

I wrote the story "[Space O](#)" in Russian in late February 2021, upon learning about a literary contest dedicated to the 60th anniversary of Yuri Gagarin's flight to space. The contest was organized by Litres.Samizdat, a Russian platform for self-published authors, and Roscosmos, the Russian Space Agency. It was shortlisted for the final and was eventually published in a separate [collection of novellas](#) by other contestants. Apparently, this collection has recently been delivered to the ISS, too.

As I was thinking about the subject for my story, I went through some notebooks but I did not find anything that caught my attention. It had to be a short story or a novella. I began to think "outside the box". I did not want to delve into too many technical aspects of space flights, nor did I want to populate the story with extraterrestrial characters. I wanted something creative, daring, and utterly humane. Suddenly *Space Oddity* came to mind..., and I wrote this story overnight.

This is obviously a fictional account of David Bowie's composing one of his most famous songs, but I did some research for the fictional part. All aspects of the first three chapters fell together almost by themselves, I only had to write it all down. Along the way I realized that I walked the same streets in Soho, I lived in Bromley, accessed from Victoria Station, for 2 weeks in 2004, so I was a regular at Victoria Station, too. The pub I depicted was a beer hole I visited once, but it was probably in Greater Manchester where I lived between 2003 and 2010. And I saw many loaders, like "Major Tom", in my 7 years in England. After I submitted the story for the contest I decided to check when the first British person went to space. Turned out it was a woman, and her mission was mutually financed by the UK and the USSR, and it took place... on May 19th, 1991. 30 years after the first flight. "Majors" had to wait for a long time.

This is a story about dreams – and what breaks them. It is about love and poverty – the topics that Robert Burns was very much aware about. It is about inspiration and thirst for life. And it is about the Earth and space – for "*the whole space is about Earth.*"

Julia Shuvalova, January 8th, 2022

Julia Shuvalova –Space O

– 1 –

John was the last to leave. In the studio, where his friend was sitting on the floor, among pillows, guitars and sheets of paper, with his back on him, hung a heavy smell of cheap tobacco, in which they vainly tried to drown out despair. It was June 1969.

"Dave," he called softly.

The long-haired, skinny guy didn't turn around, but answered:

"What do you want?"

John was uncomfortable. After all, he was just a guitarist, his job was to play music. But Dave composed it. He also sang and acted. John admired him, but now he felt sorry for him. He, John, will go home now, he doesn't need to prove anything, he'll just eat his dinner and go to bed.

"Maybe you should take a walk?"

"Maybe," Dave replied, still not turning around.

"Listen, no one meant to offend you," John walked across the room and sat by the window, opposite Dave. In the twilight that generously flooded the studio he noticed his friend's red eyes, but it was probably from tobacco. "Sorry, we smoked too much here." Dave waved him off, and John continued:

"Everyone just wants to do something already, you know. We play what no one listens to. You live by your music, but over there," he waved his hand into the London twilight, illuminated by a lantern, "nobody has even heard of Woodstock or psychedelics. That's what the guys are saying: we need a song that the girls will listen to, like what the Beatles did. And then you can play whatever you want."

Dave fell on his back with a loud groan.

"The Beatles can go to hell!" 'Play what you want' – no-one will let you play what you want if you start writing songs for girls! The Beatles know that very well, don't they?!"

Dave rolled over and buried his face in the pillow, and John heard faint sobs. He didn't know what to do, and it was awkward to leave now. The little finger suddenly began to itch, and John began to bite the burrs.

