that. Helen and I cut our hair real short, like all astronauts. But Mary's hair is long and fair. The gentle wind blew it everywhere, and one TV cameraman walked in front of her, filming it.

There were cameramen everywhere. I guess that it looked real good on breakfast TV — three young women in silver spacesuits, walking across the desert sand in the early morning sun. And there in front of us, on the runway, was our fantastic, beautiful, black and silver space-plane.

There were no other planes like this anywhere. And tomorrow this one would be floating beside the orbiting Space Station. Three days later, we would be back here, on this runway, on Earth.

That is the reason why this plane is so fantastic. It can take off from an ordinary airport, like an ordinary plane, and fly straight up into space like a spacecraft, then it can fly back down and land again like a plane. It uses its own engines all the time — jet engines in the atmosphere, rocket engines in space. It is easy. And if the engines are OK, it can turn round the next day and fly back up again.

And I was going to fly it. Me — Cathy Fox, a twenty-nine-year-old girl from a small town in Georgia — I was going to be the first person to fly this wonderful, beautiful plane away from Earth and into black starry space.

We climbed in and sat in our seats. I looked at my hands as I touched the controls. They seemed quite still, quite calm - but inside I wanted to sing, I was so excited. Helen, my co-pilot, sat beside me and Mary sat behind us.

I switched the engines on and slowly turned them up to full power. The noise was terrible. I checked everything carefully and then talked to Mission Control.

'OK, Space Bird One,' said Mission Control. 'You are OK for take-off. Good luck, everyone!'

'Thank you, Mission Control.' I smiled at Helen, and then turned to look at Mary. 'OK, honey? Are you ready?'

Mary's face was a little white, I thought, but she smiled bravely. 'Sure, Cathy,' she said. 'Let's go.'

I touched the controls. There was a noise like thunder and the little plane screamed down the runway and took off. Above us, in the clear blue morning sky, I saw the Moon.

Mary looked rather nervous, but I wasn't worried about that. You see, Mary Carter and I had been at school together. I was her best friend in those days, so I knew her well.

She had looked rather nervous on the day when we had gone spear-fishing underwater for the first time. But she had caught a baby shark that day, and we had eaten it that evening. We were both ten years old then.

Mary had looked rather nervous on the day when she and I had started hang-gliding. But she had become the best woman hang-glider in the USA — she was much better at it than me. She was the first woman to fly a hang-glider from the top of the Rocky Mountains to the sea. She was eighteen then.

Sometimes she looks small and nervous. But I know that inside she's really tough.

After school, I became a pilot and she became a journalist. She went all over the world: Japan, Latin America, India. Then she got her own TV program. She interviewed scientists and asked them to explain their work. When she got married and had three kids, she made the kids part of the TV program, too. I think that she loved those kids more than anything else. I never married. I didn't want kids. I loved flying too much. I didn't see Mary so often. I read her reports in the newspapers, saw her on TV, and met her once or twice a year. That's all.

When NASA built this space-plane, they wanted a lot of publicity for it. They wanted everyone in the country to read about it, see it on TV and say how fantastic it was, so they could get money for more space-planes. So NASA decided to ask a journalist to fly on the plane, talk on TV and write about it. And Mary got the job.

She was a famous reporter, with her own TV program about scientists. I guess that's why she got the job. Of course, she was young and pretty with long fair hair, too. And maybe Helen Wilson and I were allowed to fly with her because they wanted three women in the plane. That would look good on TV, too. We didn't like that, but we didn't care too much either. Mary was a good journalist, and Helen and I had both been in space twice before. We all knew our jobs. And it was a really beautiful plane.

Once, a man from the CIA asked me a few questions about Mary. He was worried about some other TV programs. 'Is she OK?' he asked. 'Can she keep quiet, if she has to?'

'Listen,' I said. 'I know Mary. I was at school with her. Of course she can keep a secret. She's a famous journalist. She knows her job. Don't worry.'

That was my first big mistake, I suppose. I forgot that Mary liked to ask difficult questions.

'40,000 feet,' said Helen. 'Six minutes to rocket engine start.'

'OK,' I said. 'She's flying beautifully, isn't she?'

'She sure is,' Helen answered. 'She flies like a bird.'

She smiled at me. She was as happy and excited as I was. I didn't know Helen very well, but I knew she was a good astronaut. She had lived on the Space Station for three months last year.

