

SNAPSHOTS AT A REQUIEM

by Brian Dunning

The balding engineer placed his coffee mug carefully onto the coaster. His naturally smiling face was alight as he stretched back into the cushioned wicker chair.

"Nate Grimley was certainly a remarkable man," he said, and crossed his hands assuredly upon his knee. "I'm very, very grateful that I've called him friend."

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"In Nate Grimley, I saw all the extremes of human nature," said Dr. Thomas Griffin. Behind his desk were models of the Space Shuttle launchpad and NASA's space station. "Love, frustration, desperation, passion, and when the time came, an almost maniacal relentlessness.

"Even today, when I look back at what Nate did, I'm uncertain whether to call it one of man's boldest ventures, or the most devastating personal tragedy I've ever known."

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A color photograph, worn on the edges. The whites had faded to a yellowish beige, and the blues nearly to brown. Several lines scrawled in black ink in the corner had smeared with age and were no longer legible. The picture showed a thin young man in a leather flight jacket, tall, prematurely losing hair, with an out-of-place moustache. His Air Force cap was cocked to one side and he was saluting the camera. Behind him was an aircraft so large that the fuselage alone filled the frame, making it impossible to identify. The young man's eyes seemed to speak to the camera. He looked like he would live forever.

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"My brother hated to fly," said Sarah Grimley-Davies. "Absolutely hated it." She was very proper, comely and fifty five years of age. She sat up straight in a flowered spring dress with her hands politely folded in her lap. Her honest eyes were clear.

"Nate was terrified of the war. Every boy he knew had gone to Vietnam and little Eddie Kilmer...he was my age...came back with one leg and that frightened Nate even more. He decided to join the Air Force before he was drafted into the Marines. That was in 1968." Sarah paused as if expecting a response. "Nate took me aside before he left and he said to me, 'Baby' (Nate called me Baby until the day he died), 'Baby, you have to take care of Mother now.'"

Sarah paused once more, impressively.

"`And when I come back, if she has a single gray hair, I'm going to kick you behind.'" Sarah bubbled over with giggles and covered her mouth.

"That was the first time Nate had ever sworn at me."

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"If ever there was a wrong time to fall in love," said the balding engineer in the wicker chair, "Nate Grimley found it."

He thumbed through a photo album for a moment, then turned it around to display a picture. "There."

It was a recent shot of himself, his wife, Nate and another woman. They were at a water park, all smiles with innertubes round their waists; the men displaying harsh farmer tans and the women sporting bikinis they probably hadn't worn since high school.

"Her name was Amanda. She was a nurse at the Air Force base. Grim had been in there a thousand times for his damned hangnail but they'd never happened to meet. Then one day he had to jimmy a vending machine that stole his money. He busted his pinkie finger and Amanda wrapped it up. Before the job was finished, he'd asked her to marry him and she'd accepted. He put some of the tape around her finger for a ring and they snuck off the base. An hour after that this picture was taken." Sure enough, closer inspection of the picture revealed taped fingers on Nate and Amanda.

"You'd have thought they'd known each other all their lives. They walked alike, talked alike, looked alike, made the same jokes, had the same eyes, chewed off the same bit, you might say. Grim was afraid to go down the big slide but made up some scientific excuse why it wouldn't be any fun. She harped on him like they'd been married fifty years, and made him do it.

"We took separate cars to dinner. A wheel flew off a truck and bumped Grim's car. They went down an embankment and into the aqueduct. Grim had her out of there in thirty seconds, but it wasn't enough. She was in a coma. He never saw her conscious again. He saw her eyes many times from a bed at the home but there was nothing behind them.

"Grim had always had his jets and Amanda had always had broken fingers to tape up. In one afternoon they traded all those things for each other. And suddenly they had nothing."

The wicker creaked as he leaned back into the cushions and looked reflectively at the photograph. "Damn," he said at last, "I got one hell of a sunburn that day."

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Dr. Thomas Griffin picked up a model of a strange diamond shaped jet aircraft.

"Part of my job was to interview applicants for the BENEDICTUS project. I'd sit here, they'd sit there; first a Delta Team colonel, then a DEA helicopter pilot, anyone with a dangerous job. I asked them about their families, their state of mind, how they felt about themselves. Finally came Air Force test pilot Nathaniel Grimley.

"I gave him the standard run through. He answered, but he acted like I was wasting my time with such stupid questions. Finally he interrupted and said to me 'Doc, how much time have you got?' He took me out to his car and told me to get in.

