

World Science Fiction Spring 2019

Cosmos Latinos

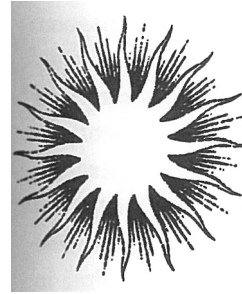
An Anthology of Science Fiction from Latin America and Spain

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A Cord Made of Nylon and Gold

Una cuerda de nylon y oro, 1965

by Alvaro Menen Desleal

translated by Andrea Bell

Back then there was a president named Johnson, and my wife was sleeping with Sam Wilson.

It was the twenty-sixth orbit. The whole thing lasted but a few seconds.

"Henry! Henry!" my crewmate pleaded from inside the capsule, "Do you realize what you're about to do?"

"It's useless, McDivitt," I told him. "I've already made up my mind."

McDivitt continued pleading. I had cut the connection with the tracking station, so his words weren't reaching Earth. Otherwise the voice of Captain Grisson, who was in charge of the project, would have rung out just as desperately. Or would Grisson, on Earth, be mute with shock?

I don't know. I was floating in the void, six hundred kilometers up, enveloped in my space suit. I had removed my thermal gloves to more comfortably operate the rocket gun with which I controlled the direction of my movements. The auxiliary tank on my back indicated enough oxygen for 110 minutes; if everything came out according to my calculations, that would be the maximum amount of time I would remain, *alive*, in space.

"Henry! Henry! What will the president say?"

Eight meters away from my body, apparently suspended immobile and magnificent in one point in space, the two-seater capsule completed its terrestrial orbit every ninety-one minutes. The hatch was open, which meant that McDivitt was also depending on his supply of portable oxygen. That's why I had to hurry, since I didn't want my decision to affect him.

"Henry! What'll become of your kids?"

The filial appeal was useless. I removed the pliers I had carefully hid-

den upon boarding the ship in Cape Kennedy, and with their sharp jaws grasped the cord made of nylon and gold that tied me, like an umbilical cord, to the capsule. Before cutting, I took the precaution of saying good-bye to my partner.

"Goodbye, McDivitt," I said, quite sarcastically. "I leave you to your marvelous world. Go on home like a good boy."

Then I severed the cord with a single cut and discharged my rocket gun until it ran out, so as to get myself as far away from the ship as possible. I still managed to see how the nylon and gold cord retracted, and how, at last, the hatch door shut. With that, I felt totally free. Free in a black sky full of stars that don't twinkle, free-floating in the void at 28,500 kilometers per hour, free at a distance of 600 kilometers from a planet I was fed up with.

That was in August of 1965. Two months earlier, McDivitt and White had completed a mission that we, on this launch, were basically copying. White had left the ship for twenty-three minutes; he was the second man after the Russian Leonov to do so. The space race-in whichever y astronaut expects to end up either scorched to death or with a wreath of flowers around his neck, like a derby-winning horse-was attracting increasingly dramatic and vain types: if Leonov stayed in space for twenty minutes, then White stayed for twenty-three.

I was the third man chosen to do a spacewalk; I, Henry Olsen, of Salt Lake City. My mission was to do a complete orbit of Earth while suspended in the void, tied to the ship by a nylon and gold cord eight meters long. I was supposed to stay out for ninety-one minutes, doing stupid things: taking pictures, moving about, making fake repairs, clowning around, turning somersaults; all with that childish sense of humor we acquire, who knows why, at Cape Kennedy. But instead of breaking another idiotic record, instead of converting myself into the winning horse for the day, I preferred to free myself forever. In exactly the twenty-sixth orbit.

It was August of 1965. There was a president named Johnson De Gaulle was threatening to checkmate NATO. My compatriots occupied the Dominican Republic. War was burning in Vietnam. The Russians had some kind of secret up their sleeve about reaching the moon. The Ku Klux Klan had murdered another black woman in Alabama. Von Braun was still doing science fiction. Rio de Janeiro had recently celebrated the four-hundredth anniversary of its founding. San Salvador had just been partially destroyed by an earthquake. Women's fashion still pursued its

mission of "less fabric, more skin." One hundred eighty Japanese miners had died from a cave-in. Queen Elizabeth was writing postcards from Germany. China had just exploded its second atomic bomb. Ben Bella no longer ruled in Algeria. Frank Sinatra was doing things "his way." Another record in car sales had been broken. My little boy John had a broken nose. I owed only \$2,800 dollars on the mortgage on my house ...

There was a president named Johnson, and my wife was cheating on me with Sam Wilson, her sister's old boyfriend. Sam Wilson, the red-head who could never handle the ball in high school rugby games.

That was in 1965. In August. Today I don't know anything more about Johnson, about Vietnam, about my kids, about Frank Sinatra ...