'Mission Control to Space Bird One. Mary, are you ready to talk to your kids now?'

They wanted her to talk to her kids, on breakfast TV. If she could explain things, which the kids could understand, then anyone would be able to understand.

'Sure, Control,' said Mary. 'We're ready.'

We heard three excited voices on the radio. 'Hi, Mom! We saw you take off! Hey, how are you?'

'Hello, Danny! Hello, Sue! Hello, David! I'm fine! Can you see me on TV?'

'We can see the plane in the sky. Mom, but it's real small now. Are you very high up? Can you see our house?'

Mary laughed. 'No, Sue, I don't think I can. But it's a beautiful view. I can see the whole of the desert, and the mountains to the north ...'

Helen smiled at me. 'That's what the world wants to hear,' she said. She was right. At that exact moment, people all over the world were listening to Mary and her children. The TV camera in the plane was showing pictures of her pretty, happy face, and the TV camera in her home was showing pictures of her three excited children and their proud father. That was what NASA wanted. And it was what Mary was good at.

Four minutes later, she asked me to speak.

'OK, kids. Let me show you our pilot, Cathy Fox. Do you remember her?'

'Sure, Mom! Hi, Cathy! Are you really flying that plane?'

'You bet I am. I'm flying the most beautiful plane in the world, and your Mommy is sitting behind me. We're already higher than any other plane in the world, you know, and we're still going up. But there's not much air around us now, and the jet engines need air. In about thirty seconds we're going to switch off the jet engines and switch on the rocket motors. Then we'll be in space. When you see a bright light on your TV screen, that's what it is. Ready everyone?'

'Ready,' Mary and Helen answered.

'OK. Twenty seconds to rocket engine start... fifteen ... ten ... five, four, three, two, one...'

I switched on the two rocket motors. The plane shot forward, and we were pushed back into our seats. Two minutes and five seconds later, I switched off the rocket engines. I checked my controls carefully. Speed, fuel, air ... everything was OK. I sat back in my seat.

'OK, girls. We've done it! We're flying into space!'

Over the radio, we could hear laughs and cheers from Mission Control on Earth, and from Mary's family. Behind me, Mary started talking again, to the millions of people in her audience on Earth.

'I can see the edge of the Earth now ...and I can see the sea ... I can see all the way across from the Nevada Desert to the sea, kids! This is wonderful! And the sky isn't blue any more. It's going black, because we're outside the Earth's atmosphere, yes, the sky's black above us, and I can see the stars and the Moon, but the sun is shining on the sea below. This is the most fantastic view I have ever seen, kids!'

'Hey, Cathy, we did it! Look up there!' Helen touched my arm and pointed through the window.

'What is it?' I could see a large star in front of us.

'The Space Station. That's where we're going,' Helen smiled.

I looked again. There it was. Six thousand miles to the east, and ten miles above us, the Space Station was orbiting near the edge of the Earth. It looked so small that I could have covered it with my little finger. But I was flying the plane there. There was nowhere else to go.

Ten minutes later, we were in free fall. I undid my seat straps, pushed gently on the sides of my seat with my fingers, bent my knees, and floated slowly backwards out of my seat. I sat on the ceiling of the cabin and smiled down at Mary.

'Go on. Try it.'

'OK. Watch this, kids.'

She undid her straps and pushed on the seat. But she pushed much too hard and shot up to the ceiling. I caught her and pushed her down to Helen. Helen smiled. We had both done this before, but it was Mary's first time in space. We had to teach her how to float.

We all enjoyed that. I really love floating in space. It was wonderful for the TV cameras and Mary's kids, too. We knew they were watching and we tried to put on a really good show. Mary's long hair floated everywhere. We often had to catch her. We probably looked like three people swimming underwater.

Then we strapped ourselves into our seats and had our first meal. That's a difficult thing, too. If you don't spear the food carefully with a fork, it floats away all over the place. Most of Mary's floated away. We had to chase it round the cabin afterwards. The TV audience loved that, too.

But Mary got tired of playing. She tried to be serious. That was when the trouble started.

Helen was working at the back of the cabin. Mary and I were floating at the front, watching the Mediterranean. The sea was a beautiful clear blue, with Italy in the middle of it. And between us and Italy, there was a military satellite.

