

STARMAN

As Inmaculada picks up the telephone on the first ring, the call is full of static which makes it so distant and so far away. She knows instantly who it is. Her father is calling her from space.

“Dad!”

“Hello champ. Just wanted to check in to see how you’re doing.”

Inmaculada then starts to tell him about her day.

“So I went to school and I took the bus there. Mami took me and then we had playtime when I got into school...”

Inma’s voice carries on like a calming metronome in her father’s ear. *The first month is always the hardest*, more senior astronauts have told him.

His mind drifts back to the first time he announced the news to his family. Wife, stony faced, silent, statuesque, rigid. Moving away from his touch. A complete contrast from his daughter, bubbling full of questions until his wife asks the ultimate question, the question he didn’t want to answer until much, much later-

“When will you be back?”

It’s such an achievement to lead on the mission. You’ll be in history books. People will study you in awe.

“Can you see me from up there?”

Inma’s voice calls him back to reality. Her father smiles.

“Of course I can. I can see you waving up to me.”

Inma gasps. At that exact moment, her hand is in the air, waving up to the sky aimlessly through the window.

“What did you do today?”

“Well I stopped at the ISS before carrying on. I’ve got a long way to go until I reach my destination so we thought it was best to make a pit stop.”

“And what will you do when you get there?”

“Well, like I said before, I’ll do lots of science and report back my findings to-“

“Will you be back in time for summer?”

“No Inma. Like I told you before, I’m going to be gone for a long, long time. But we’ll have these weekly phone calls okay?”

Inmaculada starts to cry a little. She knows this. She knows this. She just doesn’t want to remember it.

Her mother stands to one side noticing her daughter is on the phone. Inma passes it over to her and then the conversation turns to a low grumbling argument between the two adults.

“Mrs Harris played your launch on TV again and all the kids wanted to play with me at lunch!”

Inmaculada starts to giggle from the memory. Her father laughs too.

“You’re a little celebrity, Inma.”

“I want to be an astronaut like you Dad.”

“You have to make sure you study really hard-“

Before he finishes Inma begins a different topic of conversation.

“Why does the moon go away during the day?”

“Have you met any aliens yet?”

Thursday afternoon, pouring rain hits the window. Inmaculada hasn't been allowed out to go out in the garden and play.

“No, not yet. I don't think we will meet anyone during this journey.”

“I wish you could have been here today.”

Her father sighs. Inma pretends he's just at the shops around of the corner instead of being miles and miles away.

You'll be famous.

“What happened today then?”

“Sara wouldn't talk to me. She doesn't like that I'm getting all this attention.”

“Sara's just jealous. Don't listen to her. I'm so proud of you.”

“I still want her to be my friend.”

Silence.

“Can you hear me?”

She wraps the phone cord around her wrist.

“Inma, I've got to go now. They need me.”

She can hear shouts on the other end of the call.

“Ok bye dad.”

“We'll talk next week okay?”

And then he hangs up. Her mother calls her from the living room.

“Did he want to speak to me?”

“No he had to go. They needed him.”

Her mother rolls her eyes. Inmaculada unravels the phone cord from her wrist.

The phone begins to ring. No one is answering. It goes straight to voicemail. "I seemed to have missed you again. Hope you're doing well. Nothing to report here."

He hangs the phone up. This is the second time in the row that Inma has missed his call. He is on a mission that will take several years to complete. He will miss his daughter growing up into a woman and he will not see his wife until much later. Everything is changing during this time but he is still the same.

He starts putting on his suit, closes his eyes and puts his helmet on. He nears closer to the window. Outside, there are stars bright and tiny like little pinpricks of yellow peeking through a dark black sea. He can't even comprehend how many stars there are out there even with his various degrees. Earth seems tiny from here.

He attaches his spacesuit to a lead that is linked to the capsule, opens the door and glides forwards.

He lets himself float for a while and he opens his eyes. The stars are now his companions on this voyage. He is at the pinnacle of his career. He is at the start of it all. He looks further out at the planets and as his body floats upwards and upside down, they look as if they are about to fall down.

It is completely silent in space.

