

Asterisms

By

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Chapter 1. Childhood's End

At over 600 meters long it had been heralded, at one time, as the largest moveable object ever made by Man. They never got around to giving it a name so it always remained simply Starship 1. My recollections of seeing it on orbit are hazy, as I had attained the tender age of five when I last saw it from the outside. From our front porch on Earth, we could just barely discern that it appeared a slim cylinder as it passed overhead. My father said that soon I would be living there, growing up and meeting new friends. I didn't want new friends. My old friends were just fine. I did want a new sister. Mine could have used some improvement but then again, older sisters are -- well, they're just older sisters. Dad said we'd be going to the stars. I asked him which one and he said something about it being below the horizon just now. This did not please me. Five year old boys are not pleased with many things. Mostly they are not pleased with big sisters.

I had, however, managed to work out a lifestyle which largely eliminated contact with my sister. Thus simplified, my daily routine usually consisted of determining what neat stuff I could get into. Neat, as defined by males of the age, definitely includes things which are dusty, muddy, covered with grease or forbidden. Example; there's a neat old rusted-out tractor in the garage of Bobby's grandfather. We could sit on the seat (both of us at once) and it became an interplanetary attack fighter, the bridge of Old Ironsides or a Wells Fargo stage coach being chased by crazed savages.

Bobby and I sat and talked there, hidden in the dim recesses of the musty old garage. We talked about my going to the stars. Bobby said the stars were hot. He didn't want to go there. I tried to explain that we weren't actually going to the stars themselves, we were going to find the planets which were near the stars.

"Well, why didn't ya say so in the first place!" asked Bobby.

"It's the way my dad says it. He means he's going to the planets."

"What are the planets like?"

"I don't know." I felt stupid.

Bobby squirmed on the huge tractor seat. "Well, what if you don't like it there or what if there are space monsters?" Bobby had an active imagination even for a five year old.

"My dad says there aren't any space monsters. Just on video and they're not real."

"Has he been there?"

"No, but he says..."

Bobby interrupted me with, "Well, if he hasn't been there then how do you know there aren't any space monsters?" Bobby, by the way, grew up to be a lawyer.

I don't remember how that conversation worked out. It's been nearly a century and the memory fades. The only other significant event of that Spring became the grand tour to visit the relatives one last time. We visited both sets of grandparents for weeks. Cousins and uncles and aunts and second cousins and uncles-in-law that I'd never seen appeared. We found ourselves the center of attention and we had big dinners almost every night. The smells of those feasts still linger in my memory. To a five year old, the size of a meal is determined solely by the number and varieties of desserts.

Grandparents are neat. They have all of the authority to let you stay up late and eat extra ice cream and they give you money for videos. They don't worry about whether you sit up

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straight at the table and, best of all, grandfathers have lots of time to take you fishing or walking in the woods and they have attics full of neat old stuff. They also cry when you leave.

I do have memory of the shuttle flight to Starship 1 in June of 2210. It is remembered as one of the worst experiences in my life. The cabin seated 12 abreast and we sat in the middle, unable to look out the windows. Big sister Cordelia would poke me. I would poke her back. Mom would see that. I found myself in trouble. That resulted in Standard Question #3 (Why can't you be good like your big sister?) Mom gave me a coloring book. Cordelia knocked the crayon out of my hand. I slugged Cordelia. That resulted in Standard Question #2 (Will you two stop fussing?). In spite of the FASTEN SEAT HARNESS sign, Mom decided to separate us. She unfastened her harness and then mine. In switching seats with Mom, I floated away (hey, I'd never been in free fall before), knocked a stack of dinner trays into the aisle and then kicked one hard, rupturing one container and spraying vegetable soup all over four passengers, Mom and myself. Enter Standard Question #1 (Why must you always make a mess?). I spent the rest of the flight sitting in the sticky remnants of the dinner I didn't get to eat. I felt cold, hungry and I had to go to the bathroom. This is not an auspicious introduction to spaceflight. Cordelia got to eat my dessert.

I don't remember arriving at Starship 1. Mom always said I slept through it and they just towed me out of the cabin to meet Dad, who had gone ahead several weeks earlier to get things ready. Actually, I don't remember much of the first year or so on board. I do remember that my room on the ship appeared much smaller than my old room but it had a whole wall covered with small storage bins where I could hide neat stuff. And I remember that out of the 250 people on board, there existed only one other boy my age. I did not like Kevin Josephson at the time. I did not like him at any time. He is one of the few people who, I am truly glad, are now living in some other solar system and not likely to survive long enough to ever see me again -- if he doesn't get lynched first. But I digress.

Having acquired my first black eye from Kevin (he looked worse), my mother proceeded to introduce me to the only girls on board who were my age. There were three. They giggled incessantly. They whispered among themselves and then giggled even more. They were prone to shrieking at the slightest minor thing -- say, spilling ink on one of their party dresses. Mentally, I lumped them with Cordelia as being excess baggage on the ship. I became, in my mother's eyes, the number one five year old terror on the ship. She liked to say that the only reason I never held that title permanently is that I later became the number one six year old terror on the ship.

