

# a.j. bermudez

## KING OF INFINITE SPACE

THE INTERVIEW PROCESS IS A GAUNTLET. Tomás is asked about rare illnesses and their absence from his lineage. He plays a virtual reality game in which he must make waffles while the kitchen tilts at unexpected angles. He hands over his tax returns, voting record, report cards. He fashions a tourniquet. He makes a latte.

Tomás thinks of himself as a kid, wanting this (almost this). He completes aptitude tests and NDAs. He answers everything. He is honest. Each element is bluntly poised to confirm: *Are you trustworthy? Are you fit? Are you sane?*

When he gets the job, he is thrilled.

Of course he got it, he'll realize later. Who else has worked as a helicopter paramedic, a sommelier, a doorman, a boatswain, and an unpaid intern at a physics lab? Who else has been to space camp three times, but always on scholarship?

There is one other. Tomás, as his partly redacted Wikipedia page will one day corroborate, is the world's first; Freyja is the second. Her CV includes aeronautical engineering, deep-sea diving, and cocktail serving, among other qualifications. Together, early in year two, they laugh over what to enter for OCCUPATION as they fill out their tax forms. They decide on "space waiter." The IRS never bothers them about it.

Once every two weeks, either Tomás or Freyja boards the Daedelus. They wipe down the tray tables. They check the windows for smudges. They ensure that the seats are upright. They stock the champagne. They spot-check the lavatories, dragging droplets of urine from unanticipated places with squares of paper towel. They place the gift bags.

And then, as they have dreamed since the days of colored pencils and printer paper, curbs as desks, rockets in art class: they go to space.

Each trip is short, up and over with the haste of a roller coaster ride for which one has waited in line for hours. The ship ascends, exits the atmosphere, floats in what is technically outer space for roughly twenty-eight minutes, then returns to

Earth, landing just like an airplane on the two-thousand-foot runway that cuts a scar through a stretch of native land along the border between Arizona and New Mexico. Aboard are the pilot and copilot (sourced from a rotating international roster of retired astronauts), six passengers (each of whom has paid exactly nine hundred thousand dollars for the excursion), and either Tomás or Freyja. They alternate, trading shifts in the air and handling hospitality on the ground. Flights are once every two weeks, bookended by periods of passenger training and orientation before, celebration and luxury transport off the grounds after. On this schedule, Freyja and Tomás each go to outer space once a month, more frequently than any human being in history.

Tomás and Freyja are special. They are told this often. They believe it.

The desert is lonely, and they've been having sex since almost immediately upon arrival. Afterward, they sit on the roof of the maintenance building, looking out at the haze of mountains past the airstrip. They share sad stories — Freyja's mother lost during childbirth, Tomás's father the casualty of a prescription drug overdose — as well as funny ones. They compare nosebleeds and nightmares, the passengers' eccentricities. Freyja met someone last week who brought his father's ashes onboard, against regulation, to release them in space, as though that were possible. Tomás slept with a guy who confessed he was terrified of space, who asked Tomás to hold him while "Rocket Man" played.

Freyja laughs and proposes a toast to the absurdity of mankind.

"What will you do next?" she asks.

"Next?"

"Yeah. After this."

Tomás, who is drinking a low-ABV beer from the commissary, looks out past the low, flat expanse of the compound, toward the baby-pink peaks of Cibola. Just there, to the right, is the hangar which houses the Daedalus. From certain angles, the building looks like the future: glossy, abrupt. From others, it looks like a shed.

"I haven't thought about it." He is, as always, honest. "You?"

"Grad school, maybe."

"Again? For what?"

Freyja shrugs. It's partway between an honest shrug and a sexy shrug, the shrug

of flirting, averting, an onboard shrug. “I don’t know. Psychology?” She takes a swig of her canned Chardonnay. “Whatever happens, we have to go back to civilization sometime.”

Tomás feels himself tense. He looks out at the ridge. He sees the hills as both familial and contentious: now shades of violet gray, competing for the best light. The twilight is doing that thing twilight does, where everything looks both heavenly and irrelevant.