"Tony thinks I'm trying to hype on space. Like, everyone is waiting for the Apollo flight, and I want to get into the swing of things. He's an idiot: it's not about the Apollo, it's about me." Dave propped himself up on the pillows and continued, wiping tears from his face, "You see, John, over there," he also pointed to the window, "it's not Woodstock alone that they know nothing about. They don't know about anything at all. They think only about how to earn money for food and clothes. London is now a bunch of freaks in the same rags. I'm so tired of this, John! How can you think about clothes when there is space all around you!? Art is space, and music, poetry, cinema is space! 'Odyssey' does not get out of my head, Kubrick is a genius. On Portobello I found a record with Wagner, this is also space! But everyone wants The Monkeys. Yes, John, all that which I need is of no use to people THERE! And Hermie doesn't need it either! Parents – they don't care at all, methinks. I'm tired, John, I'm tired of being the only one who needs me."

"Come on, we all need you," John shook his head. "No matter what Tony says, but tomorrow he will still come to the studio." Looking thoughtfully into the translucent June evening, he continued, "One always wishes everything had been fine the day before. You should take a walk, this smoke will drive you nuts."

"Maybe it's for the best," Dave said. He was sitting cross-legged, with his long fingers wrapped around his face. John quietly left the studio.

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Around ten in the evening it began to rain. It was not a shower but that summery London rain that leaves your clothes and hair nearly dry, and you can wander in it for as long as you want. Dave walked on the wet pavement slabs, dodging the umbrellas of giggling girls. It was about an hour's walk from their studio in Soho to Victoria Station, then another half hour by train to Beckenham. In a good mood, Dave would wander through the central streets, imagining how people approach him for an autograph, take pictures with him, and he gives interviews, then maybe one day the Queen would invite him to a reception, why not? But tonight he wanted to be alone. The alluring neon signs and the crowds of fans outside the nightclubs irritated him. In this new post-war world, there were so far only two ways to escape the routine and become a celebrity: to be a musician or an astronaut. At first, everyone wanted to become Elvis, then the Beatles and Gagarin appeared. If he were any good at science, he would have made his way into real space, then the Queen would surely have invited him to a reception. But he was a complete zero at it - as, apparently, most Britons were. Otherwise, how could one explain why the Russians were the first to reach for the stars, and now the Americans were preparing a mission to the Moon? All he had was art and music, but even here he was just one of many. And now everything was about to collapse, and anger and helplessness drove him to tears again. Hermione left him. There was no hit. The musicians could leave any time. At least, he got rid of that terrible in its artlessness name, Jones. But there still were awfully crooked teeth. With such background, he could only be a mime in the suburbs of London. But for some reason, he wanted to make music, and this passion was stronger than him. If everything had been fine the day before...

He arrived at Beckenham almost at midnight. It beginning to drizzle here, and it promised to rain more heavily than in London. It was getting colder, the night wind was blowing through his silk blouse, and now he suddenly wanted to get warm and be among people. He rarely visited the pubs of Beckenham, but apparently it was the time to check in there.

He pushed open the first door with his shoulder and found himself in a narrow room with a bar counter, several high chairs under it and three rickety round tables along the wall. It was obvious that the pub was barely making ends meet, although the owner behaved as if his establishment was visited by the Prime Minister himself. In any case, this rainy evening all the seats were occupied. Taking a pint of bitter so that he could fit right in under the scrutiny of probing working eyes, Dave squeezed into a nook next to the entrance. Here, by the window, stood, propping up the wall, a plodding, wiry, squat worker in a stretched sweater, with thinning red hair and red, unhappy eyes. On the windowsill next to him there was a barely touched pint.

"Your health, mate!" he proclaimed in strong cockney dialect when Dave took a sip from his glass and smiled. "I haven't seen you here before!" The smile was missing a few teeth.

"I've never been here before," Dave said. "It's a hell of a hole, by the look of it".

"Oh, you're right, mate! It's a hell of a hole! In this weather - just the right thing!

Dave looked around, but there were no seats available; instead, three more builders came in.

"Everyone here is either a loader, or a builder, our kind of folk!" The stranger brought him up to speed. "I'm the main regular here. When my wife gets me with her "bring me money", I give her everything I have and go here. The owner pities me, pours me into debt. I don't take more than one pint, but others feel sorry for me and share. Five or six pints run in an evening."