My father remained usually busy somewhere else on the ship. I do remember two things about him from that early age, though. The first is the marvelous set of interlocking construction blocks which he gave me. The second is a memory of being awakened one night. He carried me, still in my bathrobe, rubbing sleep from my eyes, to the zero g viewport on the axis of the ship. There weren't many people there in the middle of the night, ship's time. The dark, quiet, carpeted room felt very cozy and I wanted to go back to sleep in my Dad's arms. Beneath us swam a beautiful blue-green planet, almost close enough to touch, or so it seemed. There appeared faint swirls in the cloud tops. Dad said that astronomers had named it Uranus and nobody had ever been farther from Earth than that point. We swung behind the planet, letting it pull us along its orbit and we saw faint flashes of light on its dark side. Dad said it looked like lightning and I suddenly understood the idea that we were no longer on Earth, where lightning appeared a terrible and wonderful sight. Those pitiful flickerings, if they were like the lightning back home, must be far, far away. As we went into the shadow of the planet, we could see the

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veil-like rings circling the planet, mere wisps of material viewed nearly edge-on. In the middle of these wondrous sights, I asked him if we were going back to Earth after we looked at this planet.

“Not for a long, long time, son.”

I sniffed once and said, “But I want to talk to Bobby. I haven’t got to play with him for so long.”

“Tell you what, you can record a message for Bobby. We’ll send it tomorrow.”

“But I want to see Bobby. I want to go back to Earth.”

Dad looked sad. “Son, I don’t know if you’ll understand this, but try. We -- all of us on the ship -- are going on the greatest adventure ever. Farther than Columbus or Magellan or Armstrong and Aldrin or McAdams ever went. I know you didn’t ask to come along and we didn’t ask your permission to bring you. But your mother and I -- well, we feel that this trip will be the best thing for you and Cordelia. The best thing for all of us. I don’t know what we’re going to find out there and I don’t know if it will be easy or hard but I can promise you one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“It will be interesting.” He gave me one of my favorite looks. It made me feel that I could do anything with his help and guidance. He hugged me in his huge arms and I felt warm and secure in my fuzzy bathrobe.

“Dad?”

“Yes, son”. His voice indicated his attentive answer. He always tried to answer every question I ever posed. Do you have any idea just how many questions a five year old can ask? And once they are answered, how many other questions he can ask with the simple word ‘why?’.

“Dad, can I go back to Earth?” I knew at once that I’d made the wrong choice on can/may and I’d receive Standard Correction Lesson #7 (May asks permission, can asks if you are able. If you ask for permission with the word ‘can’ then you do not have my permission).

“I said you could go back but it will be a long, long time.”

“How long? Until school starts?”

“No, son. Much longer. You will be a man and you’ll probably have children of your own before you can start back. You will be an old, old man like your great grandfather before you see Earth again.”

I couldn’t understand, at the time, just how long a hundred year round trip voyage could be. It seemed like I would never be able to go back home. I asked, in the squeaky voice which is one step below a whine, “Can I see Earth, Dad, one last time?”

“That’s why I brought you here, son. We’re so far out in the Solar System that Earth is lost in the glare of the Sun but when we swing around this planet and we’re still in its Solar shadow, we may be able to see Earth for a few moments.” Several of Dad’s friends had gathered there and they compared charts of the stars with the view of the edge of the planet. We flew deep in its shadow, the ghostly flickerings below and the filaments of the rings off to one side barely lighting the darkened lounge. We floated in the carpeted room, the men quietly conferring with their charts. Dad held me and I began to get sleepy again. The others discussed the stars and then pointed out an orange spot. Dad had taught me to tell stars from planets on many nights as we sat in the back yard just a few weeks earlier. Stars twinkle and planets don’t. Here, none of the stars twinkled. They all looked like planets. “Is that Earth?” I asked excitedly.

“No, Son, that’s Mars. Remember, the red planet.”

“Oh, yeah, but I thought it orbited over by Orion, “ I said, pointing out one of the few constellations I knew. It appeared barely visible off to one side in the viewport. Dad had taught

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me some of the star patterns which he called asterisms so that I could recognize various parts of the sky.

“Well, the people on Earth see it in front of Orion but remember, we’re not on Earth. We’re looking at it from a different angle.” This is one of those answers which dads give, secure in the knowledge that they have imparted wisdom to their children. Unfortunately, celestial dynamics is not understandable to most five year olds.

One of Dad’s friends suddenly pointed out something and said, “There it is! The blue one! There must not be any clouds on the sunlit side.” He poked me and said, “You see it, Patrick?”

I looked where he pointed and saw the bluest star I’d ever seen. It didn’t seem as bright as several of the other stars in the sky. I asked “That’s it? That’s the whole Earth?”

Chuckles came from the other men. Dad said, “It’s pretty far away.” I looked at it, trying to imagine Bobby and the town that we lived in and Grampa’s house and the school all squashed into that little dot. I tried as hard as I could to remember that little blue point, to burn it into my memory when the door opened and the Captain floated in. He looked sort of like Grampa but he wouldn’t let you fool around and run and make noise as much.

