



The Impossible Voyage Home

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Published: 1954

Categorie(s): Fiction, Science Fiction, Short Stories

Source: <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/32805>

About Wallace:

F. L. Wallace, sometimes credited as Floyd Wallace, was a noted science fiction and mystery writer. He was born in Rock Island, Illinois, in 1915, and died in Tustin, California, in 2004. Wallace spent most of his life in California as a writer and mechanical engineer after attending the University of Iowa. His first published story, "Hideaway," appeared in the magazine *Astounding*. *Galaxy Science Fiction* and other science fiction magazines published subsequent stories of his including "Delay in Transit," "Bolden's Pets," and "Tangle Hold." His mystery works include "Driving Lesson," a second-prize winner in the twelfth annual short story contest held by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. His novel, *Address: Centauri*, was published by Gnome Press in 1955. His works have been translated into numerous languages and his stories are available today around the world in anthologies.

Also available on Feedbooks for Wallace:

- *Accidental Flight* (1952)
- *Student Body* (1953)
- *Bolden's Pets* (1955)
- *Forget Me Nearly* (1954)
- *Tangle Hold* (1953)

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I

"Space life expectancy has been increased to twenty-five months and six days," said Marlowe, the training director. "That's a gain of a full month."

Millions of miles from Earth, Ethan also looked discontentedly proud. "A mighty healthy-looking boy," he declared.

Demarest bent a paperweight ship until it snapped. "It's something. You're gaining on the heredity block. What's the chief factor?"

"Anti-radiation clothing. We just can't make them effective enough."

Across space, on distant Mars, Amantha reached for the picture. "How can you tell he ain't sickly? You can't see without glasses."

Ethan reared up. "Jimmy's boy, ain't he? Our kids were always healthy, 'specially the youngest. Stands to reason their kids will be better."

"Now you're thinking with your forgettery. They were all sick, one time or another. It was me who took care of them, though. You always could find ways of getting out of it." Amantha touched the chair switch.

The planets whirled around the Sun. Earth crept ahead of Mars, Venus gained on Earth. The flow of ships slackened or spurted forth anew, according to what destination could be reached at the moment:

"A month helps," said Demarest. "But where does it end? You can't enclose a man completely, and even if you do, there still is the air he breathes and food he eats. Radiation in space contaminates everything the body needs. And part of the radioactivity finds its way to the reproductive system."

Marlowe didn't need to glance at the charts; the curve *was* beginning to flatten. Mathematically, it was determinable when it wouldn't rise at all. According to analysis, Man someday might be able to endure the radiation encountered in space as long as three years, if exposure times were spaced at intervals.

But that was in the future.

"There's a lot you could do," he told Demarest. "Shield the atomics."

"Working on it," commented Demarest. "But every ounce we add cuts down on the payload. The best way is to get the ship from one place to another faster. It's time in space that hurts. Less exposure time, more trips before the crew has to retire. It adds up to the same thing."

On Mars, Amantha fondled the picture. "Pretty. But it ain't real." She laid it aside.

Ethan squinted at it. "I could make you think it was. Get it enlarged, solidified. Have them make it soft, big as a baby. You could hold it in your lap."

"Outgrew playthings years ago." Amantha adjusted the chair switch, but the rocking motion was no comfort.

Ethan turned the picture over, face down. "Nope. Hate to back you up, 'Mantha, but it ain't the same. There's nothing like a baby, wettin' and squalin' and smilin', stubborn when it oughtn't to be and sweet and gentle when you don't expect it. Robo-dolls don't fool anybody who's ever held the real thing."

In the interval, Earth had drawn ahead. The gap between the two planets was widening.

"That's another fallacy," objected the training director. "The body can stand just so much acceleration. We're near the limit. What good are faster ships?"

"That's your problem," said Demarest. "Get me tougher crewmen. Young, afraid of nothing, able to take it."

It always ended here—younger, tougher, the finest the race produced—and still not good enough. And after years of training, they had twenty-five months to function as spacemen. It was a precious thing, flight time, and each trip was as short as science could make it. Conjunction was the magic moment for those who went between the planets.