"We drove for an hour. We get to this nursing home and he takes me upstairs. There, laying in a bed, is some poor woman in a coma. 'Doc,' Nate said to me, 'This is Amanda. This is why you have to choose me for BENEDICTUS.'

"I stood there in silence and thought about it for a quarter of a minute. Then I shook his hand."

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A cocky young man hidden behind aviator sunglasses held his helmet beneath his arm. The insignia on his flight suit showed him to be a major.

"We never figured out what Captain Grimley was doing here. He had fifteen years on the next oldest guy. He had bad eyes. He couldn't get a kill to save his life. I mean what does an old cargo pilot want to fly fighters for?"

Another pilot standing beside him cut in. "And how about four planes-- he broke the gear on four planes."

Both pilots laughed. The first pilot warmed into an honest grin. "We couldn't figure him out. Every time they'd drag him out of his jet he'd have this stupid silly smile exactly a foot and a half wide."

"Called him Grinley. It'd stay on his face for hours. Or days. Until it was time to go up again."

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"Nate was dark after the accident," said Sarah with a wrinkled brow and a low, foreboding voice. "I hardly knew him. He'd started a new project, he said; something at NASA, and he was flying nearly every day.

"I saw him once for lunch. He was very excited," she added matter-of-factly. She spoke like a doctor reading off a list of a patient's ailments.

"He was jumping up and down in his seat. He ordered two glasses of champagne, then he changed his mind and ordered a whole bottle. A whole bottle. And it was only eleven thirty."

Sarah repeated her patented pause, with wide eyes, as if expecting an answer.

"I had one glass. It made me drunk" (here she winked). "He said 'Baby, you know how much I love you. And I want you to know that I've always loved you and mom, and I've always been completely honest with you both.'"

"I'd no idea what he was talking about. I thought he was going to say he was becoming a Buddhist. I didn't know what to think. I expect I looked rather silly, holding my champagne glass to my lips, not drinking it, and staring straight across the table at him.

"'I can't tell you,' he said. 'But I love you very much, and everything's going to be perfect.'"

"'Nathaniel,' I said to him, 'all you're doing is flying an airplane.'"

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The following newspaper article was one of many that were omitted every day from the Christchurch Herald. Some were sacrificed due to space constraints, others were cut because of content or editorial considerations:

AUCKLAND: Persons aboard a private yacht off Norfolk Island allegedly witnessed the crash of an aircraft into the ocean yesterday morning. Official sources, however, maintain that no aircraft were in the vicinity.

Jonathan Drake, skipper of the yacht Queensland owned by Australian industrialist Howard Martin, noted a twisted contrail at approximately nine thirty AM. "The aircraft appeared to be out of control," Drake said. "The contrail was spiraling around itself, as if the craft was travelling along a giant corkscrew."

Drake called the attention of William Hendrickson, another of the crew. Hendrickson reports that the aircraft "Turned sharply downward, began to cartwheel, and splashed into the water."

Both Drake and Hendrickson declined to state whether they had seen any parachutes or life rafts.

"I immediately made a radio report on the public emergency frequency," said Drake, but did not say what transpired during that conversation. Hendrickson said he went below at that point and provided no further information.

Drake would not comment on any rescue efforts he may have observed or assisted in.

Air traffic officials report that no aircraft was in the area at the time. Military officials declined any knowledge of a crash. However, the American aircraft carrier Independence was in transit approximately five hundred miles due east, and there was speculation that this was a test of the latest in the American line of "black jets."

Robert White, the United States ambassador, issued a brief statement in response to numerous inquiries following the incident. "The State Department has no knowledge or information pertaining to the alleged crash reported by the crew of the yacht Queensland. It is the policy of our government not to conduct tests of developmental aircraft in foreign airspace, and this policy has been adhered to and will continue. In the case of service aircraft, such flyovers are always fully reported."

Sources describe the current "black jet" project as an aircraft capable of entering orbit through the use of supersonic ramjets and a conventional rocket fueled in flight by scooping up atmospheric oxygen.

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Dear Sarah,

Please forgive the official condolences you've been deluged with these past few days. We've landed men on the moon, supercomputed at hypersonic speeds and created particles of matter like gods, but I'm afraid the Powers that Be have never quite mastered the theory of apologizing to the families left behind. I hope you can excuse them.

