

Safe at any Speed



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In the two hundred years between Beowulf Shaeffer and Louis Wu, little had changed on the surface. Known Space was somewhat larger. Most ships used a reactionless drive, the "thruster." The birthright lotteries had been in use on Earth almost since Shaeffer's time.

It was the birthright lotteries, which made being born a matter of sheer luck, that eventually created the Teela Brown gene. Teela Brown's story is chronicled

in Ringworld. There were other teelas on Earth, and their effect was catastrophic, at least for a writer. Stories about infinitely lucky people tend to be dull.

One tale survives from the golden age that followed.

LN -----

But how, you ask, could a car have managed to fail me?

Already I can see the terror in your eyes at the thought that your car, too, might fail. Here you are with an indefinite lifespan, a potentially immortal being,

taking every possible precaution against the abrupt termination of your godhead; and all for nothing. The disruptor field in your kitchen dispose-all could suddenly expand to engulf you. Your transfer booth could make you disappear at the transmitter and forget to deliver you at the receiver. A slidewalk could accelerate to one hundred miles per hour, then slew sideways to throw you against a building. Every boosterspice plant in the Thousand Worlds could die overnight, leaving you to grow old and gray and wrinkled and arthritic. No, it never happened in human history; but if a man can't trust his car, fa' Pete's sake, what can he trust?

Rest assured, reader, it wasn't that bad.

For one thing, it all happened on Margrave, a world in the first stages of colonization. I was twenty minutes out of Triangle Lake on my way to the Wiggly River logging region, flying at an altitude of a thousand feet. for several days the logging machines had been cutting trees which were too young, and a mechanic was needed to alter a few settings in the boss brain. I was cruising along on autopilot, playing double-deck complex solitaire in the back seat, with the camera going so that just in case I won one I'd have a film to back up my bragging.

Then a roc swooped down on me,

wrapped ten huge talons around my car, and swallowed it.

Right away you see that it couldn't happen anywhere but Margrave. In the first place, I wouldn't have been using a car for a two-hour trip on any civilized world. I'd have taken a transfer booth. In the second place, where else can you find rocs?

Anyway, this big damn bird caught me and ate me, and everything went dark. The car flew blithely on, ignoring the roc, but the ride became turbulent as the roc tried to fly away and couldn't. I heard grinding sounds from outside. I tried my radio and got nothing. Either it

couldn't reach through all that meat around me, or the trip through the bird's gullet had brushed away my antennas.

There didn't seem to be anything else I could do. I turned on the cabin lights and went on with the game. The grinding noises continued, and now I could see what was causing them. At some time the roc had swallowed several boulders, for the same reason a chicken swallows grit: to help digestion. The rocks were rubbing against the car under peristalsis, trying to break it down into smaller pieces for the murky digestive juices to work on.

I wondered how smart the boss brain was. When it saw a roc glide in for a

landing at the logging camp, and when it realized that the bird was incapable of leaving no matter how it shrieked and flapped its wings, would the master computer draw the correct conclusion? Would it realize the bird had swallowed a car? I was afraid not. If the boss brain were that smart it would have been in business for itself.

I never found out. All of a sudden my seat cocoon wrapped itself around me like an overprotective mother, and there was a meaty three-hundred-mile-per-hour Smack!

The cocoon unwrapped itself. My cabin lights still showed red-lit fluid around

me, but it was getting redder. The boulders had stopped rolling around. My cards were all over the cabin, like a snowstorm.

Obviously I'd forgotten one teensy little mountain when I programmed the autopilot. The roc had been blocking the radar and sonar, with predictable results. A little experimenting showed that my drive had failed under the impact, my radio still wouldn't work, and my emergency flares refused to try to fire through a roc's belly.

There was no way to get out, not without opening my door to a flood of digestive juices. I could have done that if I'd had a vac suit, but how was I to know I'd need

one on a two-hour car trip?

There was only one thing to do.

I collected my cards, shuffled, and started a new game.

It was half a year before the roc's corpus decomposed enough to let me out. In that time I won five games of double complex solitaire. I've only got films for four; the camera ran out. I'm happy to say that the emergency food-maker worked beautifully if a little monotonously, the air-maker never failed, and the clock TV kept perfect time as a clock. As a TV it showed only technicolor ripples of static. The washroom went out along about August, but I got it fixed without

much trouble. At 2:00 P.M. on October 24 I forced the door open, hacked my way through the mummified skin and flesh between a couple of roc ribs, and took a deep breath of real air. It smelled of roc. I'd left the cabin door open, and I could hear the airmaker whine crazily as it tried to absorb the smell.

I fired off a few flares, and fifteen minutes later a car dropped to take me home. They say I was the hairiest human being they'd ever seen. I've since asked Mr. Dickson, the president of General Transportation, why he didn't include a depil tube in the emergency stores.

"A castaway is supposed to look like a castaway," he tells me.

"If you're wearing a year's growth of hair, your rescuer will know immediately that you've been lost for some time and will take the appropriate steps."

General Transportation has paid me a more than adequate sum in a compensation for the fact that my car was unable to handle a roc. (I've heard that they're changing the guarantees for next year's model.) They've promised me an equal sum for writing this article. It seems there are strange and possibly damaging rumors going around concerning my delayed arrival at Wiggly River.

Rest assured, reader. I not only lived through the accident without harm, but came out of it with a substantial profit. Your car is perfectly safe, provided it was built later than 3100 A.D.