'Is that one of ours or one of theirs, Cathy?' she asked me.

'What? Oh, one of ours, I think,' I said. I touched her hand and nodded towards the TV camera. She knew that we must not talk about things like that. But she just went on. She was speaking quite clearly and loudly. She knew that she had a big audience.

'So that's one of the famous US military satellites, is it? It doesn't look very big. We have about thirty of those, don't we, Cathy? And those thirty can shoot down anyone who attacks the USA, can't they?'

'Mary . . .' I began. I looked at the TV camera, but the red light was still on. Millions of people all over the world were listening to this. 'I don't think . . .'

'But, Cathy, I want to know one thing.' Now Mary was watching the TV camera, too. She was speaking very loudly and clearly. 'Is it true that those military satellites can fire their weapons away from Earth if they want to? Is the US government afraid of enemies from space, too?'

The red light on the TV camera went off. I was amazed. I stared at Mary. I didn't know what to say. Maybe the CIA was right about her. She *was* crazy!

An angry voice from Mission Control came on the radio. 'What the hell are you girls doing? You know that you're on international TV, Mary, don't you? Keep quiet about things like that!'

Mary looked annoyed. 'Sure I know I'm on TV. That's my job, isn't it? A lot of people ask me that question. They pay their taxes and they want to know what the money is used for!'

'Well we don't pay you to ask that kind of question. Keep talking about the view, OK?'

'OK,' Mary murmured. For a minute or two no one spoke. Then the red light on the TV camera came on again. The Sahara Desert and the mouth of the River Nile floated past the window. Mary said something nice about it. There was another small satellite above Cairo, but she didn't say anything about that.

The small satellite grew bigger. It was coming nearer. Mary spoke again.

'Hello, Egypt! We're above you now, and we can see that you're having a lovely sunny day!' She was smiling into the camera, but I knew that she was very angry.

The satellite was very near now. It was so big that we could only see half of Egypt. I floated up and switched the TV camera off myself.

'What is it, Cathy?' Mary asked. 'It's huge!'

'I don't know,' I answered. I switched on the radio.

'Hello, Control,' I said. 'We have a big object below us. We're not sure what it is. Are we near any satellites?'

'Wait a moment, Cathy. I'll check. How big is it?'

I looked out of the window. It's difficult to know how big things are in space — you don't know how far away they are. But I couldn't see Egypt at all now — just Turkey, and part of the Sudan.

'*Huge*, Control,' I said quietly. 'I'm looking at an object as big as the Space Station. Helen, come here and look at this.'

Helen floated up to join us. She whistled softly.

'Wow, Cathy, what is *that*? It's not one of ours, is it?'

'I don't know whose it is,' I said. 'But I don't like it much. It's coming straight towards us.'

'Hello, Cathy,' said Mission Control. 'There is no satellite near you, and we can see nothing on the radar. Can you still see it?'

'Can I see it?' I said. 'I can't see anything else!'

The object was now so big that it filled most of the screen. And it didn't look like a satellite at all.

'That's a UFO, isn't it?' said Mary softly. She sounded frightened, but excited, too. 'I knew it! I knew they were real!'

The object was round and flat, like a solid wheel. Green and blue lights were flashing at the edge of it. It was spinning slowly and there was a yellow light in the middle. Mary floated up to the TV camera and switched it on. 'We've got to tell the world about this! Listen, people of Earth! In front of this space-plane, there is a huge UF ... mmm!'

Helen put her hand across Mary's mouth and pushed her away from the TV camera. The red light went off.

'Hey, will you be quiet up there! This is another thing that we don't talk about, OK? Cathy, is that thing still there?' 'It sure is,' I said. 'It's here, just watching us.' 'We're trying to get it on the radar now. I think we've found it. It... *How* big is it. . .?'

'Like a football field!' I was afraid. But the thing was beautiful, too. I didn't know what to do.

'Yes, it looks big on the radar, too. Very big. Listen Cathy, try to move away from it, will you? Switch the rocket motors on.'

'OK,' I said. But first, I picked up a camera and took about twenty photographs. I knew that we couldn't show this thing on international TV, but we had to have some photos of it.

'Strap yourselves in, ladies,' I said. 'We're going to say goodbye to our new friend.'

'Why can't we show it on TV?' asked Mary. 'This is the most important thing of the whole trip! It's ... it's fantastic! We must tell everybody!'