I just wanted to express my deepest sympathies over the loss of your brother, and also to clear up any ambiguities or inconsistencies which may be intruding in a most unwelcome fashion. Please don't pay any attention to the newspapers. The fact is that Nate lost his life in a crash. Nate was fully aware that this was possible, even probable. Not only did he volunteer, but he had to beat out almost a hundred other applicants.

Nate believed that the significance of this program made it well worth any risk. Something the official record will never show is that Nate has become much more than a mere aircraft pilot, and the ramifications of his contribution are revolutionary and thoroughly successful.

One day soon we will all know more about just how Nate has advanced the state of our world. It is my deepest conviction that Nate would find any sadness on our parts to be misplaced. We must not be so selfish to mourn.

(signed)

Tom

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"Grim couldn't talk about what he did at NASA," said the engineer as he picked at a loose strand in the wicker chair. "I remember how terribly frustrated he was by that. We'd sit on his patio, having our weekly game of checkers, and Grim would ask me 'How's the flying, Bill, how's the flying?'"

"We still do it in the air, Grim,' I'd tell him.

"And he'd say, 'How are the old jets, Bill, how are the old jets?'

"Still sucking it in one end and blowing it out the other, Grim.' He wanted so much to talk, talk, talk about flying and there was simply nothing to talk about."

The engineer stammered for words, tried to grasp a gesture but couldn't quite catch it.

"A lot of people thought Grim was lucky to have been chosen for the black jet project. I don't think so. I did once, like everyone else, but not anymore. I don't believe Grim thought so either.

"What does a man do when his life is taken away from him? When his passion, the vehicle through which all his life's accomplishments came to be, is packed away and locked into a file marked 'classified?'

"What does a man do? When he can't talk about his life, what does a man say? You want to know what Nate Grimley said? He pointed at the checkerboard and said 'Your move, Bill.'"

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When Nathaniel Grimley's family arrived at his home to collect family treasures after his death, they found it very clean. The bed was made and there was no dirty laundry. The garbage had been taken out, and there were no decomposing perishables in the refrigerator. Nate had been reading the encyclopedia. There was a bookmark in the "A" pages, and one of the entries on that page was "alpha waves."

ALPHA WAVES

Bioelectrical wave patterns generated by the brain, as measured on a device called an electroencephalograph (EEG). These waves can reveal a person's state of mind and the brain's state of health and can help scientists study how the brain works. Alpha waves are

known to reflect only a small sample of electrical activity from the surface of the brain. Contemporary theory is that the more complex functions of the brain, such as those pertaining to emotions and thought, cannot be closely related to alpha wave patterns. However, some scientists dispute this, and maintain that far more information is carried in the alpha wave than we currently understand. For instance, studies show that individuals with uniquely strong personalities often have EEG readings with a higher than normal magnitude.

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There are many divisions at Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland. It functions primarily as an ordinary hospital, but also performs biomedical research and provides facilities for certain classified projects pertaining to genetics and biological defense. By and large, these divisions of the hospital are either unnamed or "under cover," disguised as blood banks or bookkeeping offices. These disguises are so intricate that even the false paperwork is regularly updated, staff persons send and receive simulated interoffice mail, and even the hospital's own accounting departments are fooled. Some of these undercover divisions employ as much as two thirds of their personnel as decoys only.

Records for these divisions are not kept on site. Today the divisions are in electronic communication with their databases and mainframe computer systems which are located all over the country. These communications are encrypted, and even they are mixed with meaningless decoy data. A "hacker" in southern Florida was once arrested for downloading a history of Nielsen ratings for civilian television programming. Although the hacker did not know it, coded within the television information was data regarding tests on human subjects of a new blood additive designed to combat the effects of certain nerve gases.

Previously, electronic data was stored on hard disk cartridges which were manually transported to safekeeping twice a day. The data would be uploaded from the cartridges into a

master database, then the cartridges would be returned to the divisions on a rotating basis. As more of the secret divisions switched over to electronic transmission, there grew to be a surplus of the outdated hard disk cartridges. Finally they were out of use altogether. They gathered dust in a warehouse for eight months. And then they were sold.

A large construction firm in Maine purchased two of these cartridges for use in their aging accounting system. The cartridges had not been properly degaussed, and it was necessary to reformat them for use on the construction firm's system. In preparation for this, one of the employees scanned the disks and recovered the following document, apparently a memo:

After last week's final screening for alpha wave transmission, three candidates remain. As you projected, they are:

204 MSgt. A. Maxwell Biggins, U.S. Army Reserve
310 Cap. Nathaniel Grimley, U.S. Air Force
119 Cap. Nelson Cleary, Canadian R.C.M.P.

