

Depressed in Space

Why is everything so boring? It was not supposed to be like this. And why can't real life be more like science fiction?

When I learnt to read in the "Noughties" I became hooked on science fiction books and films. I was fascinated by the prospect of travelling into space and decided that would be my future, even at that young age. The people in those stories were never bored. They were scared, thrilled, brave, cowardly, good or bad, occasionally killed but never bored. I know why that was. All of the action was either before they travelled or after they arrived. Nothing ever happened on route. That was always covered by some clever scheme. A handy local wormhole allowed instant travel: the ability to travel at many times the speed of light: my favourite, cryogenic hibernation. You lay down in a box, the lid closes, and you wake up years later in a different galaxy. The other big difference was the space they had to move around. Great open areas large enough to hold a dance and cabins the size of hotel suites. Real life is not like that.

I have been living in this cramped little tin can for 15 months now and still have another two years to go if I don't die of boredom in the meantime. It was supposed to be a time of friendship, companionship and jolly games of chess and Scrabble. That's how they described it and that's what we experienced during our three years of training for this mission. It sounded good at the time, and to be fair it worked well during that training period. The four of us got on so well. Mind you, we also got to go home to our wives and families. Still, we did spend weeks together in close proximity, in mock-up vessels and we got on fine. Most of the talk was technical and full of jargon, but we also talked about our hopes and fears and our varied past experiences. How was I to know that we would run out of things to say just a few months after our ship was launched.

The first big row was over music. Craig started playing his electronic metal tracks. Computer-generated noise with a thumping beat and no discernible tune. Music for morons was my description, which went down badly.

Then there is Doug (or Douglas as he now insists we call him). As if his impenetrable Glaswegian accent is not bad enough, he has found religion. He said during our training discussions that he had a general belief in God, but did not worship and was uncertain about some of the church's teachings. That changed after a few months. Now if he is not working he is in prayer or staring out of our single tiny window staring into space. That would be bad enough if he was not so evangelical. There is no discussion, technical or otherwise, that does not turn into his search for redemption and his attempts to convert the rest of us. He is best avoided at all costs.

And finally there is Sebastian. Posh does not go half-way to describe him. Born with a silver spoon in his mouth, he chose to bring it with him. He lived a life of servants and leisure and thinks he can continue in the same way in this tiny tub of a vessel. I could tolerate that, if he did not make me think that he is constantly flirting with the rest of us. I know that he was married before we left, but I am careful not to spend too much time alone with him.

So that is the crew. Four strangers, brought together for this mission, selected by experts in psychiatry and sociology to be compatible: kept in close confinement throughout training, so that

we became four best friends. And now we can hardly bring ourselves to speak to one another unless it is about the mission and absolutely essential.

Unfortunately, this mission is fully automatic. There are no experiments to conduct, no dials to watch or buttons to push, unless you count the light switches, just continuous boredom, and still two years of it to come.

There is nothing I can do about it – there is no reverse gear on this spaceship. I am beyond help, but you are not. Just tell your children to avoid space travel until reality catches up with science fiction.

Ron Duckling - signing off.