He said hello to my dad and asked, “Letting the boy get a last look?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, good. He’s probably the only one in this room who has even a chance of returning to Earth. I also applaud your keeping him up late. The halls and corridors should be more, ah, peaceful without the ‘pentaterror’ about.” The men chuckled. I knew that they often referred to me by that name. When I turned six I became ‘hexaterror’.

While they talked with the Captain, I twisted in my father’s arms and looked once again at the small blue dot which represented Earth. I concentrated on it as hard as I could and then suddenly the Sun appeared over the edge of Uranus and flooded the compartment with light. I knew, somehow, that I became the last person on board to see Earth.

School on a starship still smells like a school; spilled milk, crayons and pencil shavings. I believe they install the aroma during construction. After all, the school had just been built and nobody had ever spilled milk or sharpened a pencil in it. That first year on Starship 1, I became a big first grader, about to turn six. No longer did adults treat me like a baby in kindergarten. I had entered the world of hall passes and homework. Throughout my schooling I always viewed homework to be the mark of a poor teacher. If the teacher cannot complete his allotted instructions in the time allowed, why should he make me work the overtime? I also encountered words like responsibility and maturity. Parents and teachers use these words like a magic curse to stop you from being a child. You may resist valiantly but in the end, the curse will succeed.

For those readers who wonder what happened to Cordelia, she occupied her time doing whatever girls do in fourth grade. I never had any interest in what girls fuss around with in fourth through eighth grade so she faded from my life for a period of about four or five years. Oh, she sat across from me at the dinner table, I think. Yes, I definitely remember being scolded for making faces back at her from time to time. Then there were the times when we’d get the giggles at the table. Dad did not appear amused. It usually resulted in no desserts.

In first grade I encountered the Washington brothers. Hector and Jose were twins in the second grade and for the first few weeks I could not tell them apart. If one of them got a small bruise or cut, they would both wear bandages, thereby driving their teachers around the walls. When I finally figured the difference out, I told nobody and thus earned their eternal gratitude. Aside from their mother and, much later in life, their wives, I believe I became the only person

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ever to know the difference. The Washington brothers were neat. They laughed and joked and they had very brown skin, which meant that the dirt didn't show and they didn't have to take baths as often. Lucky guys. They liked me and I liked them. Mom didn't like them because they "weren't our kind of people". They lived way back aft of the Hydroponics Section volume. The people there laughed more and loud music always sounded in the corridors. It seemed like a neat place.

The government instruction disks had told us that we should be on the lookout for racists, even in our own families. I asked Mom about this and she said, "Dear, we have nothing against people of other races. The Chens down the hall and Dr. Osley are very good friends of ours. Dr. Osley is even darker than the Washingtons. So you see, darling, we are not racists." She had an argument with Dad that night. She still didn't like the Washington brothers.

The gymnasium represented one of the very best things about school on Starship 1. They put it up on the axis and we learned all kinds of free-fall games. I felt sorry for Bobby, back on Earth, limited to crawling around on the surface. We could fly, we could soar, we could twist and turn in the air and float for hours inside the brightly lit cylinder. In my spare time, I would go to the lounge and float in front of the big viewport, looking at the stars since there were no more planets to be seen. I cherished the time I could spend at the axis and when Cordelia broke her arm in the sixth grade I actually volunteered to visit her in the hospital so I could go to the free fall volume. But I get ahead of myself.

Computers appeared to be the very worst thing about school on Starship 1. Dad said that computers can be used to teach you all kinds of things and he worked often on the terminal in the living room studying things. I'd ask him what he did on the computer and he'd try to explain what he learned. Most of the time I thought I understood at the moment but it didn't make much sense later. The older kids in school called the computers drill instructors. If you talked out of turn or poked somebody, you had to do a hundred math problems on the computer. If you were late with your homework, you had to answer questions on the computer while everybody else went to the axis for free-fall play. I hated the computers. Dad told me not to blame the computer -- Think of it as poor programming and a lazy Education Division.

Life in Starship 1 became more like back on Earth. Instead of Bobby as a friend, I had the Washington brothers. On Saturdays we would go on a quest. You may not think there's much to see on a ship that size but there are kilometers of corridors and hallways. We felt that if the doorway weren't locked or marked with a warning sign, then we could explore. We got to know the whole ship and almost everybody on board. Unfortunately, everybody on board also knew us. In a small community, you can't get away with anything! Somebody will see you and tell your parents. There are large open areas for growing things and there are small compartments tucked in here and there -- boy size compartments. During that first year on Starship 1 we found our secret hideout. The compartment had barely enough headroom to stand in but it had a light and ventilation. By opening a loose inspection plate we found the place. Located under one of the communications compartment ventilation ducts near the Air Handling Section where Hector and Jose's father worked, it evolved into a sanctuary. Our hideout became the one place where we could be ourselves and we would go there for hours. If you sat with your back to the down-axis wall, you could feel the vibrations from the air handling machinery. We stored all of our secret things there. It remains a very special place.