Tomorrow is a flight day. Freyja will be on board, Tomás on the ground. He’ll help with pre-flight safety checks — nothing mechanical, of course, but a series of onboard items. For example, he’ll see that the seatbelt straps lay flat, that the outlets are unobstructed, that the shelved champagne flutes are secured by the little shackles around their stems. Stemless glasses would be more practical, of course, but these look better in photos. He’ll put on a mask and administer an industrially-approved fumigant — a standard hydrogen cyanide compound, to prevent any arthropodal stowaways who might disrupt the delicate machinery or alarm the passengers — followed by an aerated mist smelling subtly of honeysuckle and jasmine. In the event that a passenger notes an aversion to either honeysuckle or jasmine in their pre-training application, a cherry blossom alternative will be used.

Prior to boarding, as always, Tomás will shepherd the passengers into a ring outside the spacecraft, then will stand by in a consummately respectful pose as a local tribal councilperson imparts a ceremonial blessing on the expedition. He’ll watch during takeoff as the three-part vessel first speeds along the runway, then lifts, then vanishes.

After the flight (what Aventura Celestia terms a *mission*, although there is no mission beyond the purely recreational), he’ll assist with the reception. The banner will read WELCOME BACK FROM SPACE! The occasion will, as always, be festive. Music, string lights on the veranda, open bar. Tomás will open a bottle of 2001 Vega Sicilia Único. Furnished by the company, of course, but on his recommendation. Once, in Talarn, where he was working as a farmhand in exchange for an education in wine, he shared a bottle with his cousin Morro, the last of his living relatives. Morro tasted the wine with reverence. He described the toughness of the grapes, the evolution of the soil across generations — the Mediterranean Sea dragged in rain

across the mountains, ash from the dry seasons, the oils from the vineyard workers' hands. He was solemn, attentive. Tomás remembers his cousin saying, with no humor, that wine flourishes in disaster years.

Tomás will watch the way the guests drink the same wine. Dribbles slurped, spilled, licked from lower lips before the last bite of food has been swallowed. They'll laugh loudly, mouths open, hors d'oeuvres like cud between their teeth.

Every once in a while, someone surprises him. Sometimes a person will sip the wine like it's the end of the world. They'll inhale the scent, eyelids half-closed, then smile with true joy once they've tasted it. But usually not.

Whatever happens, Tomás is always honest, alert. He plants his feet. Observes. Does not look away.

Tomás, who has been here nearly since the beginning, has witnessed the evolution of Aventura Celestia's private space travel program. After the first, second, and certainly the third missions, then even more so over the course of the several since, the clientele has shifted. Even on their first excursions, the passengers generally seem less dazzled. The CEO no longer shows up to shake each and every customer's hand. Folks at home have stopped watching the livestream. The scholarship fund for less privileged passengers has long since run dry, either by design or inevitability, but, in any case, to no one's surprise.

The experience has, of course, changed for Tomás as well. "Do you think," he asks Freyja atop their roof, "that change is so essential that if a situation fails to change, our perspectives change just to create some sort of variation?"

"Or nothing changes," Freyja suggests. "I'm reading this book right now about how there are no new stories. Every story is just *Hamlet*."

"That's insane."

"I mean, it's definitely insane in terms of narrative straight-white-male-eurocentricity, but —" Freyja shrugs "— there are weirder theories, right?"

Tomás has never cared much for Shakespeare. He does not wish to be Hamlet, sympathizes with neither royalty nor inaction nor doom. The only classes he liked in grade school were science and art (the latter thanks to a kind teacher). There's just one part of *Hamlet* he liked, when the play was read aloud — haltingly, terribly — in junior high, when the teacher asked for a vote on the interpretation of *sullied*

flesh versus *solid* flesh. Tomás liked that part so much that he memorized the entire monologue. He liked the idea that something so established could be uncertain, mistaken. That more than one thing could be true.

The guests leave the morning after the flight. Another batch will arrive in four days, but for now, the complex (*campus*, according to Aventura Celestia) is on break. Tomás and Freyja drive into town, forty-two miles away. Tomás gets a hamburger while Freyja goes to a doctor's appointment. They meet, afterward, at the library. Freyja has borrowed an LSAT test prep book, and Tomás cocks a brow.