It was the heredity block that kept Man squeezed, confined to Earth, Mars and Venus, preventing him from ranging farther. The heredity block was a racial quantity, the germ plasm, but not just that. Crew and passengers were protected as much as possible from radiation encountered in space and that which originated in the ship's drive. The protection wasn't good enough. Prolonged exposure had the usual effects, sterilization or the production of deformed mutations.

Man was the product of evolution on a planet. He didn't step out into space without payment.

The radiation that damaged genes and chromosomes and tinier divisions also struck nerve cells. Any atom might be hit, blazing, into fission and decaying into other elements. The process was complicated. The results were not: the nerve was directly stimulated, producing aural and visual hallucinations.

Normally, the hallucination was blanked out. But as the level of body radioactivity increased, so did the strength of the vision. It dominated consciousness. The outside world ceased to have meaning.

The hallucination took only one form, a beautiful woman outside the ship, unclad and beckoning.

It was the image of vanished fertility that appeared once the person was incapable of reproducing *as a human*.

Why this was so hadn't been determined. Psychologists had investigated and learned only that it invariably occurred after too great exposure. There was another thing they learned. No, that had come first. This was the reason they had investigated.

In the Solar System, the greatest single source of radiation, including the hard rays, was the Sun. It was natural that the siren image should seem stronger in that direction, that it should fade or retreat toward its origin. No one had ever returned from compulsive pursuit of the illusionary woman, though in early days radio contact had been made with ships racing toward the Sun.

The heredity block was self-enforcing.

Deviously, the race protected itself, or something higher watched over it to assure *human* continuity. Marlowe wasn't sure which, but it was there.

"I think you're on the wrong track," he said. "Shield the ship completely and it won't matter how long the trip takes. The crew can work in safety."

Demarest grunted. "Some day we'll have an inertia-free drive and it won't matter how much mass we use. It does now. Our designs are a compromise. Both of us have to work with what's possible, not what we dream of. I'll build my ship; you find the right crew to man it."

Marlowe went back to his graphs. Machines could be changed, but the human body clung stubbornly to the old patterns. He couldn't select his crews any younger—but was there perhaps a racial type more resistant to radiation? Where? No place that he knew of. Maybe the biologists could produce one, he thought hopefully, and knew he was fooling himself. Human beings weren't fruit flies; by the time enough generations rolled around for the resistant strain to breed true—and leave a surplus to man the ships—he would be long dead and the problem solved.

The best of humanity would be dead, too, wiped out by sterilization.

Or the Solar System would be peopled by mutant monstrosities.

Far away, and not concerned with the problem, Ethan shrugged resignedly. "Guess we'll have to get used to the idea—we just won't see him till he grows up—if we'll still be around."

"You've got years and years ahead of you, and not worth a thing the whole time!" Amantha snapped.

"Damnation," said Ethan wistfully, "I'd like to dandle him."

"Won't be the same when he grows up and comes here," Amantha conceded. "There I go agreein' with you! What's got into me?"

"Maybe we can get on the next slow ship. They run them once in a while for people with weak hearts." He considered. "Don't know whether Retired Citizens' Home will let us go, though."

"Retired Citizens!" She blew her nose scornfully. "They think we don't know it's just a home for the aged!" She threw away the tissue. "Think they'll let us?"

"It won't be them so much that'll stop us. Our hearts ain't too good and we haven't got much space time to use. We shouldn't have gone to Venus."

"We had to see Edith and Ed and their kids and we had to come back to Mars so we could be near John and Pearl and Ray. Let's not regret what we've done." She picked at the chair arm. "We've been here a long time, ain't we?"

Ethan nodded.

"Maybe they've forgotten we've only got a month left," she said eagerly.

"You sure it's a month?"

"Figure it out. It took longer when we went."

"Then it's no use. A slow ship is all we'd be allowed to take—and we wouldn't be allowed because it'd be more than a month."

"They won't remember every last minute we spent in space."

"They will, too," he stated. "They've got records."

"Maybe they lost them."

"Look, we've got kids and grandchildren here. They come around and see us. Do we have to go to Earth, 'specially when it'd be against the law?"

"That's just it," she argued. "We've seen all our other kids' kids. Ain't we going to see the youngest? How do we know his wife can take care of a baby? I can't sleep nights, thinking of it."