Hector and Jose's father would sometimes take us on special trips through the ship like the place where he worked in the Air Handling Section. There were huge pieces of machinery mounted in the cavernous volume and they made a wonderful noise of power. You had to shout

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just to be heard. I loved those trips. Once he took us to see a friend in the engine spaces of the Propulsion Section. We could look through a shield window at the glow of the fusion motors. I had expected noise like the Air Handling Section but the engine control room remained one of the quietest places on the ship. Best of all, it had a window looking out on the stars. The ship's rotation about its long axis made the stars appear to wheel round and round and through the purple plume of the engines. One bright star could be seen and somebody identified it as the Sun. I looked hard for a small blue dot near it but I couldn't see it. I got kind of sad thinking about Bobby and Grampa and blue sky and all the other things I missed.

Hector and Jose became the best friends that anybody could have. We worked hard at being boys and played in the small patch of woods. We even tried playing baseball but the balls wouldn't go straight. My dad said it had something to do with the spin of the ship. Even though Hector and Jose were in the second grade, they were slightly smaller than I. They also had problems with their homework which I could help them with. It seemed they were always behind in school and they didn't like to hang around with the other second graders for that reason. The other reason surfaced that the only two other second graders were girls. Since there were only about sixty children in grade school, we were split into two classrooms so the first through third grades studied together. The one bad thing about being friends with Hector and Jose occurred when they had to stay with their baby sister, Maria. Babies are messy. They smell and they drool and they cry an awful lot. I still don't understand how that screaming, dirty faced baby ever got to be the voluptuous, raven haired bombshell that she became. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

School dragged on and, in spite of all the teachers could do, I somehow picked up those required pieces of knowledge concerning multiplication tables, the wars of Napoleon and the difference between a phrase and a clause. Hector and Jose failed third grade, while I just barely passed from second into third. We all thought this a great turn of events because we could be together more. Hector and Jose's mother and my mother both thought we exerted bad influences on each other. They did all they could to introduce us to other children. This is not easy when, on the average, there are only five children in the ship of a given age. I had to go to an eighth birthday party for Kevin Josephson without my sidekicks. It became an ordeal. For some reason Mom thought I should be scrubbed and dressed for Church at the party. To make matters worse, girls showed up at the party. The three in my class, whom I had dubbed Fate, Horse and Chubby, all attended. They still giggled but now they did it at the strangest times. Fate remained almost a foot taller than I. Kevin didn't like the present my mom had selected. Somebody threw a punch. The girls screamed, although I don't know why. Nobody threatened them at the time. I collected another black eye and Kevin got a tooth loosened early. We had established a pattern in our relationship.

Although it may seem as if I am racing through this description of my childhood, realize that it contains almost all of my memories. It's not that I'm forgetful of events almost a century in the past, it's just that there are few really significant events in my early life. I led a rather pleasant childhood, filled with warm companionship of my two best friends and the steady support of my family. My understanding, if slightly misinformed (my opinion at the time) father appeared periodically. There were picnics in the little artificial woods near the Hydroponics Section volume and birthdays and holiday presents. It's just that none of these items stands out as really significant. Lest you think that life contained only roses, I remember having the drudgery of homework hanging over my head and I remember sitting in a corner all afternoon for some truly terrible breach of the rules until my father got home. Space suit drills happened often -- boring, tedious and generally not fun at all. They'd ring a bell at just any old time and you'd

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have to suit up right away and stay that way for hours. I remember sitting in bed with a cold, being fed by my mother and feeling more miserable than I had ever felt in my life.

As a child growing up on a starship I remained unaware that I had attained celebrity status back on Earth. Many people followed our lives and progress, much as they followed the soap operas on the video. I simply played at being a kid, doing what a kid knows best. Psychologists have tried for years to analyze the well kept records of the sixty odd children who started that trip. We are probably the best documented people ever, with complete records of everything we ever ate or said or did or didn't do. Want to know how I did in my geography lessons on 10 November, 2215? Check the computer, it's all recorded. Aside; I just checked. They skipped geography one day per week for music appreciation. It is recorded that I had an excellent, if not innate sense of rhythm, could read music moderately well but had no feeling for the dynamics of harmony. The computer recommended that I be directed more toward brass and away from keyboard instruments. A rather confusing and extensive graphical analysis of my voice control appears to state that I couldn't carry a tune in a bucket with a lid on it. And that's for just one thirty minute lesson out of a whole school day which is summarized in only ten and a half pages of text! The next day has a similar analysis but it's almost thirty pages since it includes my group dynamics interactions and participation in a spelling bee (I missed the word speleological). In spite of massive analysis of the data, the psychologists couldn't find any significant differences between us and a control group of similar kids growing up on Earth. The conclusion is that kids pretty much spend their time being kids and, given time, they grow up.