All have been briefed and possess full knowledge of the project. All express eager willingness, and each has sufficient personal reasons to warrant commencement. From our end, each should serve equally well. The final decision is now yours. If you go with Captain Grimley, just let me know so I can see the look on Barnes' face when you tell his subcommittee you're going to send their shiny new prototype to Davey Jones. Call me if you want those tickets. Otherwise I'm taking Alison and there's nothing you can do to stop me.

The employee reported discovery of the document to the government agency which had handled the sale of the hard disk cartridges, and they were subsequently repurchased from the construction firm. Sale of all computer surplus was halted by the government, and as much equipment as possible was recovered from other buyers.

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TO: Dr. Thomas Griffin

NASA

FROM: Sen. Theodore Barnes
Senate subcommittee, black programs

EYES ONLY

Dr. Griffin:

I have spent 12 years on the black jet project. More than five billion taxpayer dollars have gone into it. 30 million alone was spent training Captain Grimley to fly the black jet.

I am somewhat flabbergasted to learn that my jet was intentionally destroyed and its pilot killed merely as a cover for your project. May I know what your project is?

Cordially yours,

Sen. Theodore Barnes

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Mike Ricks was introduced to the small group of scientists as a graduate student from the University of Utah. Dr. Griffin had already completed his portion of the briefing, and the dashing young Mr. Ricks was just getting to the meat of his. He clicked a button on a remote control to change to the next slide, which showed a complex chart.

"This shows the level of Captain Grimley's alpha activity during normal flight at 9:15:20 as received by the Independence's modified array and recorded by our digital system. Compared to this trace from the captain's control EEG, you can see that we are able to receive the alpha waves from a distance of 500 miles with virtually no loss in resolution or detail."

Mr. Ricks changed to the next slide.

"This is our recording at 9:21:40, approximately thirty seconds after Captain Grimley initiated the spin in the aircraft. Note the anticipated agitation in this section of the trace here.

"Further down, we approach the impact point. Notice the agitation relaxes. It's our conclusion that this is the result of self-conditioning and self-relaxation on Captain Grimley's part. Whether or not that has any bearing on our near-death research will certainly be a very interesting point."

He changed slides again.

"This is 9:22:13. At exactly this moment, aircraft telemetry was lost, Captain Grimley's vital signs went flatline and the aircraft's automatic beacon began squawking. We establish this as the exact moment of the impact, and of Captain Grimley's physical death."

At this point, Mike Ricks stood to one side as Dr. Griffin asked three of those present to please leave the room. He closed the door behind them and pressed a button notifying security that they were at maximum confidence. "Proceed, Mr. Ricks," said Dr. Griffin.

Mr. Ricks pressed the remote again and a new chart appeared on the screen.

"This shows a transient jump in the amplitude of Captain Grimley's alpha transmission at the moment of impact. We attribute this to an electrical spike in his central nervous system caused by the physical damage to his body.

"Following this line, you can see that within a fifth of a second, the alpha wave returns to normal. There was no reduction in amplitude or detail."

Several of those seated around the table looked at one another with obvious skepticism. Mike Ricks smiled.

"The Independence is still receiving Captain Grimley's alpha wave transmission. It is being beamed via satellite to Houston where it is being recorded on duplicate equipment."

Silence governed. Finally Dr. Griffin pushed off from the wall he'd been leaning against and stood up straight. "Gentlemen," he began. "You've just witnessed what may well be the most miraculous advancement of the human race. We are in contact with Nathaniel Grimley."

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"Nate was engaged to be married, you know," said Sarah Grimley-Davies. "Once he took me to see her. Her name was Amanda, and she was in a coma. I asked him if he was going to find someone else, and he smiled like I was a child who'd just said something silly. 'That won't be necessary,' he said."

Sarah made a funny face that seemed to say "Can you believe what kind of an idiot would say that?"

"Nate would never talk about her. He'd never explain his obsessive behavior about his project, either. I felt that for the first time, Nate was keeping some secrets from me.

"One night, after he died, I was upstairs trying to sleep, but that conversation we'd had at Amanda's bedside kept intruding on me. You know how you get late at night. Wild ideas seem sane. Fantasies seem possible. Something told me that Nate had been up to something and I thought Amanda was going to suddenly have a miraculous recovery. I thought Nate might not be dead after all. It seemed logical. It was a top secret spy project; Nate's death was a fake. Perhaps Amanda's coma was a fake as well."