'It's an official secret,' said Helen. 'Didn't NASA tell you? All UFOs are official secrets.'

'Do you mean that they don't exist?' said Mary. 'But it's there, in front of us. I can see it!'

'Sure,' said Helen. 'I can see it, too. Lots of them exist. But you can't just tell everyone about it on TV. People would be afraid. Anyway, we don't know what they are.'

'So what?' said Mary. 'I'm afraid. But I want to know what it is. Can't we go a bit nearer?'

'No,' I answered. 'We're going away. Hold tight.'

There was a problem with the rocket motors. One minute they wouldn't start. The next minute they were too strong. It was very difficult to control them. For five minutes, Helen and I worked hard.

'Are you OK?' asked the radio. 'Are the motors OK now?'

'I think so,' I said. 'I think it's OK now.' My hands were wet with sweat.

'Where is the UFO now? Can you see it?'

Helen floated up behind us to look. 'Yes. It's much smaller now. About five miles away, maybe.'

'OK. We can see it on radar. Keep your motors on for four minutes and twenty seconds. Then you will be in orbit 200 miles above the Space Station. When you switch the motors off, sit back for a while. Go to sleep, or listen to music, or something.'

'OK,' I said. 'That sounds like a good idea.'

But we didn't go to sleep, because I couldn't switch the rocket motors off.

'What do you mean, you can't turn them off?' asked Helen.

'You try it,' I said. It wasn't hot in the plane, but I was sweating. And sweat doesn't run down your back in space; it just floats around inside your clothes. It's terrible.

Helen tried to stop the rocket motors. She couldn't. The controls had stopped working.

'Cathy, what are you doing up there?' shouted Mission

Control. 'You've got to switch those motors off! You're going out of Earth's orbit!'

'I know that, dammit!' I shouted. 'But nothing works! There's a problem with the controls!'

'What does he mean? Why are we going out of Earth's orbit?' asked Mary. 'Where are we going?'

'I'll tell you what he means,' said Helen quietly. 'He means that we are going out into space. We are going to leave the Earth and never come back.'

'That's not possible,' she said. 'It can't be possible!'

'Shut up,' I said. 'I think I've got it! I know what to do!'

Suddenly, the controls worked again and the rocket motors stopped. But it was too late. Six minutes and ten seconds too late. We were about 400 miles above the Space Station and we were going away from it at about 15,000 miles per hour.

I looked at Helen. She was trying to be calm, but her face had gone very white.

'We're still leaving Earth's orbit,' she said. 'And we haven't got enough fuel left to turn around.'

'Do you mean that we're going to die, here in this plane?' asked Mary quietly.

'Maybe,' I muttered. 'I don't know yet. Find out where we're going,' I said to Helen. 'I'll check the fuel. Then we'll decide what to do.'

I checked the fuel. We only had about three minutes of rocket fuel left. Helen was right. Unless something else turned us around first, it wasn't enough to get us back to Earth. There was nothing we could do. We were just going to go on and on into space. Our air would run out, and we would die. Perhaps one day, a hundred years from now, someone else would find the plane. They would open it and see our dead bones, floating around inside.

While Helen was working on the computer, I floated back to Mary. She was looking out of the window at the Earth — our beautiful, blue and green home. Her hand was tapping softly on the glass, as though she wanted to get out. I took her hand and, for a moment, we stared at the Earth together. We said nothing.

Then she let go of my hand and pointed. 'Look,' she said. 'There's the UFO again.'

The UFO was quite small now, about five miles away. It looked like a small wheel, shining in the sunlight above the Earth. As I watched, it suddenly began to move away, towards the Moon. It moved amazingly fast. In two minutes it had completely disappeared.

'Do you think the UFO stopped our motors?' asked Mary. 'Could it do that?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'And at the moment I'm not very interested. Helen, where are we going?'

'Just a minute.' Helen was still working at the computer. 'Yes ... that's it. In twelve hours, ladies, we'll be in orbit around the Moon. A low orbit. At one point, we'll only be about five miles above the Moon.'

'Are you sure about that?' I asked. 'We're not going to hit the Moon, are we?'

Helen checked the figures on the computer again. 'No,' she said. 'We won't hit it. But we'll get a beautiful view of it.'