When Inmaculada's father left she was six years old. Today is her twelfth birthday. She is starting secondary school soon, with new friends to make and foes to banish. She wishes she can call her father right now.

She peeks through the window, at the night sky. She can see the tiny stars. She can't see her father's capsule. She waves to the sky and then goes back to bed.

"What do the stars look like from where you are?"

Today's conversation seemed more difficult than the others. Her father talks to her about things she can't quite understand and she mentions topics that her father has no interest in. They're becoming more distant and Inma is not sure how to stop it.

Sometimes Inmaculada wishes her dad could appear when she wants him to. As soon as a weekly phone call is over with him, she finds herself pining for the next one. She wishes with her eyes screwed up and her hands made into fists that he could be home now.

When she tries to talk to her mother about him, the conversation tends to shut down. She knows her mother is angry. But she knows that there is still a little part that misses him too.

“Dad I can’t really talk now; I’m going to a party.”

Silence. Her dad swallows.

“Ok. Have fun.”

He’s not sure when she hangs up, but he ends up listening to the dial tone for a while before hanging up himself.

He peers outside the porthole – the stars staring back at him.

His Command Module Pilot drifts towards him.

“Everything okay at home?”

He shrugs his shoulders. He won’t understand. His Command Module Pilot has several family members across the world. He spends his weekly call to every family member, spending hours and hours talking in Italian, English, French.

The most time Inma’s father has spent talking to his family is 25 minutes and that was at the beginning of his journey. He bites his lip, unsure.

“This is the most incredible trip you will take. You’ll be the first man to-”

Inma’s father waves his hand at him.

“I know that, I know, it’s just-. Hard.”

The stars don’t compare to you.

“And we won’t age a bit!” His Command Module Pilot laughs joyfully.

Inmaculada waits for her father's call. He's meant to call on Thursdays, like clockwork.

No news is bad news.

Her stomach turns in on itself. She feels guilty about missing a few phone calls here and there, feeling bored when they do talk, not remembering his face unless she uses a photo for reference.

Fifteen minutes late.

He's never late. She checks the connection of the phone to the wall.

"Mum!"

Her mother appears, tired and weary.

"He'll call. He always calls on Thursdays."

"He's late!"

Her mother looks at Inma.

"Look. Sometimes people will disappoint you. Even the ones you love the most."

Her mother tucks Inma's hair behind her ear. Inma moves away from her.

"I know you don't like me. But you have to live with me and the differences that we do have, we just have to get over it. He won't be here until-"

Inma storms upstairs and goes to her room, slamming the door shut.

Take me with you.

Inma stares aimlessly at the sky, remembering the conversation earlier today.

“All I am able to tell you, ma’am, is that we lost contact with the Pilot at 0700. Last contact established that an unknown object may have interrupted the trajectory of the capsule. Thereafter our signal was blocked.”

Inma and her mother look at each other.

“Can’t another team find him? Or his crew?”

“All I am able to tell you, ma’am, is that we are keeping all channels of communication open at this time.”

“But he’s-”

“He’s a hero, ma’am. Prior to loss of contact, the findings were beyond expectation.”

“Stop talking about him as if he’s dead already!”

“Inma I’m not sure if this is going to reach you in time. Something’s wrong and I don’t know if I can fix it. Our crew is doing the best that we can. Even if we’re able to steer away in time, we’re unable to calculate the damage to our ship. I’m so proud of you and I hope you’re able to forgive me.

I wanted to return to you safe and sound. But that’s not possible and I know that’s hard to hear. I love you and your mother. I hope-”

Then just static.

His last recording.

Years pass. Inmaculada still receives interview requests about her father but she refuses every single one. She moves to a different part of the country. Her mother still keeps in contact with her and the distance that she once had with her melts away the older Inma gets.

She still dreams about her father and her last conversations with him.

She keeps every single photo of him and as she combs through each one, Inmaculada imagines he's still up there in the sky, exploring space, an ageless starman at the edge of possibility.

She imagines he's survived – and he and his crew will be home one day soon.

One day soon.

One day soon.

Lift off