"Try catnaps during the day, like I do."

Amantha touched the button and the automatic chair stopped abruptly. "Are you going to try to get tickets or aren't you?"

"I'll think about it. Go ahead and rock."

"I won't," she said obstinately, "not even if it was the kind of chair you can rock yourself. I thought I married a man who'd make me happy."

"I've always done my best. Go ahead and rock."

"But will you try to get the tickets?"

Ethan nodded resignedly and felt better when the chair began to swing back and forth. There was no living with a woman when she didn't have peace of mind.

Amantha lay in bed, listening. Sometimes her hearing was very good, the way it used to be. Other times, it wasn't worth a thing. The way it came and went reminded her of when she was young and used to wonder why old folks couldn't hear. Now she could often lie next to Ethan and not even notice whether he was snoring. Tonight her hearing was good.

Footsteps came from the hall, creaky noises of someone trying not to make a sound. She'd lain awake many nights, hearing him come home. She knew who it was and for once she didn't mind. The Home for Retired Citizens had rules.

Careful, she thought. There's the bad spot where the floor's thin and bends when you step on it. Then when your foot comes off it, it goes ploinnnnng. They don't build right any more. Skimping and trying to save.

But there wasn't a sound. Ethan avoided it. When she thought of it, she realized he had a suspicious amount of skill—the skill of practice.

Ethan was fumbling at the door and she forgot her irritation. She slipped out of bed and swung the door open. He stumbled in against her. "Mantha, they laughed—"

"Did you have anything to eat?" she broke in.

"Cup of that Mars coffee. But—"

"Don't talk till you get something hot inside. Empty belly, empty head."

"Can't eat stuff that comes out of the wall. I'll wait till breakfast."

She flicked the light on low and punched the selector. She took the glow-plate from under the bed and set it on the table. As the food arrived, she heated it and began adding spices. "There—it ain't real food, but you can pretend."

Ethan pretended and, when the food was gone, wiped his lips and looked at her.

She nodded. "Now you can tell me—but keep your voice low. Don't wake anyone up."

Ethan stretched and creaked. "Went down to the Interplanet office and they wouldn't talk to me. Said there wasn't any ship leaving for the next ten months and they didn't sell tickets in advance. I kept pestering them and they got mad. They looked up our records and said we couldn't go

anytime, except on a fast ship, and, considering our age, it was doubtful they'd let us. Didn't give up, though, and finally they said we might get a release from the man who'd take us. Maybe they wanted to get rid of me. Anyway, they sent me down to talk with one of the pilots."

Amantha approved. Go straight to the man responsible. Persistence could get you there.

"He talked real nice for a while," Ethan continued. "He explained he didn't own the ship and didn't have the say-so who he took. I knew you wanted to go real bad. I offered him the money we'd saved."

"All of it, Ethan?"

"Don't get mad. Figured it was worth it to you."

"Don't believe in paying extra," she mused, "but did you tell him we could borrow some if it wasn't enough?"

"Didn't get a chance. He started laughing, saying didn't I understand he got paid not just for each trip, but for all the years after that, when he was finished and had used up his time and couldn't work at the only thing he knew? Saying that he wouldn't risk that kind of security for any money and I was an idiot for believing he might." Ethan trembled.

"Never mind. He's an old fool."

"He's younger than Jimmy."

"Some people get wisdom when they're young."

Ethan sat morosely in the chair. "If Jimmy hadn't made that last trip, he'd be here and he'd have married a girl here and his kids would be here. We wouldn't have to worry about them."

"I guess so, but he was lucky anyway. They found out he wasn't as strong as he was supposed to be and wouldn't let him come back." She began clearing the dishes. "How'd they know he couldn't come back?"

"They got tests. They give them each trip."

She should have thought of it. They had tests. Because of tests, Jimmy was safe but distant. She sat down.

"Tired." Ethan yawned. "Let's go to bed."

"You go. I'm thinking."

Amantha went on thinking while he undressed and lay down. Sometimes it was difficult—things weren't as clear as they used to be. Tonight, though, she had no trouble managing her mind. A woman who had kids had to know her way around things. Presently, she said, "Tomorrow I'm going to bake."