'Great!' I said. 'A beautiful view of rocks and dust. Then what will we do?'

'That depends,' she said. 'How much rocket fuel is left?'

'About three minutes,' I answered. 'Why?' I looked at her and we both worked out the answer at the same time. There was a chance — a small chance, but it might work. It *had* to work! I didn't want to spend the rest of my life going round and round the Moon, waiting for our air to run out.

'What is it? What are you going to do?' Mary asked. But we did not have time to tell her. 'She's a science reporter,' I thought. 'She can work it out herself.' For the next half an hour, Helen and I worked on the computer. We checked the figures again and again. It was a mistake not to talk to Mary. I see that now. She was frightened, and she didn't have anything to do. But Helen and I didn't think of that then. We didn't notice her at all, really.

Half an hour later we floated away from the computer, smiling. I took a packet of orange juice and drank it.

'It is possible, then,' I said to Helen.

'Sure,' she said. 'We can do it. We have to get it right first time, that's all. We won't have a second chance.'

Mary was looking out of a window, staring at the Earth. The Earth was much smaller now, much further away. It was like a blue and white ball in space. Not a very big ball now. Not much bigger than the Sun. We could see Australia, India and Africa at the same time.

'I want to talk to my kids,' she said. 'They're down there. They don't know what's happening.'

'Sure,' I said. 'Go ahead.' I was still feeling happy because Helen and I had found the answer.

'Mission Control won't let me,' said Mary softly. She looked at me. Several small drops of clear water - tears — were floating in front of her face. She brushed them away with her hand. 'Damn it, Cathy - they won't let me talk to my children! What's wrong with those guys down there?'

I thought about it for a moment. Mission Control certainly had a big problem. The idea of this trip was to get NASA publicity. Good publicity - not the sort of publicity, which you get when your motors go wrong. And now we were halfway to the Moon. The whole world wanted to see Mary on TV, explaining what was happening. But she thought that the motors didn't work because of the UFO.

'Listen, Mary,' I said. 'I'll tell Mission Control you want to talk to the kids. But don't say anything about the UFO, OK?'

'Why not?' she asked. 'The UFO switched off the controls, didn't it?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'I don't know what switched them off.'

'Well, why can't I talk about the UFO, anyway?' she asked. 'It's important, isn't it? It's a fantastic discovery. I'm an experienced journalist. I know what people are interested in! And NASA want publicity, don't they? That's why I'm here. But now we see the most amazing thing since Christopher Columbus and you won't let me talk about it!'

'Listen, Mary,' I said. 'This is the first UFO I've seen. But other people have seen them - pilots, maybe even other astronauts. And what happens when they talk about it? People laugh, don't they? NASA doesn't want the whole world laughing at us.'

'They won't laugh at *us*,' she said. 'Two astronauts and an experienced journalist. We're not crazy - we saw it! Anyway, you took photos.'

'Sure,' I said. 'And we'll look at the photos when we get home. But if Mission Control tell us not to talk about it, then we don't talk about it. They must have good reasons.' I hoped that they had good reasons. But it wasn't really true. Helen, however, was quite sure.

'No, Cathy. It's more important than that,' she said. 'If you tell the world about this on TV, Mary, what do you think will happen? People will be terrified! They'll think that the end of the world has come! They won't believe in the government, they won't believe in the military, they won't believe in NASA! Everything will change! That's why it's an official secret.'

Mary shook her head. 'You're crazy,' she said. 'You're completely crazy!'

We talked for ten more minutes. Mary couldn't understand us, but she agreed to say nothing about the UFO on TV. Then we explained our idea about the rocket motors. 'When we go behind the Moon, we'll be very near the ground. We'll be moving very fast because of gravity. Then when we come round the other side, we'll be moving very fast towards the Earth. We'll fire the rocket motors, leave the Moon and fly very fast back to Earth. The Moon helps to send us back. It's like running towards a tree, catching hold of it, going round, and then running back the other way. All we have to do is to fire the motors at exactly the right moment.'

'But if we don't fire the motors at the right moment, we'll go into orbit round the Moon, won't we?' said Mary.

'That's right,' I said. 'We'll just go round and round the Moon until we die. So we'd better get it right.'

Mary talked on TV about that instead. She talked very well; she knew how to do that. She didn't say anything about the UFO, but I think we got a lot of publicity anyway. After all, it isn't every day that three children lose their mother behind the Moon.

