

Comet's Tale

by Michael Olsen

Character: Comet, a female Russian mutt taken from the streets of Moscow to participate in the early days of the Soviet space race.

Note on pronunciation: Comet speaks with a Russian accent. Hence:

the "th" sound should sound like "zh" or "s" and

the "w" sound should sound like "v."

*In the darkness we hear something falling, endlessly falling through the air, then the splintering of trees, and finally an almighty thud: Vostok 1K has crash-landed somewhere in Siberia. All we hear for a little while is the sound of a snowstorm.**

Lights come up on Comet, a small white dog with a black nose, sitting in a capsule. She is dressed in a sleeveless woolen top, and a lace-up space suit. A couple of long tubes snake out from her chest to measure heart-rate and respiration. Her head is slumped down, her eyes closed. Slowly, she raises her head and opens her eyes. Shaking her head, she stares around wildly. She is panting frantically. She barks, again and again. She tries to look over at her companion, Shutka, but cannot see her.

Shutka? Shutka? Are you still with me, Shutka? Say something! Anything! Let me know you are alive! I need to know you OK. Do you think I am going through all this alone? Huh? You are much mistaken. *(Pause. There is silence.)* Shutka? *(emphatically:)* Listen to my voice! We will be OK, I know it!

Pause.

(sniffing capsule, coughing:) Can you smell it? Burning. Something went wrong this time. I do not know what happen. We were meant to go higher—for longer. I am sure of it. We came down too soon. Did you hear fire trying to start? I wish I could have pushed button, or called out for someone, but there was nothing we could do, was there?

Pause

I can not see anything, Shutka. Only this darkness. Can you? What time is it? Is it day or night? I can not see! Can you see anything? *(Pause.)* Wait. Can you hear it? Something . . . ? *(Pause.)* There is—nothing. Just the wind. We must be somewhere deep in forest.

Pause

There is no need to worry, Shutka. Really. I have done all this before. I am veteran. This is my third time. I remember first time. I was so scared. What was happening? Where were they putting me? *(shaking her head:)* The way they pat your head or rub your back as if nothing is going to happen. Typical Russians! "Any smile can hide a lie," as they say. Always the same: strap you in,

last look as if they never see you again, they close hatch, and finally, rumble of rocket, something push you down, shaking, shaking and then—nothing. Floating. Weightless. Free. *(Pause.)* Were we ever meant to do this? Were dogs ever meant to fly? *(Pause.)* Second time, I knew what was coming, so was no surprise. For some reason I trust Sergei. Strange, yes? And this time? I must confess I was little excited. Maybe this time we would go higher, for longer.

Pause

(looking around:) I love the silence, Shutka. Not like Moscow. All the crowds! Running around, scrounging for scrap of food. But how about Cafe Pushkin and the Seleznev, smell of those meats hanging in summer morning air! You could always get mouthful out back. Valery would throw you something very nice. You could find mouthful in kolkhoz if you were nice. There were always few friendly faces around. You would have to watch their eyes, though. You could pick straight away if they were going to throw you scrap or run you off with big stick. At least we get fed at the training facility, hey? I call it "glub". It just slide right down your throat you barely taste it, but it fill you up.

Pause

(Shaking her head:) But how many times do we have to do it? Will they send us up again? It is time to retire now and raise shchenki. You would like to do this, yes? Find some nice kobel—looks do not bother me, but he has to be—half decent, you know? Makes difference. When you have shchenki how many would you like and what would you name them? I would like six: three girls, three boys: Tatiana, Nastassia and Olga, and Andrei, Peter and Stefan. Simple. Maybe some dacha in the country, with plenty of space to play around. Yes. Space. Yes. Not the city. Moscow is too crowded, too noisy, too smelly. At least in country you have sweet smell of pine trees, running streams to quench thirst, sun out and beating down on your back.

Pause

All that training. They always so serious about it, hey Shutka? Drills, over and over. Back and forwards. Running here, running there. Tit-bits they give you if you do good. Cage that gets smaller and smaller till it is this size *(gesturing to the capsule they are in)*. Humans!

Pause

Sergei will be expecting us, you know. If he is not there with tasty meat dinner for us, I will bite him. I will. Sometimes you have to let them know enough is enough, you know? We have done our duty now let us go.

Pause

But before then, we will go to Moscow. I can see it now, Shutka. We will get parade in Red Square. Everyone will be there. Everyone will know where we have been and what we have done. They will know that we are heroes of the Motherland. We will meet Khrushchev. We will receive Order of Lenin! We will be first dogs to do so! What do you think, Shutka?

Pause

Do you realise, Shutka, we should already be dead? The scientists build failsafe into every rocket. If anything break down, if rocket goes off course, there is self-destruct to protect all the secrets of the Motherland, their precious knowledge, the truth they think they know about the stars.

Pause

So many gone before and never come back. Their rocket explode, or fall and they die. But that is not our fate, is it, Shutka? They say every dog will have her day. Well, we have used our special day. We have survived.