Age eleven is one of those critical times in development. To me it became a major trauma and uncertainty. On the other hand, that's no big deal because to every kid it's a major trauma. Kids in space and kids on the planets seem to all go through it at about the same age, give or take a couple of years. We all seem to survive it somehow, at least I've never heard of anybody succumbing to terminal puberty. It all started back at age eight at Kevin's birthday party when I realized that Horse (so called because of an ever-present pony tail and henceforth referred to as Rosanne) really didn't have the face of a horse. By age eleven, Rosanne had the face of a cherub topped with golden bangs. She appeared nearly cute. Rosanne forms the basis of my only regret in childhood. There she sat right in front of me with that long, blonde pony tail hanging down over the front of my desk. I had a jar of school glue (you know, the stuff that doesn't stick too well) and many times I had the tip of that pony tail poised over the open jar, ready to dip it. I never had the guts to do it and that I regret that failure to this very day. Fate (hereafter referred to as Mary) appeared still one foot taller than I, and she remains so to this day. Mary showed all angles and elbows. Later, we would refer to her figure as slinky. At the time she appeared skinny and awkward. During space suit drills, everybody looks the same (kid in a snow suit effect) but we could always pick out Mary, the tall stick figure even in a bulky pressure suit. Chubby (hereafter referred to as Candy) had yet to lose her baby fat. For a good reason, she does not figure prominently in my memories.

At age eleven, males still openly consider girls "icky". When anybody of the female gender passed, we all said "Yecch" or perhaps accomplished some endearing thing like pick our noses or maybe even, if the occasion called for it, knock her books out of her hand or trip her if we weren't in zero g. If we were, we'd grab her elbow and give her a spin. If we were walking past her, perhaps we'd reach out and flick off her terminal. None of us had realized that we had somehow stopped being indifferent to them. They had permanently infiltrated our lives, even if in an adversarial way and life would never be the same.

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Just after turning twelve, the watershed event occurred. We were in the 0.4 g level where you have to walk with that slow, rolling gait. Rosanne sauntered past, swaying her hips sensually while showing the first nuances of a feminine figure and all three of us failed to utter one derogatory word. She grinned in full knowledge of the significance of the event. The three of us just stood there with a collective IQ of about seven.

The all-knowing computer, realizing the state of our development, programmed a course of study on sexuality and human development. Now, I'd hung around a little with Hector and Jose near some of the older guys in the maintenance volume and I'd picked up a sufficient amount of misinformation to make me think I didn't need the embarrassment of having to participate in group discussions with the class on this particular subject. The three girls and Kevin could, for some reason, talk about their bodies without acquiring a dry mouth. The Washington brothers and I were incapable of that feat.

Nature is particularly hard on males at this age. Just at the point when they desperately wish to make a good impression on the female of the species, they develop acne. Their voices tend to squeak and change when under stress, such as when they are trying to talk to a female. Nature then makes them grow in short bursts, adding sudden inches to their limbs and causing them to acquire clumsiness not seen since they initially learned to walk. Nature then turns on glands which would drive a bull ox insane, while society expects our victim to "behave like a young gentleman".

At about this time it finally sank into my thick skull that one of our three classmates, formerly tagged as Fate, Horse and Chubby, would actually bear my children. I didn't know the first thing about having children! Well, thanks to our education computer, I did know the first thing about having children. Rosanne appeared the obvious choice but she clearly preferred the evil Kevin Josephson, scourge of my childhood. That left skinny Mary, the girl I couldn't look in the eye without standing on a box and chubby Candy, who obviously had her eye on me. I spent the following year alternately running from Candy and feeling miserable. I even tried sounding out a distant relation, my sister Cordelia, on why women seemed so baffling. Cordelia sat in her room, a volume usually off limits to me, and lounged like a queen amidst her collection of stuffed animals. She had, at some time, taken on the name of Corky and had become disgustingly cute. There were four boys and two girls in her class and the other girl had the personality of a wounded viper. Corky enjoyed the time of her life, oblivious to any suffering on the part of the male gender. I berated her for failing in her duties toward her younger sibling and told her she seemed as useless as having no sister at all. Her response; "Hey, I didn't ask to be a big sister. Don't make fun of me for it." I later turned to my two sidekicks for advice and they just sort of stood there, grinning at me, looking for my usual leadership to emerge.

Then Dad gave me a very long speech which started with "Son, when I was your age..." and ended with "... and I'm glad we had this little talk." I don't remember anything in between. Apparently it didn't seem relevant at the moment. I spent a lot of time alone or with the Washington brothers in the observation lounge, musing on how miserable I felt. Rosanne fairly gushed over Kevin and Candy followed me everywhere like a lost puppy.

Did I tell you that in spite of minor miseries, I look back on this time in my life as a golden age, filled with hope and inspiration? I had no responsibilities other than a few paltry homework assignments. I had friends and acquaintances who looked up to me and I had the respect of the community. Everybody said I showed promise and that is all you need to be admitted to the adult world of your parents. Occasionally I obtained permission to stay up later and go to grown-up events. My dad's friends started giving me advice on career opportunities.

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Life felt beautiful -- except when Rosanne floated by on the arm of the evil Kevin. Then life became a disaster.