Ethan stirred. "Won't do no good. Didn't say so, but there was a girl talking to the pilot when I got there. She was crying and begging him to take her to Earth next trip. Said she'd do anything if he would."

"Shame on her!" exclaimed Amantha. "But did it work?"

"She was young and pretty and still he wouldn't pay attention to her," said Ethan. "What chance would you have?"

"I'm going to bake tomorrow. In the morning, we're supposed to go for a walk. We'll take a big basket. Do you remember the old canal nobody goes near any more?"

There was no answer. Ethan was asleep. Now that she'd decided what to do, she lay down beside him.

The sentry huddled in his post. It was insulated and supplied with oxygen, very much like a spacesuit. Though big for a spacesuit, it was a small place to spend hours in without relief. But there were compensations: never anything to do—except as now. He went to the mike.

"Get back," he shouted.

They paid no attention.

Swearing, he shouted again, turning up the volume. Even in the thin air, he had enough sound to blast them off their feet. But they kept on going. He poked the snout of his weapon through the porthole and then withdrew it. Who'd given him those orders anyway? He didn't have to obey them. He clamped on his oxygen helmet and slipped into electric mitts and hurried outside.

"Where do you think you're going?" he demanded, standing in front of them.

"Hello," said Amantha. "Didn't see anyone around."

Damn senior citizens—they never used hearing aids. "You've got to turn around and go back," he said.

"Why?"

He was shivering and didn't see how they could stand it. Thin clothing and obsolete oxygen equipment. Oddly, they could take more than you'd think, though. Used to it, he supposed. "Come on in," he commanded gruffly. He wasn't going to freeze. They followed him into the post. "Didn't you see the signs to keep out?"

"But the ships aren't using the field. What harm are we doing?"

"Orders," he said. There were still a few pilots checking over their ships, making sure everything was in working condition before they were locked up. In a week, all flight personnel would be gone to the settlements, there to await the next round of voyages when Earth came

near. They had it soft, while he, the guard, had to stay in cold discomfort.

"We're going to visit a friend of my son," said Amantha. "They were pilots together. Do you object?"

He didn't, but there were some who would. The order made sense with respect to little boys who would otherwise swarm over the field, falling off ships or getting stuck in rocket tubes.

"What have you got?" he asked, eyeing Amantha's parcel dubiously.

"I baked something." She opened a corner of the package and the smell drifted out. "Made it with Martian fruit. Not much of it around these days."

He sniffed and became hungry. That was queer—he'd eaten before coming on duty.

"Okay," he said. "You can go. Don't get caught or it's my neck." He stood closer to the old man and woman, and the package, too, and pointed out the window. "Act like you're leaving in case anyone's checking up. When you get near the line of ships, duck behind them and walk along until you find the right one. No one will see you except me."

Amantha pinched the package together. "I'd give you some, but I can't cut it before the pilot sees it."

"I guess you can't," said the sentry wistfully. "Maybe he won't eat all of it."

"May he won't. I'll bring you back what's left—if there *is* any left."

Long after they were gone, the sentry stood there, trying to analyze the indefinable odor. He was still standing there when the checkup squad marched in and arrested him for gross dereliction of duty.

"Go away," said the pilot, disappearing from the viewport. Ethan pounded on the hull with a rock. The pilot came back, twisting his face. "Stop it. I'll angle the rocket tubes around and squirt you with them."

Ethan raised the rock.

"Okay," said the pilot. "I'll talk to you, though I know what you want." Sullenly, he made the hatch swing open. He looked down at them. "All right, let's hear it."

"Got a present for you," said Ethan.

"Not allowed to take bribes unless it's money."

"Young man, where are your manners?" snapped Amantha.

"Haven't got any. It's the first thing they train out of you." The pilot started to jerk his head back, saw the rock and decided not to close the

hatch. He glanced at the narrow ladder to the ground. "I'll take your present. Bring it up."

He stopped smirking as Amantha hitched up her skirts and, holding the package in one hand, swung up the ladder. Agile as goats and probably as sensible, he thought. He took hold of her as she neared the top.

"Grandma, you're too old to climb around. You'll break every brittle bone in your body if you fall."