Sarah became more and more intense as she spoke faster and faster. Now she paused and her lip began to tremble:

"I rushed downstairs in my nightgown and leaped into the car. I sped all the way to the nursing home, bounded upstairs and threw open the door."

She seemed crazed with excitement. Gradually it wore off, and Sarah sank back into her chair.

"I was wrong, of course."

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The engineer in the wicker chair looked down as he spoke.

"A couple of days before Grim died, he'd been home to visit the family. His mother had been ill. Anyway I had dinner with him, and when we parted he promised me a checker game on Wednesday. Well Wednesday came and I didn't know that he'd died. I waited all day long; no Grim. I waited all evening; still no Grim. Finally I went to bed, and sure enough, I dreamed about him. I dreamed we were playing a game. And he beat me, the son of a gun. Grim always beat me. His sister called me the next day and I found out."

He shrugged the story off with one of his automatic smiles that his face couldn't seem to avoid. He fidgeted.

"Kind of makes you wonder, doesn't it? I never used to believe in ghosts. But Nate Grimley was never one to miss an appointment." And he laughed whole-heartedly.

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A U.S. Navy Ensign stood proud and tall. He had a black crew cut, wildly protruding ears, thick glasses and a nose that sloped to one side. Behind him stood several other (uninvited) seamen who stared over his shoulder. He was on the bridge on the U.S.S. Independence.

"I received a signal from an undisclosed point of origin for 72 hours on the Independence's primary array. I beamed the signal directly to the NA-402 stroke

7 satellite. After 72 hours the signal strength deteriorated and I added the secondary array. But at this point we received a communique from an undisclosed point of origin which stated that we were relieved of this duty."

He continued to stare straight ahead. Straight faces on all those behind him. His eyes flitted to the side for just a moment. Then he gave the slightest hint of a shrug, indicating that he didn't know whether he was expected to say more.

"That's the Navy's way of saying I didn't have to do it no more." And he grinned, exposing enough metal dental work to build a mile of chain-link fencing.

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TO: Dr. Thomas Griffin
NASA

FROM: Sen. Theodore Barnes
Senate subcommittee, black programs

EYES ONLY

Dr. Griffin:

I have not yet received a reply to my last communication. It is my understanding that your project, which cost me 14 years and six billion dollars, is coded BENEDICTUS.

Please have the courtesy to brief my office on BENEDICTUS. I await your kind reply.

Cordially yours,

Sen. Theodore Barnes

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The technician was a goofy kind of kid with hair that shot out in every direction and a tie-dyed shirt. He sat with one leg on the table and the other leg resting on the opposing hip, yoga fashion.

"The guy from NASA pointed at my main dish and said, 'Use this antenna. This one right here.' I told him we couldn't move that one because it's monitoring an incident out at U-Cephei and would be for another three months. I offered him its backup dish which has a broader frequency band, and he said 'No, it has to be this one right here.'

"I asked him where his signal's coming from. He didn't know. I asked him how I was supposed to align the dish. He said it didn't matter. Well then why couldn't he just tap off my main dish and let me continue monitoring U-Cephei? He said 'No problem.'"

The kid shrugged and laughed. "The guy clapped me on the back, handed me an envelope marked BENEDICTUS and said 'Let's talk.' A week later I threw away all the U-Cephei data, realigned the dish on my own lack of authority and embarked on the greatest adventure any human being has ever experienced."

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The balding engineer began pruning some of the rose bushes which threatened to take over his back yard. He had all kinds of roses, and prided himself on raising some of the largest ones in the neighborhood. He often brought bouquets for the girls at work, and always received genuine compliments.

"One day I went to the home where Amanda was in her coma. Just by myself; it was a couple weeks after Grim had died. I just sat and looked at her. I suppose I went in there hoping to see a smile on her face, something like that. Romantic, superstitious me. I guess most people hope for life after death.

Maybe I fancied Grim was talking to her somehow, and I wanted to see her smiling because of how happy they were together."

The engineer laughed and shrugged. He had gardening gloves on and shears in his left hand.

"Yeah, it's stupid. But if nobody ever had stupid thoughts we'd all be pretty boring. Anyway she wasn't smiling. She looked like a corpse. Pretty soon the nurse came in to bend all of her joints, to keep them from getting stiff I guess, and I had to leave. That's the moment where the romance disappeared, and I saw it for the tragedy it really was."