"What's your name?"

The redhead broke into a smile.

"I call myself Major Tom!"

"You're a soldier, or what?"

"Nay," the redhead drawled. "You know, the working class is like a life sentence, not that you can't get out anywhere, but you don't even know where to go. And when this Russian, Gagarin, flew into space, I thought then: I wish I could! I told my wife and friends, well, they made fun of me, of course. It would be fine if they said that they would not take me there because of beer or because I didn't know much. But no, they went: your mug is no good. Gagarin is handsome, and I'm not. Well, that's fine. But I decided that I'd call myself Major Tom. And what are you?"

"A musician."

"Wow, we have a star here!" Dave gave the redhead a threatening look, and he backed: "Right, right, I'm mum. Do you write songs or play?"

"I write them. It's quite difficult."

"And what do you write about?"

Dave grinned:

"Well, about space, too."

"Mate, you're just like me, the same nuts. You know, I haven't stopped thinking about it." He moved closer to Dave, pouring the beer fumes over him, and his glittering red eyes seemed even unhappier. "When that other guy, also Russian, went into outer space, I almost went crazy. I thought then: how do I live?! I load barges in the day, drink in the evenings, my wife nags me, and then these guys fly into space. Can you imagine, from Earth – and straight there, into the darkness, to the stars?!" They both stared out of the window, as if a Soviet cosmonaut could be seen in the darkness of the night. The "Major" reveled in the attention and continued: "Sometimes when I'm coming back from the dock, I look out of the train window – there's a full moon, and I think: what is it like up close? Is it the same white colour? Or yellow, like custard? And the stars: are they just a little bit like what they draw them in books? How do they actually shine? And how does it happen that a star is so small when it hangs in the sky or when it falls, but when it shines, we see it down here? I tried to read about it in books, but it's hard for me, you know... I'm not stupid, but it would be easier for me if there were pictures, I would understand more this way." Dave nodded understandingly.

"Would you fly?" he asked the "major".

"Oh, I would fly tomorrow! Well, as soon as I sober up." The redhead smiled guiltily. "I cut out that interview with Gagarin from the newspaper and put it at home. Sometimes I take it out and read it. I'm still thinking: I wish I could see our Earth from space, especially like the other one, I forgot his last name. We're all swaggering in front of each other here with bombs and rockets, and in space you're sitting so small, stars and planets are all around you, and somewhere beneath you is the Earth. And then the signal comes through: 'Major Tom, ground control!' And you feel like a hero, even for one day."

The people in the pub were discussing football and the latest government measures. Dave secretly studied the wrinkled, weather-beaten face of the "major" and his strong, sinewy hands, embarrassed to look into his eyes. For the first time that day, he felt sorry for someone other than himself.

"And so I'd fly around the rocket," the redhead continued his story, "and then I'd disconnect. The rocket would return back, and I'd be floating in space."

"What's the point? You would be dead, Major," Dave tried to joke, but it was clear that the "major" was serious.

"Yes, I know, mate," he swirled the beer in his glass. "What's the difference, everything comes to an end. But I really want to do something big. You write music, of course, you'll be a star. And I'm just going to load the barges till I'm dead. The Americans will now launch a mission to the moon, and after that, you mark my words, they and the Russians will make their way to Mars. And I don't have any other life here, you know. Just the barges and the wife".

"And if the wife leaves you?"

"Ah no, she won't go anywhere. Nay, she feels sorry for me," tenderness sounded in "major's" voice. "I'm useless, and she pities me. If she didn't pity me and didn't ask for money, I would have given up everything long ago."

The "Major" followed him when he left the pub, and for the whole half a mile to Foxgrove Road he walked beside him, straightened up, and spoke excitedly:

"You know, mate, you do write a song about space after all – I'll hear and I'll know that you did it thanks to me. You're all artists, astronauts, you're all stars, somewhere over there. So you do something for us, simple folk, sometimes. Here's another twenty years – and everyone will fly to space, like they ride the tube now. I won't live to see it," he said with a laugh, "I was born too early. And they will all be heroes. But you do write about space so that I know that it's thanks to me. Promise, mate?"