"Why not?" she says.

He's seen this before, with a book about advanced coding, another about motorcycle repair. Once there was a volume about how to be a script supervisor for films. Freyja is already thinking ahead to the next phase of life, and Tomás feels lonely.

On the drive back to the campus, he asks about Freya's checkup. She's quiet for a moment, then says, "Not great."

"Not great how?"

Freyja has opened the LSAT book on her lap and frowns as she peruses the table of contents. "You know. Space radiation."

They've known since they were hired that this was a possibility. It was in the packet. Both Tomás and Freyja have signed full sheafs of liability waivers on the subject.

What all passengers know — but what Freyja and Tomás endure more frequently than anyone — is that radiation exposure is exponential beyond the Earth's atmosphere, including in low orbit. A layer of insulation on the ship (comprised of lead, perhaps) would be possible, if it weren't too heavy for contemporary spacecraft design. On account of limits in technology, sufficient protection does not yet exist, at least not for individuals with the lifestyle of a space waiter. Owing to immutable science, the ramifications to one's health — to the brain, the thyroid, the retinas, the skin of the lips, fingers, so forth — are both certain and irreversible.

"Don't worry," Freyja says. "I knew what I was getting into."

"And *I* knew what *I* was getting into," says Tomás. "But you're my friend." He

hears his voice crack like a child's and winces. "I didn't know what *you* were getting into."

The flight after Freyja's appointment is, for Tomás, different. He finds himself ruminating, self-loathingly, on his theory of change.

After the tribal blessing on the tarmac, he's the last to board. He subtly approaches the tribal councilperson and asks, very quietly, about the nature of the blessing.

"It's a real blessing," they say. "The CEO pays us to come out here. He's very big on 'authenticity.'" They shrug. "We use the money for after-school programs."

"Like art?"

"Sometimes."

"You're not teaching Shakespeare, are you?"

"We try our best not to."

Tomás thanks the tribal councilperson, shakes their hand, and then boards.

There's a cadence to the flight. Tomás checks everyone's seatbelts, demonstrates how to securely and efficiently release the latch. He circulates with a little silver tray of high-strength Dimenhydrinate, which passengers tend to find either amusing or necessary. At takeoff, he straps himself into his seat in the rear quarters, a windowless nook shared with the first-aid kit, lavatory, and kitchenette. This, in his earliest crayon-rendered conceptions of outer space, is admittedly not what he had in mind, but this is what it is.

Takeoff is quick and, even without an exterior view, extraordinary. The spacecraft is structured in three parts, the primary vessel supported by two auxiliary vessels, one on either side, which look like friends with their arms draped around each other's shoulders. As the spacecraft picks up speed, the latter two detach, leaving the solitary vessel to exit the atmosphere.

Almost every passenger, regardless of their background and bravado, is a poor sport during acceleration to Mach 3. Tomás can't see out their windows, but he can see them lolling, conferring, perhaps momentarily regretting having undertaken the trip at all. Then, in an instant, their expressions shift with the advent of what they came for.

The apogee of the flight is at roughly four hundred thousand feet. At this

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altitude, gravity is suspended. Passengers unlatch their seatbelts, whirl and float through the cabin. They laugh, somersault. Mostly they take selfies. Tomás watches them photograph themselves in the portholes, not even looking out. His job at this phase of the “mission” is to cheerfully assist with documentation, mostly snapshots of smiling passengers with views of outer space at their backs.

On the return journey, Tomás delivers their coffee, champagne. Not

until reentry, of course; the last thing the company needs is passengers vomiting sans gravity partway through a nine-hundred-thousand-dollar excursion. He marvels, even now, at the buy-in. The price has not gone up, nor down, since the company’s inception. It is, apparently, exempt from the economy.

Always, at the apogee, Tomás considers how far the vessel is from the nearest space station. The estimate ranges, generally, from nine to seventeen hours. He knows this because he knows everything about the spacecraft. He is here to serve, both generally and in the event of an emergency.