In January of 2216 we had the biggest community celebration of all when we reached a distance of one tenth light year from Earth. The celebration lasted two days and we counted down the seconds until we arrived at the magic distance. For the first time I went to a party with girls and looked forward to it. I'll always remember the preparations for weeks in advance, the plans and decorating work details, the pageants staged by all the kids in the school. It remains, perhaps, the most joyous holiday of my youth.

School had become more interesting. There were actually some things about mathematics which could absorb my interest for hours at a time. There were also areas of general science like the computers which somehow captured my imagination and made me stop thinking of the unreachable Rosanne for extended periods. We also had to participate in joint projects and Mary seemed to always be my lab partner. I began to give her the grudging respect that she deserved as the class brain, although in science I just about approached her ability.

We were working on a joint science project in my apartment when the meteor struck. It happened on March 15, 2217. Anybody on board can tell you exactly what he did when pressure went to vacuum in nearly a fifth of the ship. Mary and I studied at the terminal getting some data ready for reduction when that awful boom sounded and we felt the shudder in the deck plates. I'd never experienced the ship shake before and it startled me. Almost immediately, the lights failed and the suit drill bell started clanging. The emergency lights came on and in the dimness I made my way to the suit locker by the door. Mary remained frozen by the console and I didn't notice until I'd gotten halfway into mine that she just stood there. "Come on, Mary. Get into the spare! We've done this a hundred times."

"I can't"

It didn't strike home until seconds later that she sat paralyzed with fear. I had everything on but my helmet when I realized that she wouldn't move unless I moved her. They'd told us that some people act that way in an emergency. I said, "Snap out of it, Mary, Get into the spare suit." I used a voice I'd never heard from my own mouth when I bellowed "NOW!" That seemed to snap her out of it. I pulled my own helmet out and held it in my hand as she came toward the suit locker and dragged out one of the larger spare suits, standard issue for apartments. She whimpered something and I had to ask her to repeat it.

"It won't fit. I'm too tall. There are only three suits on the ship which will fit me. One's at my apartment. The other's at school and the third is way up on the axis, aft of Hydroponics."

"What?" I bellowed. "You mean to say that there's no way you can just climb into any old spare suit?"

"I've been too tall for the last year. It's something I live with; always knowing which of the three is closest."

"Damn!" That's the first time I'd used profanity in front of a woman but it seemed to fit. I grabbed my helmet, finished sealing the torso zipper on my own suit and headed for the door, leaving my visor open. I took her hand and dragged her with me. "Which suit is closest?"

She seemed to come to life and said "Ah, axis. Up stairwell 12 to level 6, aft to frame 450, up to level 13, spinwise to the lockers." She followed my lead to the door. It seemed hard to open and I checked the lock. I thought that the frame might be twisted slightly so I gave it a yank. There came a huge ear-popping whoosh of air as the apartment emptied itself into the partial vacuum of the corridor. I let the door slam shut and swallowed hard to clear my ears. Mary leaned against the wall and then slid down to sit on the deck plates. I stood in front of her

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with my helmet in my hand, unable to say anything. She sobbed once, then looked up at me with tear streaked cheeks and said, "Put your helmet on, you big, dumb fool or you'll die too." She smiled in a funny sort of way and sniffed.

I knelt and set my helmet on the floor. "Oh, Mary, I don't know what to say. Isn't there anything I can do?"

She wiped her nose and said, "Put your helmet on. I don't want to be responsible for your death too." Her voice sounded small and squeaky as she said, "I wish I had some last words to say, something everybody would remember me by. Can't think of a damn thing to say." She paused and wiped her nose. Then she reached out and grabbed the bulky suit, pulling me to her and said, "Oh, Patrick, I don't want to die!"

I turned and sat beside her, holding her as she cried. Her head rested on the metal neck ring of my suit and the top of her dark hair rested on my cheek. She racked with sobs as I just held her quietly. I listened and, for the first time in many years, I could not hear the gentle susurrant of the air handling vents. That scared me. I'd lived with that sound for most of my life and had hardly noticed it. The silence felt devastating. I listened as hard as I could for any sounds, perhaps noises made by other survivors. We had no idea of the extent of the damage or what other survivors might be going through. Then I thought of the terminal. I could ask for help and find out others' status. Gently, I lifted Mary's head and crawled to the terminal. It appeared dead. The audio hand set remained dead, too. I crawled back to the suit locker and got out the spare air tanks, arraying them on the floor. Corky's suit and Mom's and dad's and the other spare hung neatly. I wondered where the rest of my family had been caught by the incident and if they had found spare suits. Then I sat back down and held Mary as she resumed her position, leaning on me and sobbing quietly. At one point she lifted her head and asked me to put on my helmet. I told her I would, later, if I needed it.

I checked my watch in the dim light and surveyed the situation. My ears hadn't popped since the initial partial decompression so I concluded that we weren't continually losing air. I still couldn't hear any sounds other than our own breathing and an occasional sob from Mary. Even through the bulky sleeves and gloves of the suit, I could feel that her breathing had returned to normal. Folded against me, she didn't seem so much all angles and bones. She felt soft and fragrant and I, like a fool, had ignored her for years.

