

# PATIENCE

by Greg Stolze

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Do not go down. You are dead. The first rule is not to go down. No! You there, stop, you have to resist it, don't go down, don't!

OK. Wow. Well, the rest of you, yeah, you've got it under control? *Intend upward*. You can move, see? Left, right, forward and back, yes, you can fly like that. Really fast lateral movement. Practically the speed of thought. But stay closer to me, please, *please*, don't go down. As soon as you touch the Earth, that's it.

"Afterlife"? I guess this is it. I mean, everyone assumes that when they touch the ground (or the ocean, in this case), that they... well, heaven, one presumes. Nirvana. Oblivion. Whatever?

All right, so... you'll get there eventually. You tire out. You can't go up at all. So that means you shouldn't ever go down by choice. If you go lower, you will never get back up to where you are now. And you sink. Not much, not much at all. As little as an inch a day, if you don't weaken.

So... so are you stable? Do you understand what happened? Yeah, your plane blew up. Mid-ocean explosion. I was haunting another plane's cockpit when it happened, heard about it on the radio. I actually used to be a pilot. Died with my boots on in 1997, we were up at cruising atmosphere... you all were on your descent path, which is why you were low enough that I could get over here and yell up at you.

Hm? Oh, I think I'm speaking English. You think I'm speaking whatever. The dead only have one language, which makes things a *lot* easier. We all speak Dead.

That's exactly right. We're ghosts. I don't know if there are any surface ghosts, the traditional graveyard specter kind. If there are, by the time we sky-ghosts get close enough, it's hard to yell over the ambient surface noise to get the information up here. But I'll be honest. I think if ghosts really existed, the way the living think? I reckon we, us, the few who died aloft, we'd know about them. Though maybe they're just... like on another channel? The living can't see or hear us. Maybe we can't see or hear the surface haunTERS that, that whisper to the living or knock on ouija boards or whatever. None of us know the rules. I mean, who was the first person to actually die in the middle of the air, not touching the ground or a building or anything? When did that happen, some time around 1912?

Even people who jump off buildings, they don't die of the fall. They die of the stop.

Well / don't know why touching the Earth makes souls go away, I've never touched it which is why I'm a soul that's still here. I'm sorry that's so circular, but... I'm a prisoner of circumstance.

*NO DO NOT COME CLOSER...* oh shit, now you've done it. You wanted to get closer and see my face while I yell at you and so you forgot the cardinal rule which is *do not ever go down*, congratulations. You dropped about seventy feet there? You won't climb back, no, you're trying, I see it, you can't.

Seventy feet times twelve inches is... nine hundred forty? Is that right? Eight hundred forty. You lost eight hundred and forty inches of existence as a coherent,

communicating sky-soul. If you'd kept it to an inch of forced descent a day, that's over two years. You just pissed away two years of being you, because you...

Oh hell, what's she doing? A plunge, *real brave sister!* Say hi to God for me. Some people have no fucking patience.

Hm? Yes, that happens. Some people are weak, they give up. Or they have *so much faith* that the universe is, is good and sensible and works out right that they just rush to the ground where they figure they're 'supposed' to be to see what the next thing is. Even though, for all we know, as soon as you touch the ground you get sucked to the Earth's molten core for eternity. Or it could be that you blend with all the other dead souls into some super-conscious entity. Nobody knows. But we're all going to find out.

*We don't have to find out right now though.* That's my point. OK, the rest of you, can I, can I get your names? I'm Omar Jackson. Pleased to meet you Frederick. Samir? Hi. Jennifer and Peter, you were going to... oh. I'm sorry to hear that. That's... that is really sad.

The rest of the people on your flight? Well, they probably free-fell and died on impact, or else survived inside the plane body until it hit the water. Hell, some of them could still be alive now. Any of you want to go *lower*, where you can see the accident close up? No?

Right answer.

I mean, I don't want to seem callous, but once you die, dying stops being the Great Unknown and turns into... just something that happened to everyone you can speak with. Like being born. Why bring it up? You have to worry about the next thing. You have to worry about getting grounded.

Let's just hover here in the middle of the sea for a while and process. Until sunset,

say? And it probably won't be as bad as you think. You're bodiless souls now, so you're not flooded with adrenaline, you're not receiving pain messages from your flesh. It's a mercy. It keeps you calm.

# # #

OK crew, you ready for the next unbelievable thing? I know you already died today and that's... that's a bit of a milestone. But you know where you're going, at least... somewhat. Yes Frederick, "down," that's where. It's... it is what it is.

But no, let's be serious for a moment, there's some consolation, isn't there? Some solace in knowing that souls *exist*, that we *are* a thing beyond our bodies, more than just a pattern of information in, like, in some brain cells? That... OK, we're like stories, right? Like a story written in a book. Isn't it good to know that when the book gets burned, the story's still there?

I don't know Samir, I was a pilot. I never studied philosophy. But I've thought about it a lot since dying, that's for sure.

Right. If you all move with me away from the sunset, *laterally only*, OK, great. Keep up.

Cool, right? No drag, no wind resistance, just pure speed. Race you to land's edge? Ready... go!

Uh huh, the only limit to how fast you go is how fast you're *willing* to go. As long as you don't try to go up. But yeah, wait here a bit. We're on the coast of France, follow me... yeah, here's the city of Brest.

No Frederick, that's just its *name*. Well I guess it means something different in French. How old are you anyhow? Oh. Wow. Well, you look older? So you...

Yeah, I guess your parents hit the water, Freddie. Frederick? You don't go by 'Fred'

or...? Hey, don't cry. It doesn't... yeah, nothing comes out.

I guess you can cry if you want to.

...and we can't hug either. Yeah. It does, it sucks. Nice try, Samir? But no. We touch nothing. Nothing touches us.

