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CLOUD-PLANES

In 2064 a group of aerospace engineers working under the direction of a certain E., successfully launched production of the so-called “cloud-planes” – and after a while all civilian passenger flights were switched over to the new technology.

E. suggested dividing the propulsion units and the passenger module into two autonomous assemblies, connected on the tug-boat principle by a special hawser equipped with hyper-responsive sensors (the material for the hawser was created in 2049). If a breakdown or malfunction occurs in the propulsion section, the hawser is uncoupled mechanically. The passenger module is composed of a jelly-like, transparent, but exceptionally strong material, permeated with nano-capillaries. The form of the module changes in flight, according to the dynamics of the air currents, but it most often resembles a spindle-shaped cloud, with elements of a flying tree seed. Left all alone in the sky, the passenger module goes into free fall through the air, descending to the ground very slowly. The material for the passenger module was synthesized in 2022. This material is so ductile and strong that it allows the module (the so-called “snot”) to land in the sea or on a mountain crest. And even if the “snot cloud” descends onto sharp rocks, no mountain peak can puncture it, and all the passengers wait imperturbably for a rescue vehicle that will take the “cloud” in tow.

The passengers are positioned comfortably inside the jelly, half-reclining in special cavities. The system of fine tubules that permeate the gelatinous mass provides them with air and water, and there is also a soft reservoir in the body of the jelly, containing a nutritious paste, and each passenger can draw nourishment from it if he or she is hungry, but the era of delicacies, stewardesses and alcohol is a thing of the past – why would people want alcohol during a flight, if there is no risk? Those who wish to accentuate their enjoyment of the flight with the effects of alcohol or narcotics can introduce these substances into themselves before they fly.

However, for total safety, a few things had to be sacrificed: not only is it not allowed to carry any luggage with you in the “snot cloud”, but ladies are actually forbidden to have light handbags, and even the tickets are in the form of fruit drops, which dissolve a few minutes after takeoff. Well, so much for handbags and tickets! However, all the passengers also have to fly as absolutely naked as the day they were born – this is one of the obligatory conditions of flight safety. Some people have had to overcome their sense of shame or their prejudices. In general terms, the structuring of a passenger’s position in the cloud reproduces (although only in part) the situation of an embryo in its mother’s body.

In addition to absolute safety, a flight in the “cloud” guarantees unforgettable aesthetic pleasure, given that the beauty of the heavens is not merely a vague presence in oval windows. No! The naked passengers are embraced from all sides by the delightful beauty of the heavens and a feeling of immense, open space – for, after all, the jelly is absolutely transparent: fluffy clouds stream past right in front of their eyes, expanses of clouds or breathtaking landscapes

stretch out right below their feet. The effect of dissolving in the open sky reaches its apogee during night flights, when the passengers fly with their faces turned towards the moon or the glittering stars and, as if in response to the stars, the cities twinkle down below. It is not possible to listen to music, since no technical devices are permitted on board, and the passengers either maintain an inspired silence or sing. Their voices sound changed, as if they were children's voices, and everyone is astounded that people with absolutely no ear for music suddenly start singing incredibly well, and natives of different countries merge together in choral unity, performing songs in languages that none of them know. (Glossolalia or "speaking in tongues" is regarded as one of the euphoric side effects of safe flight.)

Merely to say of the miraculous material of which the "cloud" is composed merely that it is an aerogel, permeated through and through with sensitive nano-capillaries, as strong as steel, as soft as jelly and as transparent as glass, and that it provides for all the passengers' thermoregulation and breathing requirements, would be to use too few kind words concerning its qualities.

Engineer E.'s invention not only saved many people's lives, it opened a window of sorts in the aggregate soul of humankind.

Engineer E. flew a lot in the "cloud-planes" that he himself had designed, and one day during a long-haul flight the propulsion unit that was towing along the cloud and its passengers on a hawser suffered a breakdown. The hawser immediately uncoupled itself (this hawser is so complex and magnificently conceived that it was felt impossible to call it simply a "hawser", and one more letter was added – hawser). Anyway, the hawser became uncoupled. The cloud, in which the people were reposing peacefully, was left alone in the sky. The propulsion module crashed, sending a column of glittering smoke up into the heavens, but the cloud carried on flying, gradually losing speed. In addition to that, the cloud began slowly rotating, swaying slightly as it drifted in the air currents. Nobody was agitated, everyone was smiling, the girls merely sang a quiet song about a nightingale and summer.

Nikolai Ivanovich E. sat calmly in his gelatinous cell his; body felt quiet. It had become old, his thin body, and now he felt like an ancient and happy embryo in the womb of the heavens.

They descended towards a high-mountain plateau, a bleak and lifeless expanse, surging up here and there in a crest of stratified cliffs – a boundless, dark-grey surface, dissected by sinuous lines of white ice. There were no settlements to be found here, it was high terrain, uninhabited, the air was rarefied, but flight control had already received a signal indicating where the accident occurred, and all they had to do was land and wait for a town plane. They flew low over the mountain landscape, but a strong wind prevented them from landing, dragging them along above the plateau. Glancing down, the engineer was amazed to see people. At first he thought the people were soldiers lined up for an inspection, because they were arranged regularly, in a strict order. But on looking more closely, he realized that they were not standing, but sitting on white rocks, and their regular arrangement was determined by the regular pattern of the rocks. In some places the rocks were empty, appearing bright white. The engineer fancied he saw something

vaguely familiar in the pattern of these white rocks – and suddenly he spotted what it was. His engineering nous prompted the realization, or perhaps it was a hazy recollection, prompted by the girlish figures in identical dark-blue clothing, standing motionless in the straight aisles between the rows of rocks. He realized that the pattern of the rocks matched the way passenger seats used to be arranged in the old planes.

His heart was wrung by a rapturous agony. The people's faces were already visible. They were all smiling and waving to him.

But actually, to be honest, no engineer Nikolai E. ever existed. I was the one who invented the “cloud planes”, impelled by simple love of humanity, without any traumatic subtext; that's why they are popularly known as “peepees” or “tug-trailers”, and now that the numerical code attached to the abbreviation PP has passed the three-hundred mark, not many of the old pilots, who used to fly on the first peepees (PP-1, PP-2, PP-13) are left. These people are held in great respect, if they have not been forgotten.

2010