Suit drill requires that you check the oxygen level at regular intervals. I grabbed my helmet, activated the power and peered in through the neck to read off the pressure and composition projected on the faceplate display. Still within limits but the air in the apartment would soon become stale. I did a laborious mental calculation, estimating the volume and calculating oxygen levels. If we stayed calm, we'd have about six hours. Add the tanks from the unused suits and we'd have maybe twelve at the outside. I did more mental calculations about how bad I'd let the air get before I put on my helmet. The thought of living in my suit while watching Mary die slowly seemed a horror, worse than my most terrifying nightmare. I tried not to think of it but my mind drew me back to the thought again and again. Soon we'd reach a threshold level of low oxygen partial pressure at which I knew I'd have to make a decision. It's the number which we'd all memorized during suit drill. No doubt Mary thought of it too. She hadn't asked me to put on my helmet again and I realized she needed me close right now, not behind a faceplate.

Check the oxygen again, check the clock. I found that it had been nearly a whole hour since the pressure had been disrupted. In the dim light of the emergency lamps I couldn't tell if Mary had fallen asleep. Sleep is the usual method of death in a slowly decreasing pressure

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situation. Suddenly I remembered that the emergency lamps were good for only about four hours. I roused Mary and went to get the lamp from its clip on the wall. I brought it back and snapped the switch off as Mary once again cuddled up to me. She had stopped crying but she remained strangely silent, not her usual outgoing bubbly self. I guess we all deserve to be a bit moody at death's door. In the silence, Mary said, "Patrick?"

"Yes?"

"I don't want to die like this."

"I don't want to die either. We'll get out of this. Don't worry, we've got maybe ten or eleven hours of air. They'll find us."

"Patrick, what if we're the only people left alive? What if everybody on the ship is dead? What will we do?" That thought had crossed my mind earlier and the idea of a ghost ship, sailing right through the Centauri star system became abhorrent. What a terrible waste of people and ideas! Man would probably wait another century before he ventured out of his solar system again. Mary stirred and said, "Patrick, I don't want to die like this. I want to have babies and live -- live like an adult. I want to experience all the things I've been waiting for. It's not fair!"

I remembered something my father said, long before and told her, "Mary, life is not fair. The most I can promise is that it will be interesting."

"Yeah, like the old Chinese curse; May you live in interesting times!"

I turned on the light and checked my watch. It had been a whole three minutes since I last checked it. I said, "Mary, I'm sorry that this happened."

"It's not your fault." I thought about ways to get Mary into a spare pressure suit. My mind dwelt on a design for an extension belt which elongated the torso at the waist seal. Then some extension cuffs which went between the sleeves and the gloves. It seemed very simple but it required a pressure suit shop and machining to make the adjustments. If only I'd known of her problem, I'd have designed the parts necessary to make any spare suit fit her. In my mind, it became my fault. My fault for not realizing that she needed a special suit. My fault for not mentioning a quick and easy solution. She could have carried the belt and the cuffs with her wherever she went. It would take her a little longer for suit drill but she'd have been saved. It became my fault that she'd die.

After a while I turned on the light, checked oxygen levels and my watch. It had been an hour and twenty minutes since we lost pressure. We sat in the darkness, not saying anything. I guess we didn't have much to say.

After five hours in the darkness, the oxygen levels approached the danger point. I started letting a little of the oxygen out of the spare suit bottles. Mary said, "Patrick, don't do that. Save the suit tanks for yourself." I tried to think of some brave answer, something to the effect that either we both survived or we'd both die. Nothing sounded good so I didn't answer. I'd just count slowly to a thousand, turn on the light, check the levels, maybe bleed a little oxygen into the air, check the time, turn off the light and start counting again.

Nine hours later my dad walked in and nearly tripped over us. He still wore his suit but he carried his helmet. He looked terrible. "Mary, why don't you have your suit on?" he asked. He stumbled over one of the suit tanks and staggered to the couch.

"I -- I can't wear one. Not unless it's specially modified."

Dad sat up and stared at her. I could feel the fresh breeze from the corridor, filled with more oxygen than I'd experienced for the past few hours. He said, "You mean, there's no way you could get into one?"

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“Not without major surgery on either the suit or me.” She looked at me and said, “Patrick saved my life. He bled air from the spare suit tanks so we both could breathe. She looked at me with the most wonderful look I’d ever seen.”

My father gazed at me with a considerably different look than he usually reserved for his children. He said, “Son, you’re either the biggest fool I ever raised or the greatest hero I’ve ever seen. No, let me take that back. There are many heroes tonight. I’ve seen things in the past few hours that I’ll never forget.”

“What happened, dad?”

“Nearly as we can tell, we hit a meteor, a rock. There aren’t supposed to be such things out here but at our speed, even a pebble can cause a lot of damage. It holed the ship in the nose, near the observation lounge. Blasted a crater you could drive a truck through. Son, a lot of people have died. Maybe fifty. There are still some missing.” He paused and then said softly, “We don’t know where your sister is. There are still some volumes cut off and we know there are survivors but we don’t know how many.