"I'll try," Dave replied, closing the gate of the house. At home, he rushed to the window and managed to see how a squat figure in a stretched sweater was rapidly turning into a distant black dot, like an unknown star, from which his apartment was instantly thrown away millions of light years.

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At home, Dave quietly made his way into the living room, trying not to make any noise so as not to wake Angie. Hermione won't come back, and he's fine with Angie, even though he doesn't love her. Now they two are mutually not in love, maybe it's right. Bitter has almost gone out from his head. The clock said half past one. He wrapped himself in a blanket and began to scribble in a notebook with a pencil. If he understood at least something about how this world works, such a meeting happened for a reason. Who knows what comes of it. "Ground control to Major Tom" is a great line. Make sure to write about his

wife. Poor "major", what an ordeal: to have imagination that leads you out of the suburbs into outer space and not being able to do anything about it. He'll probably drink himself to death.

Dave shuddered: what made them, musicians, different from the "major", after all? Those who didn't drink smoked weed or were on a needle. Having a wife and children was considered worse than self-destruction. It made them creative people, but in fact everyone drowned out their pain and fear in this way. Pain – because you were not so famous, rich, loved, and free; fear – that you would remain like this for the rest of your life. Remain nobody. Like "Major Tom" from a pub in Beckenham, which name Dave did not even think to find out.

He barely waited until morning to play the theme. Now he knew exactly that the guys would like it, he had already made notes where the mellotron or stylophone could play. And here it was necessary to imitate the launch of a rocket, let the "major" hear it and imagine himself flying into space. And a countdown before that. And let him go into outer space, as he wanted. Yes, Major, you could have also become a star, like Gagarin and Leonov (was that his name? it seems so), and some "Vogue" would have liked to do an interview with you, and a journalist would have written about your walking with a confident gait through the lobby of the Savoy, dressed in a suit from this so-and-so, a shirt from that so-and-so, and that your shoes come from the latest collection of another so-and-so.

Dave hesitated over the last verse. Never before that conversation with the "major" had he sat next to someone who was seriously contemplating death. He had a terrible guess: what if, after their conversation, the "major" does "fly away" somewhere? And the wife will never see her useless loader who dreams of space so just not to see, not to hear, not to smell – not to live - the poverty? Hermione had enough of it and therefore she left him, Dave, and did not feel sorry for him, and well, he will survive, he has his own space, his music, but the "major" has nothing...

...except for the planet Earth that he wants to see from space. Well, let him see it, let him circle it, rise above the moon, fly to Jupiter and its satellites. Here's Odyssey again. Who is this Ulysses anyway? The same kind of hero who is plowing the ocean while his wife is waiting for him at home. Maybe Penelope was a bitch and always nagged him for money. And then he left her everything he had and went on a journey. No, quite the contrary: he loved her and wanted to return, but the expanse beckoned him. Previously, space was the world ocean, and Ulysses simply could not stop, he sailed on and on, discovering new places on this planet. By the way, what color is the Earth from space? If previously ocean was the space, then it must be blue...

Of course, "Odyssey" is not about the major. It's very odd, in fact, that someone like him dreams of space. "Space Odyssey". Space oddity.

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It was 2013. "Hello, Spaceboy!" Dave tweeted in response to Chris Hadfield from Canada, who sang and played *Space Oddity* on the ISS.

He turned off the sound on the computer and put the video on repeat. After all the remakes and releases, a song about space is being sung... in space! Now a young man from a London suburb who suffered from obscurity and unhappy love has become a real intergalactic star - and with him that mysterious "Major Tom", who never showed up anywhere and did not thank for "his" song.

"Yes, Major, I was right when I wanted to write a song about space. It's a pity you never found me. But if you did hear your song one day, I hope you liked that you were drifting on the cosmic waves, as you wanted."

