

If Man were Meant to Fly

by [Joshua C. Frank](#) (February 2024)



The Moon, Tarsila do Amaral, 1928

Technology comes with one guarantee: eventually, it will fail. The more moving parts an object has, the sooner it will break down, and the harder it will be to fix when it does. In retrospect, the distress call shouldn't have surprised me.

"To anyone who can hear me," said a high-pitched female voice with an unfamiliar accent over the speaker, "this is Ellfour Colony. Life support is failing, and we have no food. We need emergency supplies and a repair team."

I answered. "Planetary Space Colonization Agency."

The young woman—or maybe it was a girl—answered back after six seconds. Three seconds of that, I knew, was the radio waves flying from Earth to the orbiting colony and back. "Can you help us? Time is running out!"

I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. She and the colony would die soon, and there was nothing I or anyone else could do. I felt for the caller and the million people at Ellfour, but I knew such feelings were in vain. "We can't help," I finally said. "Your colony has been isolated from the outside world for sixty years. Diseases have had time to develop separately on Earth and in your colony. Any contact could result in a plague on both sides, just like when we helped Leo Seven in 2245. We can't risk billions of lives to try to save a million." Two billion on Earth had died, but it was even worse for the space colonies that still had contact with Earth. None of them still had enough people to keep them going, so they were recalled to Earth.

Five seconds. "But we'll all starve, if we don't overheat or run out of air first! We need help!"

"I'm sorry. Over and out." I knew it wasn't much, but what more could I say?

I sent my supervisor a recording of the call and confirmation of its origin. I tried putting the colony out of my mind as I went back to work, hoping they could resolve it somehow with knowledge above my pay grade.

Five minutes later, my supervisor replied through the same speaker: "I've received orders that go all the way up to the

Chief of Staff. We'll destroy the colony. Otherwise they'll escape to Earth."

I choked; my stomach tightened into a knot. "Kill them all? Can't we do something else, something that doesn't involve killing a million? There are women and children in that colony!"

"If they stay, they'll run out of air. If they escape, we'll have billions more dead on our hands. A warship has already been launched to Ellfour. Over and out."

What seemed like hours went by as I sat in shock, staring off into nowhere in particular, replaying those few minutes in my mind over and over and imagining the million men, women, and children of Ellfour seeing a spaceship, hoping to be rescued it, only to watch it blast a big hole in their colony and let all the air out.

I racked my brain looking for something, anything, that could have prevented their deaths, but found no solution ... except for the original colonists staying home on Earth. If man were meant to fly, he'd have wings; if man were meant to live in space, he wouldn't need air, food, water, gravity, or radiation shielding to survive. If I were a religious man, I'd say it's God's way of saying, "Stay home."

No, if I stayed with that job, this would be the rest of my career. Routine monitoring would be punctuated by me pronouncing death sentences on populations in space larger than a lot of countries on Earth. Some of those colonies had billions; I didn't want to be around when they failed.

I walked away from my station right then and there. I walked out of that building without saying a word and never looked back. I didn't give a damn about two weeks notice. I never wanted anything to do with the government again. Once I could no longer see the building, I called a one-person car and waited.

After two minutes, a small car parked by the sidewalk where I stood. I went in, closed the door, and gave my address, and the car drove its usual route there.

I absentmindedly stared out the window. The sky was nowhere to be seen. Nothing except skyscrapers hundreds of stories tall, blocks wide, cities in their own right. Human anthills. Earthbound space colonies.

I could feel the color draining from my face as I thought about that. What if they broke down like Ellfour? I didn't want to be around for that, either. I wouldn't have my government-employee housing for long anyway now that I walked out on them.

So, I moved to a small town in Oklahoma near some relatives. I became a Central States citizen, married local, and started a family and a farm, both of them big. Abundant life in the face of all that death. We're self-sufficient and have little need for machines; when civilization fails like Ellfour, life will go on as usual for us. You have no idea what peace of mind that brings.

Still, the horror of a million dead haunts me to this day after forty years. Officially, the colony failed on its own, and even though I emigrated to the Central States, I was required by law to keep the truth a secret. Every time I hear about another colony "failing," or see one in the night sky, or wake up from a nightmare about Ellfour, or mention that I used to work for the Agency, I relive that moment, and all I can think about is that orbiting, frozen mausoleum.

It's a good thing we tried this within Earth-Moon space before we went gallivanting off to the stars.

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Joshua C. Frank works in the field of statistics and lives in the American Heartland. His poetry has been published in *The Society of Classical Poets*, *Snakeskin*, *The Lyric*, *Sparks of Calliope*, *Westward Quarterly*, *Atop the Cliffs*, *Our Day's Encounter*, *The Creativity Webzine*, *Verse Virtual*, and *The Asahi Haikuist Network*, and his short fiction has been published in *Nanoism* and *The Creativity Webzine*. His website is [here](#).

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