He remembers a childhood story that came up during the interview process which, at the time, he thought would disqualify him, but which he now recognizes as a deciding factor in his hiring: a moment of uncertainty just after his father’s death. The nearest person who might have taken him in was 470 miles away. He recalls the hushed chatter about how long it would take him and his stuffed backpack to get to Syracuse from Columbus. In the end, it was seventeen hours by a progression of bus, train, bus. Even if there’d been a way, somehow, for him to be driven, it would have been nine hours to get from one place he didn’t belong to another.

Anytime someone says the word *access*, this is what he thinks about.

That night, after the reception, Tomás sleeps with a passenger in her forties, wealthy and pretty in all the usual respects. Afterward, she cries. She confesses that she

recently lost a daughter.

“I’m so sorry,” Tomás says.

“It’s all right,” she says. “I mean, it isn’t all right. I’m in shock.”

He doesn’t ask how it happened. Only a monster or idiot would. But she volunteers: “She was at dance practice. She’d just started the first grade, so the serious troupe, not the preschool one. Turns out one of the fathers of one of the girls was outside — estranged, of course — looking to kidnap her. Only the girl was sick that day. Flu, apparently. So he took the girl who looked the most like her.”

The woman’s hand flies to her mouth and Tomás feels, briefly, that he’s in a play. “I’m so sorry,” he says again.

The woman waves him off. “She was just standing there. Alone. Right there on the curb just outside the dance studio. Waiting to be picked up.” The woman has begun to weep. “But it wasn’t my fault.”

“Of course,” Tomás says.

“Pedicures go long sometimes.” The woman is really crying now, big gloppy tears. “You understand.”

“I’m trying,” he says.

Tomás goes to a couple of appointments with Freyja. The test results are neither conclusive nor promising, but especially not the latter. Freyja has become, in her words, “a one-person parade of symptoms.” Fatigue, memory loss, nausea, blurred vision. She gives notice as soon as her contract allows.

On her last day, Tomás filches a bottle of 2001 Vega Sicilia Único from the stockroom, and they sit atop the outbuilding facing the hangar and mountains.

“What’s your next move?” Freyja asks.

“I’m not sure yet,” he says. “But with you leaving, as soon as possible.”

Freyja laughs. “Yeah right,” she says. “With me gone, they’ll never let you leave. You’re a fixture now.”

Tomás is sad in a way he has not felt in several years, but he musters a toast. “You survived,” he says, his tone a failure of playfulness.

“We’ll see,” she says. “‘Survive’ is a strong word.”

In the weeks after Freyja leaves, Tomás boards the Daedalus every two weeks. The



nature of her departure, precipitated by the terms of her servitude, has leaked (Freyja's doctor, wanting to spare other recruits a similar fate, is suspected). For Aventura Celestia, good help is consequently hard to find.

Tomás thinks, alone now on the roof, of displacement. Survival. Birds underwater, fish on land. He thinks of all the people — technicians, maintenance, marketing, engineers — who make each expedition possible. He remembers having heard someone say once, perhaps in his junior high literature class, *The peasants make the king*.

An idea takes root. Tomás begins to study the manifest — not merely the passengers' names, but their ages, heights, weights, professional profiles, proclivities for or against honeysuckle, jasmine, champagne — every mission, every two weeks, far more closely than he has in the past.

Perhaps it would be enough if he were to recognize — even denounce — the outlandishness, the extravagance, the lavish inanity too earnest to be funny.

Or perhaps not.

Tomás builds on his idea night and day. He builds a plot before he can name it. He never writes anything down, but develops the idea continually — the pace of its ontogeny astounds him. He performs his tasks with robotic precision. He stops sleeping with the passengers. Monitors his own nosebleeds.

His days, one way or another, are numbered.

Twelve weeks after Freyja's departure, Tomás finds — although he could not have dreamed of articulating it — exactly what he's been waiting for. The manifest is perfect. A company party, arranged by the CEO himself, populated by the CEO's son, nephew, and four interchangeable friends-from-back-east, one of whom is — not surprisingly, given his pedigree — the heir apparent of the pharmaceutical company that manufactured the drug that felled Tomás's father.