From the moment I cut the cord made of nylon and gold, I lost all contact with humanity. And although the Earth imposes its spherical presence on my multiday scenery-sometimes it's at my feet, sometimes above me, sometimes at my side-I know nothing more about it. A large part of its surface is covered in clouds, but at first, recently free of the umbilical cord, I could occasionally make out the lights or shadows of the big cities. "New York," I said to myself, and I would imagine a Fifth Avenue choked with a sea of people watching me, their necks stiff from the effort of keeping their heads in such an uncomfortable position. "Moscow," I'd say, and I'd picture another multitude of proletarians, the women wearing babushkas; "Buenos Aires ... Paris ... London ... Melbourne ..."

For a while I was content with my map of the world, hazy and less colorful than the one in school. I was amused by the spectacle without imagining the consequences of my desertion. Later came a few attempts to recover my "body," and the Russians almost succeeded when they tried to fish me in with a kind of net. I always found ways to escape and remain free. Free and *alive*.

Because something's happened that the scientists never guessed at. I was only supposed to live for 110 minutes, to live for precisely the length of time my oxygen supply lasted, but that's not what happened. I don't know why, but that's not what happened.

I came to realize the phenomenon of my survival some twenty orbits after I'd cut the cord. "Why," I asked myself, "have I seen so many sunsets and sunrises?" I began to count the number of times I saw dawn and dusk; when I got to around 120 sunrises I got bored with counting. I calculated that that amount of sunrises was possible only, at the speed I was traveling, in something like a week's time. Then I got another surprise:

the needle that indicated my oxygen tank's pressure was on *Full*. I had, therefore, remained in space for days and days without needing to consume one bit of air. In other words, I didn't need air to survive. Then I discovered-I was always slow on the uptake - that when I crossed the shadowed cone of the Earth I didn't feel colder, nor hotter when I was exposed to direct sun light. And I didn't suffer hunger or thirst, pain or anguish. I felt happy. Free and happy.

I have no idea of the years that have passed since then. I haven't gone back to counting a single sunrise or sunset, but I believe I've seen millions. And although I still feel free, my happiness has changed to desperation. Because I should have died a long time ago. Not died out in space, so that my corpse would remain like a rock flung loose from some planet, but with *them*, with humans, back there on Earth.

Because they all died.

I don't know *why* it happened, but little by little I realized *how* it happened.

The sky was black and the stars shone without twinkling, with that majestic monotony they have when seen from space. On Earth everything was clear: from Cape Kennedy to Italy, from Italy to Malaysia, over the Pacific and over California and from there again to Cape Kennedy, not a single cloud hid the shapes of the islands and continents. It was like a day designed to be a happy Sunday. Everything was as calm and quiet as always, maybe even calmer and quieter, because I could even seem to *hear-I* know it's foolish to say that-the shouts of the fans who must have been in the stands at Yankee Stadium. I wasn't thinking about anything-why should I need to think about anything?-and I contented myself with looking at the old familiar terrestrial scenery.

Suddenly *it* exploded down below, to the north of Vietnam. It exploded in light and then as a mushroom, and I, swallowed up in the void, didn't hear any noise at all. Seconds later, five, ten, one hundred more brilliant flashes in China ... When I crossed the Pacific and saw the territory of the United States, one hundred, five hundred more bright lights lit up over San Francisco, Los Angeles, Detroit, New York, Washington . . . And another one hundred to the south, over Mexico and Panama and Rio and Buenos Aires; and more to the north, above Montreal and Ottawa. And to the east, above Cuba and Puerto Rico. And further east, on the other side of the Atlantic, the great flash over London, and the other hundred flashes in Paris and Madrid and Rome and Bonn and Bel- grade. And further away, in Moscow, in Leningrad, in Ulan Bator. And in

Tokyo. And Manila and Hawaii. Always bright lights like a flash, explosions like millions of flashes.

At the end of my orbit, slow mushroom clouds covered Asia; another orbit and the mushrooms were holding hands all across America, like a macabre ring-around-the -rosy. And hundreds of serene mushrooms were growing over Europe and over Africa and over Oceania ...

I couldn't watch any more ...

When I opened my eyes, much later, the earth's sky was no longer clear; it was blood red, it was green, it was purple. A thick, multicolored cloud covered everything.

That was a long time ago. Today, the cloud has dissipated; but I no longer see, in my forty -five-minute nights, the lights of a single city. No matter how hard I try, the dark side of the Earth only seems dark, dark with a glow from beyond the grave. It's the same on the light side: the soft tones of the pampas are dark now; the forests, and even the snow on the great mountains, are gray, gray like lead or ashes.

I'm still free. It's true that I'm still free, just like when I cut the nylon and gold cord back on that day when there was a president named Johnson, Vietnam was burning with war, our marines occupied the Dominican Republic, my son John had a broken nose, Frank Sinatra was singing "his way," my wife was sleeping with Sam Wilson, and China exploded its second atomic bomb.