Shit, I didn't mean for this to get all... like this. I... I mean, I thought we'd processed, but I guess I... look, when you've been dead as long as I have, you forget what it feels like to...

Oh shit, I don't know. I'll, OK, yes, fine, I'll shut up.

# # #

...ready to go to Paris? There's something there I should show you. Follow me.

Hold up here. Look off to the east there, up above that hill... see it? See that light? That's a soul.

No, not a sky-ghost like us. That soul hasn't been *born yet*. Let's get a little closer... yeah, she's way up there. Or maybe he. Does it look like a...? I suppose it doesn't matter. The closer we get to the city, the more likely we are to find one at our level. About seventy people are born every day in Paris, so unborn fall pretty thick... Yeah, this way.

As you can see, they tend to funnel down towards the hospitals, although... ooh, look at that one! Ugh, a shooting star.

Well no, that's just what I call them. You won't think they're pretty when you know what they...

OK, so the rules of unborn souls. You know how it works with us, right? Die suspended midair and you survive as a ghost until you touch the ground, you can't go up, you're doomed to drift down, and the living

can never see hear or interact with you? Pretty clear.

The unborn, they're freaky. It's a little weird. Ooh, all right, here's a good one, way up at our level and pretty old, that's good! Ma'am! Ma'am? Can we talk to you a little bit?

"...yes?"

Right, so you're going to get born this year, 2017? What's the last thing you remember?

"Oh, um... my grand-daughter! She gets born in... oh dear..."

Tell me about your kids!

"They're lovely. There's Éloise, who is born in 2036, and Henri in 2039... and poor little Gerard, born in 2041 and dies too young, that foolish boy..."

How does Gerard die? Please ma'am, tell me how Gerard dies!

"He passes over in 2059, he self-annihilates in a consciousness-eraser over in the Neo-Finnic Republic..."

What do you do? What *happens*?

"Well I don't see much of the war in 2021, I'm still pretty young, but I get a job in water reprocessing in the re-elevated part of Amsterdam... oh my, I'm really speeding up, I'm... sorry, I must go, farewell!"

Wait! Ugh, dammit.

OK, so what did you all see there?

Yeah, she fell a lot slower than that other soul, but she was still moving right along compared to us. I have a *theory*. There are some sky-ghosts over New York who watch, they think this seems pretty solid. The data, you know. The data backs it up.

So people, unborn people, souls... they fall out of the sky. I talked to a test pilot who died way high up there, he says they come from beyond the stratosphere, moving fast... they slow down as they get closer to the ground, but they move at different speeds, see? Depending on how long they're going to live. That French woman who's just now getting born, you saw how she looked younger and younger the closer she got to her body, the closer she got to the ground and the hospital? Yeah, she was... aging backwards. You start out way up high, as old as you're going to be when you die, and then you get younger as you get closer, until your soul age is the same as your body age. That is, when you forget your life, and you're born.

That falling star? Yeah, that... that was probably a baby that isn't going to make it.

Well I'm *sorry* Samir, I didn't... didn't make any of this, you can't blame *me* for...

*Fine*, go! See you in the funny papers Samir, fly off all pissed, *sorry* I tried to uncover the ugly truth! At least I taught you not to *go down*!

Jesus. I mean, I get that she's upset, but to fly off like that? Stupid. She wouldn't have been any happier when she figured it out on her own. Shit.

No Freddie... sorry *Frederick*, yes, I will, I honestly, I will try to be better about that. Sorry. I'm not mad. Well, I'm mad at *her*, but mostly I guess I'm mad at her stupidity. Hm?

Mad at the whole situation. Sure, I guess, but there's not much point. Being mad at the world for being the world isn't going to get anybody anywhere. Ugh. It just, it is what it is, is... what... ugh.

You can never ask them about God. By the time they're close enough to yell at, they've long forgotten what they see when they die or anything about where they came from.

But yeah, the shorter their lives, the faster they descend. You're not going to see many centenarians, though they're... woo, they're interesting. And *scary*. Oh, bad stuff is coming. That war she mentioned in 2021? That's... well, there's a reason I stay away from Indonesia. Yeah. Let's just say that from what I hear, in about four years, you're going to see nothing but falling stars over Jakarta.

Jennifer, are you... what's wrong?

Oh. The fate.

Yeah, I guess that's... that's a hard knock to take. Finding out that your whole life is predestined, but honestly... OK, there was this religious uncle I had when I was alive...

Jennifer, where are you...? Peter, wait... ask her to come back when you...?

Whoa. Sorry about that, *Frederick*. I... didn't mean to scare them off, I just wanted them to understand.

No, I don't think it was *me* that scared them, me, Omar, no. It was what I told them. Should I have not told them? I mean, knowledge is all we have left. We can't do anything, but...

What made Jennifer sad was... so that French baby woman, she told us everything about the future, right? And I've been around long enough to know those souls, those pre-borns, their stories stick together. They all agree about Jakarta and San Diego and President Walton and the Extinguishers. It's bad. I mean, people still survive and have happy lives but the overall course of humanity... I guess they invent a lot of cool stuff and fly off to colonize Venus in floating habitats but... there are going to be dark cities, *Frederick*. Places in 2023 where no souls fall, because there's no one there to give birth to them.

I have no idea how the soul thing is going to work on Venus. Maybe the souls will fly

from wherever they come from on their way to Earth and will go there. Or maybe they just won't have souls. Or won't be able to be born. No one knows about *that*. Not yet. But if we stay up, we can find out, we can...

Frederick? No, look, I know it's tough and you miss your parents, but the plunge is, it's, we don't *know*, DAMMIT FREDDIE DON'T GO DOWN!

Oh goddamn. Dammit Frederick, why.

No patience.