Tomás's job is to care for people, to attend. He prepares everything impeccably. The CEO, though not joining the trip, is there to see off his son and his friends. He shakes everyone's hand, like in the first days of the company, even Tomás's and the tribal councilperson's.

The mood on the ground, the morning of the flight, is rapturous. The CEO's son appears on the tarmac in the lead, wearing aviators and a t-shirt that reads FAR OUT. He zips up his flight suit, then claps his hands together to receive the local blessing.

Afterward, he high-fives the tribal councilperson, forcefully, followed by his five friends, then the pilot and co-pilot, both of whom received astronaut certification abroad after being dishonorably discharged from domestic military service.

Aboard the spacecraft, Tomás preps the belts, the outlets, the champagne.

He sits quietly through the takeoff, the ascent, the inverted climb. He realizes, with a surge of backhanded pride, that he's the only person onboard who truly understands how all of this works.

When they hit the span of weightlessness, Tomás takes photos of the passengers. They flip and faux-perform martial arts. One moons the camera, pointing out the window at the moon.

Normally, they'd wait till the return of gravity, but Tomás has a playful suggestion: perhaps, given the exclusivity of the occasion, he should serve the champagne now.

The agreement is unanimous.

Tomás fetches two bottles. He uncorks and sprays them into the air. The champagne lands fatly, in droplets, on the passengers' tongues. The CEO's son knocks on the cockpit door, insists that the pilot and co-pilot participate. On autopilot for this most recreational portion of the recreational mission, they gamely oblige.

Tomás laughs with them as they float, watches as they lap the ripples of champagne from the air and suck it from the bottles in rounds.

It is not so difficult to distill hydrogen cyanide to a soluble liquid. Not for someone with a CV as varied as Tomás's. Not for someone who's at last found an occasion.

"Hey, hey, bud," the pilot says, half-upside-down, clutching a bottle of champagne upright. "You too."

"No thanks," Tomás says. "I'm sober."

"Bullshit," the pilot barks. "I saw you with a beer on the roof."

"No, I'm good," says Tomás.

But the passengers are chanting, the co-pilot is laughing, and the pilot is sloshing the champagne toward Tomás, clutching him by the shoulder so he can't move. "Drink!" he insists, part-festive, part-brutal.

Tomás tries to dodge, but he can't avoid the spray. Small beads of champagne

land in his nostrils; then, as he gasps for air, a couple more droplets find his mouth.

Not much, but it will be enough.

Tomás doesn't have to extricate himself from the grip of the pilot, whose arm is already going slack. Around him, the passengers hack and shudder, drift and seize.

Tomás doesn't panic. Those neural wires have been cut a thousand times. He feels calm, even now. He watches the passengers, the pilots. Thinks of how much a body can do. How little it does.

He considers how far they are from Earth — visible now, inverted, in half the portholes — how far from an international or independent space station.

Around him, the passengers and pilots go still and silent, one by one. Their bodies hang like sculptures in the air.

Tomás feels a growing tightness in his limbs, sluggish but unmistakable. He extracts a pencil from an armrest — an amenity he's never once seen used — and on the back of a cocktail napkin he writes:

HOW WEARY, STALE, FAT AND UNPROFITABLE  
SEEM TO BE ALL THE USES OF THIS WORLD

Tomás feels the note slip from his grasp and struggles to the window nearest the front of the vessel. He feels his throat tighten, his vision blur.

Through the foremost porthole, he is certain he sees something — a birth or death, a cluster of stars. A quasar maybe. He marvels that the most striking light in the known universe occurs only on the perimeter of the darkest — is perhaps even reliant on it.

Tomás stands at the window. He feels the ruptures, the internal sensations.

He has seen photos of quasars, blue stars, feathers of light at the edges of black holes. He sees — has never seen from this angle before — a ribbon of light, fluid or discrete, explosions or city lights, a riot or celebration — from here, impossible to say.

He plants his feet. Observes the Earth. Does not look away.

The brightest color, outside the human body, is this. 🍷