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TO: Dr. Thomas Griffin
NASA

FROM: Sen. Theodore Barnes
Senate subcommittee, black programs

EYES ONLY

Dr. Griffin:

It has been some weeks since my request has gone unheeded. I am faced with the task of explaining to my committee why over seven billion dollars was spent, and explaining to my wife why I expended 15 years of my life, to kill a pilot.

For the last time, I insist that you brief me on BENEDICTUS and provide a full accounting to my committee, or I shall surely have your head on a platter.

Cordially yours,

Sen. Theodore Barnes

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From Dr. Thomas Griffin's electronic mail on SkyNet, one of the National Aeronautic and Space Administration's worldwide computer networks:

Olde Fart:

My signal's been dropping six tenths of a percent in amplitude every day for the last four months. I added both of our other arrays to compensate. By the end of this month, this facility will no longer be able to pick up the signal. That would blow.

--The promising young
technician you rudely
abuse with the nickname
Space Cadet

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Space Cadet:

Thank you for the information. NASA's radio telescopes in Australia and the Marshall Islands are now at your disposal through this network. Someone will be in touch with you by the end of the week.

--Olde Fart

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Olde Fart:
Yahoo!

--the promising young
technician you continue
to rudely abuse with the
nickname Space Cadet

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"Sometimes I would dream about Nate," said Sarah GrimleyDavies while watching the clouds drift by. "I'd dream that he'd tell me secrets and things that he'd never had the courage to say while he was alive."

Sarah fidgeted. She was a good person and always looked for the best qualities in everybody. In herself. In Nate.

"I'd wake up after one of those dreams and just lay in bed thinking for hours. The dream had made me love him so much more. Of course, the dreams were only what I wanted subconsciously to hear Nate say to me. But I believe he would have said things like that to me if he could. I'll put faith in my dreams. They're all I have left of Nate, and fantasies though they are, I'll take him any way I can get him."

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Dr. Thomas Griffin reached into the water which rushed back out to sea and picked up a flat stone. He skipped it out across the tidepools and shaded his eyes with his hand to watch it bounce.

"Amanda."

He wriggled his feet to sink down into the sand as the last of the water receded.

"What's that old saying, 'Greater love hath no man than this?' Something like that. It sure seems damned appropriate, doesn't it? I don't think any woman has ever been loved with such faithfulness as Amanda was."

A wave came in now and splashed up Dr. Griffin's white legs, getting his shorts all wet. He caught his breath as the coldness of the water struck him.

"I'd left my number at the home in case she ever came out of the coma. I didn't expect I'd ever hear from them, but then one day I was having a cup of coffee and they called. Apparently, my name was the only contact information they had for her. And she didn't know me from Adam.

"I went down to the home. The doctor took me aside and explained that Amanda's kidneys had atrophied during her coma, and that she wasn't expected to live. And he told me that she didn't know. I went upstairs by myself and took a seat beside her bed.

"She looked okay, considering what she'd been through. Thin, a little wasted, but alert and lucid. I told her who I was and that I was a friend of Nate's. I told her Nate had asked me to be there when she woke up. She said 'Well that's stupid; Nathaniel's been here himself the whole time, hasn't he?'

"She didn't know he was dead, of course. I had supposed that I'd have to tell her. But she said, 'Oh, he's been so sweet. He's been here every day, sitting

right there and holding my hand. I could hear every word he said to me. Where is he?"

Dr. Griffin shrugged, and tossed a shell at a seagull. He missed.

"I didn't know how to tell her. So I thought for a moment and then I asked her if Nate had ever told her where he was or what he was doing. She said no. All he ever talked about was how much he loved her and please couldn't she answer him.

"I had to excuse myself from the room. I went down to the lobby and sat down on some terrible lumpy couch, and I started crying. Imagine the sacrifice Nate made to be with Amanda. Imagine his patience, day after day, week after week, coming to her; and then never knowing if she could hear him, never once being able to connect with the one tangible being who was the sole purpose for his existence."

Dr. Griffin smiled in spite of himself, a slight chuckle to cover up the awful realities of what he was feeling. He pulled a foot loose from the sand and kicked at the ground.