After that we tried to sleep. It's difficult to sleep in free fall. You strap yourself into your seat, and close your eyes, with your arms and legs floating in the air in front of you. But because there's no gravity, I often dream about falling and wake up. I woke up several times that night, and twice I saw Mary awake, too. Helen slept OK. I don't think she dreams much.

When we woke up, we were falling towards the Moon. The Earth was very small and far away, and the Moon was very big. It was a huge, white, shining ball of dust and craters and mountains. We were falling towards it, faster and faster.

Mary was feeling better. She looked quite interested in the Moon, in fact. She asked us a lot of questions about it. We spoke on TV for half an hour. They showed a lot of pictures of the Moon.

'Why don't we land there, Cathy?' she asked. 'You could land the plane and we could have a look around.'

I laughed. Mary knew the answer, but she wanted me to explain something easy to the TV audience. 'This is a plane, Mary, not a moon landing vehicle. We need a runway to land on and air to fly in. There are no runways on the Moon, and there is no air to fly in.'

But I liked the question. This is the old Mary again, I thought. She is sometimes afraid for her children, but not for herself.

Then Mary asked one of her really difficult questions.

'It looks a very lonely place, Cathy,' she said. 'Why don't we have a Moon Station there or something?'

'You can see why,' I said. 'There's nothing on the Moon except dust and rocks. No air, no water. It's better to have our own Space Station.'

'Yes, but there must be *something* interesting there,' she said. 'I mean, why did NASA send those astronauts there in the 1960s, and then suddenly stop? It seems crazy to me.' She paused and looked at me with her old smile on her face. 'They saw some UFOs there, didn't they? I remember that I heard a story once. The first man on the Moon was Neil Armstrong, wasn't he? And he saw two huge...'

There was a loud noise from the radio and the camera light went out. Helen looked angry, but Mary continued talking.

'... two huge UFOs on the edge of a mountain, ten times as big as the moon landing vehicle. Isn't that true?'

'Oh for heaven's sake, Mary, of course it's not true!' said Helen angrily. 'You know you mustn't say things like that on TV.'

It was a new story to me, but I didn't believe it either. I was wrong about that, too.

As we came nearer to the Moon, we saw a dark line rushing towards us, across the ground. It was the line between the bright side of the Moon and the dark side. On the bright side, everything was shining white in the sunlight; on the dark side, it was black as midnight. We were going behind the Moon, to the dark side.

'We're going very fast now, aren't we?' said Mary.

'That's right,' I said. 'It's the gravity. We have to fire the rocket motors soon.'

Helen and I looked at our controls. We checked the figures on the computer again.

Suddenly we were behind the Moon. The stars were still shining above us, but below us there were no stars. It was empty. Everything was black. Almost everything. Mary saw it first.

'Cathy, what's that? What are those lights down there?'

'Lights? Don't be silly, there aren't any lights,' I said. 'You must be looking at the stars.' I didn't look; I was too busy with the computer.

'No, I'm not. There are lights, Cathy, lights down there on the Moon. Lots of them. It looks like a city or something.'

'For heaven's sake, Mary, I'm busy!' I said. But then I looked up and saw them.

I looked up and saw the most amazing thing that I have ever seen in my whole life. I know Helen says she didn't see them, but she is lying. She definitely saw them. We all did. And for twenty minutes, maybe half an hour, we just sat and stared at them with our mouths open.

The lights below us were like a city. There were orange, green and red lights in long lines like streets. There were tall lights, yellow and white, like great trees or high buildings. There were circles of lights, great wheels that went round and round. They changed color all the time, like rainbows. And there were bridges of light - long, very thin bridges. They were perhaps half a mile high and twenty miles long, going from one side of the city to the other.

The whole city of lights was moving. All the time, it was going round, like a wheel. And every few minutes, small planes or spacecraft shot up from the sides of the wheel, went along the bridges and flew off into the night. There were small lights flashing on them, too. We watched the small lights grow smaller in the darkness.

We didn't say anything. What could we say?

After half an hour the city was behind us, and in thirty-five minutes it had disappeared. Helen was the first to speak. Her voice sounded strange, a little shaky.

Four minutes, thirty seconds.'

'What?' I was still thinking about the city of lights. I couldn't forget it.