"Ain't so brittle," said Amantha, making way for Ethan who had followed her. "My, it's cold!" She began shivering. "Invite us in to get warm."

"You can't go in. I'm busy. Hey, wait!" The pilot hurried after her into the control compartment.

Amantha was looking around when he arrived. "Cozy but kind of bare," she said. "Why don't you hang up pictures?"

"Most fabulous pictures you'll ever see are right there."

Amantha followed his glance. "Nothing but Mars. I can see that every day." She puzzled over it. "Oh, you're teasing an old woman. I didn't mean what you see out of the port, stars and planets and such. I'd want a picture of an Indian settin' on a horse."

"I'll bet!" muttered the pilot. "Get warm in a hurry. I've got work to do."

"You just go ahead," she said. "We'll set here and toast our toes. We don't aim to interfere."

"I'll stay," said the pilot hastily. "Let's have the present." He'd made a tactical error—he should have ignored the noise that went shimmering through the hull when the old man had pounded with a rock. No, it was nice to think he could have, but impossible. Patience was one of the things the aged did have and the young didn't.

Amantha set the package down. The pilot scrambled ahead of her and got the navigator's instruments off the desk and into the drawer.

She opened and displayed the contents.

"I baked it for you," she said. "It's a cake."

He could see what it was. "Hate cake," he said. "Can't eat it."

"You'll eat this. Canalberry shortcake."

"Canalberry?" he asked, wrinkling his face. He smelled it and changed expressions in the middle of a wrinkle. Resolutely, he turned away from it and saw Ethan clearly, perhaps for the first time. It was the old man who had tried to bribe him a few days ago. They weren't as innocent as they seemed. What were they trying to do?

"Ain't you even going to taste it?" she urged.

He shuddered suspiciously. It smelled good, though he had told the truth about hating the stuff. Under other circumstances, he might have nibbled at a piece for politeness' sake.

"Can't. Doctor's orders."

"Diabetic? Didn't think they let them in space-service," said Amantha. "Funny, it's the same with Ethan. He can't eat sweets, either." She looked at her creation. "Seems a shame to bring it so far to somebody who can't touch it. Do you mind if I cut myself a slice?"

"Go ahead, Grandma."

"Amantha," she corrected him and brought out a knife and two small plates. He wondered if there was any significance. *Two* plates.

She laid a slice on the plate and poked at it with a fork that was also in the package. She put the fork down and picked up the cake.

"It don't taste right unless you eat it the way it was meant to be," she said.

He watched her in anguish. His nose quivered and his stomach rumbled. He shouldn't have let them in.

A crumb fell to the floor and Amantha reached for it. She straightened up, a berry in her hand.

"Canalberries," she said. "They're nearly all gone. Used to be you could hardly go anywhere without stepping in them."

She crushed the berry and the rich aroma swept devastatingly through the air.

"Sure you won't have some?" she asked, slicing the cake and placing it in front of him. When he finished that, he cut another, and another, until the cake was gone.

The pilot settled logily in a chair and dozed off. Amantha and Ethan watched him in silence.

The pilot got up and began to stretch lazily without seeming to notice them. The laziness disappeared and the stretch changed into a jerk that seemed to elongate his body. He sprang out of the compartment and went leaping down the corridor. When he came to the hatch, he didn't hesitate. The ladder was too slow. He jumped.

He landed on the sand, sinking in to his knees. He extricated himself and went bounding over the field.

"Never saw canalberries take so long," muttered Amantha. "Don't know what's wrong. Nothing's as good as it used to be."

She shook off her hat and closed the airlock.

"You don't need those nose plugs any more, Ethan. Come on, let's see if you remember."

Several hours later, she twirled unfamiliar knobs and, by persistence and beginner's luck, managed to get the person she wanted.

"You the commander?" Since he had a harassed look, she assumed he was. "Thought you might be worried about that poor boy."

"Madam, what do you want?" He scowled at the offscreen miscreant who had mistakenly summoned him. "I'm chasing criminals. I haven't got time to chat about old times."

"Don't sass me. I thought you might want to know how to stop that poor boy from running around."

The commander sat down. "What young man?" he asked calculatingly.

"Don't know his name," said Amantha. "He ran out of the ship before we could ask him."