“Let me tell you, son, it’s bad -- real bad. The Hydroponics Section volume lost most of its pressure. We won’t starve -- we’ve got plenty of reserve food -- but many of the plants are dying and they’re our oxygen supply. The Astrogation Section volume is wrecked and the school is in vacuum. Yes, I know Cordelia should have been at a dance there tonight but it had broken up and most of the kids had left. Just once, I hope she disobeyed me -- as she often does -- and went to one of the restaurants with that boyfriend of hers. The restaurants are on the safe side of the ship.” He sighed and lay back on the couch.

What about Mom, “ I asked.

“She’s in the hospital -- working there, that is. She’s being a saint and when she gets home she’ll need some help and attention. I’ve been checking out the damaged volumes. Roger Osley died in Astrogation when it hit. Some others didn’t make it either.”

I knew that Dr. Osley and dad enjoyed each other’s company as best friends. I didn’t know what to say so I just got up and sat beside him. He held his face in his hands and for the first time in my life I realized that he didn’t carry the appearance of the invincible tower of strength I’d always imagined him to be. Now he slumped tiredly on the couch, looking like other men. But he still seemed in my mind to be better than most men.

Mary walked up and asked, “Mr. White, what about my folks?”

“I don’t know, Mary. You live near the Computer Division volume, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir. Is that volume all right?”

“I think so, at least the computer volume itself didn’t suffer any damage. As soon as they get the terminals going again, we’ll check.” He looked up and assumed his confident face again. “I think it’ll be all right, Mary. For now, however, why don’t you stay right here? I’ve got to go back and report on the survivors in this volume. Then I think I ought to speak to Denise Osley. Don’t know what I can say to her. She just learned that they are expecting.”

Mary sat beside him and said, “Oh, No! Is there anything I can do?”

“Not that I can think of. Yes, there is. When my wife comes back, she’ll be tired and need some food. Clean this place up, make it look as normal as possible. Then make her some tea, feed her and put her to bed. She’s been through an awful lot tonight. I’ve got to be going. You kids -- you two stay here and wait.” He moved slowly and stiffly as he got up and walked out the door.

We put the suits away and stacked the used oxygen bottles by the door. I clamped the emergency light back in its recharger when the lights came on. We tried the terminal again and it

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remained dead. With nothing to do, Mary sat on the couch, thinking. Finally, she said, “Patrick, you saved my life tonight. If there’s anything you want -- and I mean anything -- anything at all. Just ask me and I’ll do it.”

I knew what she meant and my hormones started to take over but it appeared neither the time nor the place. I stood across the room and said, “Mary, you don’t have to...”

“Patrick, anything -- any time and any place, for the rest of my life. All you have to do is ask and if it’s within my power, I’ll do it.” She smiled at me and I guess I sort of smiled back. Then she started giggling. I asked her why she laughed and she replied, “I don’t know, I guess it’s just the release of the tension.” Then suddenly she broke into sobs again and I found myself holding her, just as I’d held her throughout the long night.

When I looked up, Mrs. Osley stood in the open doorway. She asked, “Is there anything I can do to help?”

I got up slowly, releasing Mary and said as I walked toward her, “Did they tell you ...”

“I know about Roger. Right now I need to help somebody else. I’ll think about my own problems later.” She helped me get Mary put to bed in Cordelia’s room. Mary went right to sleep. We went back out into the living area and I put on some water for tea. Mrs. Osley said, “It’s been a bad night.”

I asked, “What happened? Dad said we hit a meteor or something.”

“I guess so. Your father said a lot of people died. Maybe fifty or so. I keep thinking about the ship and our mission. We’re supposed to populate a world. We can’t do that if the gene pool is too small. We were just barely marginal before. I hope we can still continue onward. You know, there were a lot of people back on Earth who said we’d never make it. We overcame a lot of opposition to spending the money and we almost didn’t launch a couple of times. I know there will be those who will want to turn back now but I don’t want to see that happen.”

“But we’re not even halfway there”, I protested.

“True, but by the time we slowed down to turn back we’d be about a third of the way there, in years, that is. Remember that we don’t have any handy planets out here that we can whip around to slow or reverse our velocity. By the time we got back to Earth, we’d have spent two thirds of the time it would have taken us to get to Centaurus. Patrick, we reached the practical point of no return about a year ago. It’s just that nobody noticed. Roger knew, of course. As chief astrogator, he calculated the point. I guess that position now falls on your father.” She paused and then put her face in her hands. “Oh, God, I want Roger’s dream to succeed. If only for his children. I never particularly wanted to go to the stars. I just wanted to be with him and if he wanted the stars, then I followed him. I’d have followed him to the ends of the Universe. I know that sounds corny to you, Patrick but I would have -- followed him anywhere.” She sobbed and cried into her hands. I don’t know why, but I just walked over and held her. I learned that sometimes, the most masculine thing you can do is provide a dry shoulder and a gentle stroke of a woman’s hair. It doesn’t matter that you don’t completely understand. What matters is that the lady thinks you understand.

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