'Four minutes, thirty seconds, Cathy. In four minutes and thirty seconds we have to start the rocket motors.'

'Oh. Yeah, sure, you're right.' Helen was a good astronaut, but I was the pilot. I had to fly the plane. It was very difficult, but I had to forget the lights.

'Three minutes, ten seconds ... two minutes ... one minute...'

I was not thinking about the lights any more. My fingers touched the controls gently. It was my plane. I had to get us home.

'Twenty seconds ... ten. Start the motors ... nine, eight, seven, six...' I checked the fuel carefully on the computer. Was there enough?... two, one, *full power!*

I switched the rocket motors on and we were pushed back into our seats. It felt strange after spending so much time in free fall. Suddenly the ground below was shining with white light. We were on the bright side of the Moon again! Helen and I watched the controls carefully.

'We've done it!' Helen laughed aloud. 'We're going home!'

The rocket motors fired for exactly two minutes and fifty seconds. It was enough to take us out of the Moon's gravity and back towards Earth. We had only ten seconds of rocket fuel left. But when we got back into the Earth's atmosphere, we could use the jet engines to fly back home. We had missed the Space Station, but that didn't matter now.

Mission Control wanted to talk to us. They sounded really happy.

'Well done, girls! You did it! It's fantastic! You're coming home!'

'Thank you,' I said. Somehow I didn't feel happy. I just felt tired. I didn't want to talk to anyone. But the man at Mission Control could not stop talking.

'Our computer tells us you'll enter Earth's atmosphere in twelve hours, just above Hawaii. Then you can fly here with the jet engines.'

'Good,' I said.

'Listen, Cathy, everyone here on Earth thinks you girls are wonderful! The President wants to talk to you on TV. Can you talk to him?'

'Er, yeah, sure,' I said. 'Hey no, wait a minute, Control. We're a little tired and ... we don't look too good at the moment. Can the President wait for half an hour while we cleanup?'

It was a silly thing to say, but I needed time to think. And because we were women, it worked. I could almost hear the man thinking about it.

'Oh, er, ... sure, ladies, of course. We want you to look real good on TV. Be ready in half an hour then.'

I switched the radio off and looked at Helen and Mary. For a moment no one said anything. Then a terrible argument began.

'We mustn't say anything about it,' Helen said. She looked cold and very angry.

'What do you mean?' Mary pushed her long hair behind her ears. 'You're crazy! We have seen a city of lights on the Moon - a UFO city! We have found people from another world! We *must* tell the President!'

'No,' said Helen. 'It's an official secret. It's so secret that even the President mustn't know. All UFOs are official secrets. Cathy knows that, too. I'll tell the President that we didn't see anything, and so will you, won't you, Cathy?'

'Yes,' I said. I'm sorry I said that now. Maybe it was the biggest mistake of all. But I said it anyway.

'But why? *Why*, Cathy?' Mary looked as if I had shot her in the back. Helen tried to explain. 'Look, firstly, we don't know that they come from another world. Maybe they're human. Maybe they're our enemies...'

'Oh, come on, Helen!' Mary laughed. 'Don't be silly!' 'And secondly, if they *are* from another planet, they're much more intelligent than us. You saw that UFO. It went a hundred times faster than us. Do you want to tell everyone that the military and NASA are useless? Everyone will be afraid!'

'It's true, then,' I said. There is no Space Station on the Moon because the UFOs are there, and we're afraid of them. Maybe Neil Armstrong did see some UFOs in 1969!'

'Maybe,' said Helen. 'But he kept quiet about it, didn't he? We must keep quiet, too.'

'But this is crazy!' shouted Mary. 'Why do you think the UFOs are enemies? Maybe they're friendly. Maybe they can help the people of Earth.'

'They switched our rocket controls off, didn't they?' I said.

'Maybe,' said Mary. 'But maybe they wanted us to see their city. The rocket motors are OK now, aren't they? Listen, Cathy, if the UFOs are friendly, they can help the world. Maybe we won't need wars and fighting and military satellites any more. Maybe they can help us to stop all that!'

'Do you think the President or NASA want to hear that?' asked Helen. She looked even more cold and angry. 'Listen carefully, Mary. This is a very important secret. It is not something for your TV show. You must not say anything at all about it. I'm sorry, but if you talk about this, Cathy and I will say that you are lying. NASA and the CIA will say that you are mad. They'll send you to a hospital. You'll lose your job, and you won't see your children again, maybe for

years. Is that what you want?'