"So *you're* the poisoner," said the commander coldly. "If he dies, neither your age nor your sex will make any difference."

"Just canalberries," Amantha assured him. "Reckon you wouldn't know about them."

"What are you talking about?"

"Canalberries. Used to be lots of them. Males, men and animals, just can't help eating them. Don't bother women or any other kind of females. Biologists used to tell us it was a seed-scattering device. Guess so. Won't hurt him none. Try bicarb and vinegar. It'll fix him up."

"For your sake, I hope it will!" said the commander. "He's in a bad way." He stabbed a pencil at her and his voice became stern. "If you follow directions, I'm sure I can get you off lightly."

"Think we will?" said Amantha.

The commander hurried on. "It's hard to find a ship in space. Stay where you are or, if you can, turn around and come back—*slowly*. We'll send a ship up and transfer a competent pilot to bring you down. Do you hear?"

"Real plain. You got good radios on these ships."

He smothered a growl. "Your lives are in danger. We're not going to chase out and rescue you unless you cooperate." It was an understatement. If they observed radio silence, search ships would never find them. They might not think of it, but he wouldn't bet. They were smart enough to steal the ship.

There was another thing. From what he'd learned from records, they were close to the exposure limit. Any moment now, they might go

berserk, turning their course fatally toward the Sun. He had to be careful what he said.

"We'll get you out of this, but only if you help. I refuse to sacrifice men and waste their flight time, which is more precious than any ship, merely to save two senile incompetents. Is this clear?"

"I suppose," said Amantha. "We've got to go home."

The commander rubbed his hands. They weren't as stubborn as he feared. He'd rescue them.

"Good. I'll have men aloft in a few minutes."

"Guess it was you who didn't hear," she said. "Our home is on Earth."

II

"There's no one here," said the robot blocking the door.

"We'll wait." Amantha tried to go inside. The robot wouldn't move.

It was dark and windy and, from the steps, they could see lights of houses glowing around them. Not many—it was near the edge of the little town. Farther away, over the hill, the ship nestled safely in a valley. No one had seen them land. They were sure of it.

Ethan removed his hat and his bent shoulders straightened. He seemed to grow taller.

"Rain," he said in awe. "Thirty years and yet I haven't forgotten what it's like."

"It's wet, that's what it's like," said Amantha. "Robot, let us in or I'll have Ethan take a wrench to you. He loves to tinker."

"I can't be threatened. My sole concern is the welfare of my charge. Also, I'm too large for any human to hurt me."

"Damnation, I'm soppin'!" complained Ethan. "It's better to remember the rain than to be in it."

"Wait till my son Jimmy gets back. He'll be ravin'. Makin' us stay out here and get soaked."

"Son? Is the Jimmy you refer to Pilot James Huntley?"

"Ex-pilot."

"Correct. But he's not at home. He took his wife to the hospital half an hour ago."

"So soon?" gasped Amantha. "Thought I taught him better than that. Women have got to rest between kids."

"It's not another child," said the robot with disinterest. "It has to do with one of the ill's flesh is heir to and machines are not. Nothing serious."

Ethan fidgeted, turning up his collar. Water began flowing from the eaves. "Stop arguin' and let us in. Jimmy will turn off your juice when he finds you've kept his folks outside."

"Folks? He has none here. A mother and father living happily on Mars. They died quite recently, lost in space and plunging into the Sun."

"Make up your mind," Amantha said peevishly. "We ain't on Mars, we weren't happy and we didn't get lost and plunge into the Sun."

"I merely repeat—in sequence—the information I'm given or overhear. If it's inconsistent, so are humans. I'm used to it."

"Mantha, they think we're dead," said Ethan. He wiped a raindrop away. "Poor Jimmy!"

A thin wail came from a crack in the door. The robot's eyes shone briefly, then dimmed.

"What's that?" asked Amantha. "Sounds like a baby. Thought you said no one was home."

"No responsible adult. Only a child. Because of that, I can admit no one except the parents—or a doctor if I decide one is needed." The robot whirred and drew itself up. "He's absolutely safe. I'm a Sitta."

"You sure are. Now get out of my way before I jab you. The kid's crying."