His wife came into the room and sat down next to him on the arm of the chair. He kissed her. God, what a blessing it is to be her husband! She never nagged him, never demanded money. Of course, they met when they both had wealth, but most importantly, she loved his music, and he wanted her to be happy.

"It's just amazing: I've done so much in music, and people keep bringing me back to the very beginning. That's the real oddity!" They smiled at his pun. "Sometimes it seemed to me that I, like Ulysses, am sailing somewhere all the time and cannot get to the shore in any way, and yet it is always so close – and it is always this song about space. It's like I'm really an alien. I am so grateful to you for keeping me grounded," he said and was amazed at such a confession himself. She remained unperturbed:

"Frankly speaking, I think you are the most down-to-earth person in the world. For some reason, it always seems to us that rock stars, all these creative souls, should be out of their mind. But if they are cut off from the human world, they will never do anything worthwhile."

"The same goes about astronauts, right? After all, they are there for us who are on Earth. The whole space is about the Earth."

"Of course. Today I am more proud of you than ever".

"Didn't I tell you how I really wrote this song?" he caught himself on a thought. "It's amazing, if I didn't."

She smiled softly:

"No, dear, and I'm sure this song has the most incredible story. I will definitely listen, but I came to remind you that they are waiting for us."

Of course, he forgot. He didn't want to go, but he didn't like to decline at the last moment. Well, he'll tell her sometime later.

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January 2016. The most important thing was done, now he was calm.

"Happy birthday, dear David!" a chorus of voices sang.

"Thank you," he said weakly. "Alas, it seems that all my voice is now on the album. Is everything ready for release?"

"Yes, as you asked, on your birthday," his wife replied. She was doing well, but he saw better.

"Tell my wife I love her very much, she knows."

When they stayed alone, he pulled her close.

"You're beautiful, my dear, and you're still keeping me grounded."

"I'm doing everything I can," she replied in a trembling voice.

"You don't even know how much you're capable of. I still haven't told you about Major Tom. So many years have gone since, I'm not even sure now that everything was exactly like that. We couldn't write a

single hit, and everyone was just talking about space. And so I wanted to write about space, and the guys kept saying what we'd better write about love. One does not go against the other, of course, but there was no love in my life. Hermie left me at the beginning of 1969, and then, in the summer, the guys all left me, and I walked from Soho to the train station, and I felt very bad. And then, in a beer hole in Beckenham, I met a red-haired loader who called himself "Major Tom" and dreamed of flying into space. I don't know, maybe I imagined it all. He hated the poverty in which he lived, but he loved his wife, and from space he wanted to look down on Earth. Looks like I'm going to space soon, too. Do you think I can still see you all from there?"

She broke into tears, and he stroked her hair, her shoulders.

"Lazarus will rise again. I know that now. You have nothing to cry about, dear, I was very happy. Thanks to you, for the first time someone other than myself needed me here on Earth."

...And later, when he closed his eyes, feeling the sleep approaching, he suddenly saw a red-haired "major" in the distance. The loader waved his hand in greeting:

"Hey, you, star! I told you you'd be famous! Yes, I heard your song, I even told in the pub that you wrote a hit about me, someone believed it, someone did not. And now you're wondering if I really was."

"Why didn't you ever find us, or me?"

"Oh, mate," the redhead spread his hands, "you were like that space for me: an impossible dream, so as not to drink myself dead. Only astronauts and real artists reach for the stars. All of us, simple folk, are born to walk on Earth. We look up to you so that we have the meaning in life, so as not to go crazy down here. But some of us do get lucky sometimes, too," he winked.

Sleep overcame him.

"I'm sorry, Major, I'm tired."

"I see, have rest. See you soon."

"...Though I'm past one hundred thousand miles,

I'm feeling very still,

And I think my spaceship knows which way to go..."

Julia Shuvalova, February 27th, 2021

Translated from Russian by the author