Mary went very white. She looked at us both. For a long time no one said anything. We watched the Earth getting slowly larger. I switched the radio on.

'The President will be ready in three minutes, ladies.'

'OK,' said Mary slowly. 'I won't say anything about it now. But when we get back to Earth ...We'll see.'

When we got back to Earth, we all had long talks with NASA and the military. We all had to sign a report. It said nothing at all about the UFO or the city of lights. I gave them my photographs, but I don't know what happened to them. I never saw them again.

I don't know what they said to Mary, but she kept her job and went home to her family. She didn't write anything about the UFOs in the newspapers, or say anything about them on TV. I didn't say anything either. I wasn't happy about it, but I wanted to keep my Job, too.

Then a year later, Mary asked me to come on her TV show. 'It's a program about space flight,' she said. 'I want you and Helen to talk about it with me on TV.'

But, two weeks before the TV program, Mary was killed in a hang-gliding accident. Something was wrong with the hang-glider, her husband said. One minute it was fine and the next minute it fell out of the sky. No one knew why.

I asked her family, but they didn't know anything about the city of lights. She'd never said anything about it to them, and they thought I was crazy.

That's why I'm writing this. I'm going to send it to every newspaper in the world. It was Mary's job really — she was the journalist. But then she had to think about her children. She kept her mouth shut. I know I'll lose my job, but I don't care. I think this is the most important story in the world. Everyone in the world should know about it.

'Astronaut Fox often sees things which are not really there, Helen Wilson said. 'Cathy began to be ill on the first space-plane flight and she has become worse recently. She knows she has a problem and she is happy to go into hospital.'

Glossary

amazed/amazing: very surprised/surprising

atmosphere: the mix of gases around the Earth or any moon or star

audience: a group of people who are watching or listening to a TV program, a radio show, etc.

cabin: a room on a ship, aeroplane or rocket

clean up *US:* wash, comb hair, change clothes etc

crater: a large hole in the ground, made by a meteor

Damn it / dammit: some people say this when they are angry about something

drop: a small amount of liquid

Earth: our planet; the third planet from the Sun

exist: a thing exists if you can see it, feel it, hear it, taste it, smell it or measure it in some scientific way

float: be held up in air without falling; stay on the surface of a liquid and not fall down

For heaven's sake!: some people say this when they are angry or surprised at something

free fall: astronauts are in free fall when they do not feel gravity; there is no up or down, they just float

government: the people or organization that control a country

gravity: the force that pulls objects in space towards each other and on Earth pulls them towards the centre of the planet, so that things fall to the ground when they are dropped

Great!: Wonderful!

guys: friends; people you know

hang-gliding: sport of flying by using a large machine which is controlled by your own movements

honey *US:* dear; friend; loved one

huge: very big

I guess *US:* I suppose

journalist: a reporter; someone who writes for newspapers, magazines, etc.

kid: a child or young person

military: of the army, navy or air force

Mom/Mommy *US:* mother

mutter: speak or say something in a voice that is difficult to hear

official secret: something that ordinary people are not told about but that the people who control a country know

orbit: the path of a planet or satellite around something else, e.g. the Earth, the Moon

publicity: information given to interest the public; a type of advertising

rainbow: a line of beautiful colours that you sometimes see in the sky when the sun shines through rain

real *US:* really

runway: the part of an airport where planes land and take off

shark: an often dangerous fish with sharp teeth and a triangle-shaped fin on its back

spear-fishing: a way of killing fish by swimming underwater and shooting the fish with a sharp spear from a gun

spin: go round and round very quickly like a wheel

starry: full of stars

strap: a piece of leather, cloth, etc used to hold people in their seats, etc

sure: 1. yes; OK 2. definitely (used for emphasis)

sweat: salt water that comes from your skin when you are afraid, hot, ill or working hard

tap: touch or hit something quickly or lightly

tough: strong and brave

work out: find the answer to a problem or difficulty

What the hell ...: some people say this when they are angry or surprised at something

You bet I am: I certainly am

Note: American spelling has been used throughout e.g. *color*, *TV program*, which in British English would be *colour* and *TV programme*.