"There's a romantic inside everyone, isn't there?" He picked up another rock and threw it hard. "It was days before I was ready for the truth. Numbers on a computer don't make a sick woman's dreams real. They don't mean there's life after death, and they don't mean my friend, whose jet I sent to the bottom of the Pacific, is still alive. Numbers on a computer mean that there's a hell of a lot of stray electromagnetic noise in space. They mean nobody has any business playing God. And they mean that Nathaniel Grimley is dead."

Dr. Griffin took careful aim with a shell, concentrated fully on a seagull through his sunglasses, and missed another shot.

"There was a kid who worked for the program in New Mexico, recording all of this supposed 'data.' A couple of days after I talked to Amanda, out of the blue sky, the kid asked me to tell him about this man who existed only as meaningless numbers on a computer printout. Nobody who knew Nate could look at those printers spitting out page after page of binary code, and think Nate was adequately memorialized. It made me angry inside, so I just popped and told this kid everything I knew. I told him about the planes. I told him about Sarah, and about Amanda... especially about Amanda, including the bad news. It really seemed to bother the poor kid, almost as if he'd known them himself.

"As if it wasn't enough that Nate Grimley died in the most tragic way, ripped up the lives of his loved ones, and spent millions of federal dollars to play a cruel joke on a dying woman; I had to go and dump it all on this poor kid. I wish I'd told him BENEDICTUS was a new satellite video game."

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Shredded paper, twisted into huge heaving bundles like massive muscle striations, weighing down a trash cart. Movers with a rattling metal desk upended on a dolly. A darkened room with a dusty linoleum floor, a beam of light stretching from the open door with the shadow of a man looking down, looking down at a pointless failure.

And Sarah Grimley-Davies never heard from her brother's friend Tom again.

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TO: Dr. Thomas Griffin
NASA

FROM: Sen. Theodore Barnes
Senate subcommittee, black programs

EYES ONLY

Dr. Griffin:

I find little humor in receiving a photocopy of your buttocks inside an envelope marked BENEDICTUS. I find less humor in an identical package mailed to my wife.

Please be in my office Monday morning at 8AM sharp, and be prepared to explain your sense of humor to the Commissioner of Internal Auditing.

Cordially yours,

Sen. Theodore Barnes

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"I'd listened to Captain Grimley's thoughts for almost a year," said the young technician with his legs on the table. "At least that's what they told me. On paper it was just numbers; on the screen, just a pattern. But then one day I learned about the man, and then the numbers became a book, and the patterns became a painting.

"We've all loved somebody. Even geeky satellite technicians. Sometimes you feel great, you feel like you're on top of the world, you feel like nothing can stop you. Sometimes it feels like someone's grabbing your heart in their fist and twisting it. Your face flushes red. You cry. Your breath comes in choppy half snatches. But no matter how much it hurts, you love it and you wouldn't trade it for anything. I know that Captain Grimley wouldn't.

"Numbers were all that came in, and numbers were all that I could report, and they didn't mean a thing. But at the very end, when at last I learned about the *man*, I got it all at once: he'd been *speaking* to me.

"Three weeks ago I got the last signal from him. Wherever he is now, whatever his state is, he can't reach us anymore. I had four 200 meter radio telescopes around the world tuned in to his signal; under maximum

amplification the signal drifted below the ambience threshold after four seconds."

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The thin woman lay in her bed at the home, staring at the pattern of the ceiling tiles but not following it. The pain in her sides had been growing worse, and in spite of the medication, had become nearly unbearable.

Awakened from her long sleep, the comforting dreams had left her and she found no solace in this unfamiliar new world. Life and laughter were only in her memories, for this strange house felt only of wasted time and robbery.

It had been days since Nathaniel's friend Tom had visited. It was a desperately welcome visit, but unfulfilling; why had he left so suddenly? And why didn't Nathaniel come himself? The thin woman tried to make sense of this discord, but there was no sense in the storm of loss and loneliness she found herself in. There was so much pain, from so many sources, and no one to explain it.

At last the nurse with dark eyes pushed open the door, glanced in, and shuffled away. Standing in the doorway was a smiling young fellow who looked around with wonder at everything in the room. The great spider-web pattern of dye on his T-shirt shouted "POW," and his crazy hair seemed frozen on end from the impact of the explosion. In spite of the pain, the woman giggled. She knew at once who this character was.

"Space Cadet," she said, and felt her lips stretch into an awkward smile.

"Amanda," answered the kid. And then, in the same breath, both said:

"Nate told me all about you."

THE END