"He is, but it's no concern of yours. I'm better acquainted with infant behavior than any human can be. The pathetic sob merely means that the child wants attention. I was given no instructions to hold him."

Again the child cried. "Who needs to be told?" demanded Amantha. "Nobody gives grandmothers instructions."

"He's got a grandfather to cuddle him," added Ethan. "How far do you think we came to do it?"

"And he's not cryin' because he wants attention. Something's stickin' him and he's hungry. Don't you think a grandmother would know?"

"There's nothing that can stick him, but if, by accident, something sharp had gotten in his bed and if he were also hungry, he would sound like this." The Sitta hunched down and swiveled its head, giving an imitation. "You see? I do nothing but watch babies. It's built into me."

Inside the house, the child's tone changed, became querulous, listening. Interrogatively, it offered a single yowl.

"My analysis was correct. It wanted attention. The parents left so hurriedly, they forgot to give me permission. When I didn't come to investigate, the child stop—"

The wail burst forth with renewed vigor.

The robot rotated its head and the alert look flashed on and off. It stuttered, "I know w-what I'm doing. But I—I can tell only what has happened to my charge, n-never what *will*!" The Sitta rumbled bewilderedly. "Anticipation is beyond my capacity. The child *is* hurt and hungry. Please come in and help me."

Triumphantly, Amantha followed the robot into the house toward the nursery. She whispered to Ethan, "Sittas ain't smart. I reckon he never heard a bunch of babies together. If one cries, they all do."

The Sitta barred the path. "You seem sincere and are obviously an expert. But before you go in, understand this—attempt no harm to the being in there. I'm linked."

"You'll be unlinked if you don't stop acting balky," warned Amantha. She ducked under his arm and darted toward the crib.

"By linked, I mean that if anything happens that I require aid to handle, an alarm rings in Sittas Circle and help is on the way. Meanwhile, I can put out fires or carry him unharmed through concrete walls."

"Go ahead, run through a wall," invited Amantha abstractly, snatching up the child. "The darling's wet, too. Fetch me a diaper."

The robot fetched at her command. And when the child was quiet, even cooing, but with a sharp undertone of protest, Amantha settled back. "Now we've got to feed him."

"They didn't give me special instructions and I can't originate. If you hadn't come, I'd have had to contact a doctor."

Amantha handed the child to Ethan. "You hold him." She went into the kitchen.

Ethan tossed the child up. "Here we go," he bellowed. "Free fall. Got to start early to make a spaceman out of you." The Sitta stared at them, puzzled, as the infant shrieked with fear or joy. "Now if only Jimmy was here to see us," said Ethan, grinning proudly.

Jimmy didn't come back soon enough. The police arrived first.

Ethan wandered to the window. The ground was far below. He didn't want to think of what was outside the door.

"Don't mind jail myself—been in a few." He looked at Amantha. "Just for raising hell. Never thought I'd be responsible for putting *you* behind bars."

"It wasn't you," said Amantha, her back straightening. "Curious about it myself." Wisps of hair straggled over her face. "I mean why didn't we think of it on Mars? Didn't we know what they'd do?"

"I guess we didn't." Ethan cracked his knuckles contemplatively. "Did it occur to you?"

"No. I can't understand." She frowned, but it didn't help clarify what she was thinking about.

"We're criminals," said Ethan soberly. "Thieves."

"I don't mind for us. Jail's not much worse than the home for Retired Citizens. It's our grandson I'm thinking of."

"Don't worry. They won't do a thing to him." His eyes widened and he wiped off the sweat. "Oh. I see what you mean."

"Jailbirds," said Amantha. "We'll still be in here when he grows up. It's a fine way to help your kin. They'll never trust him with us in his family."

"Jailbirds," repeated Ethan mournfully. By some magic, his face cracked along the wrinkles and broke into a smile. "But once we flew," he whispered to himself.

The door opened and an official of some sort came in. Outside, Ethan caught a brief glimpse of guards.

Marlowe, chief training director of space pilots for Interplanet Transport, Inc., walked in silence across the room and eased tiredly into a chair behind the desk. He'd gotten the news late at night, having been the first one contacted. The ship that had been lost had showed up in the atmosphere. There couldn't be a mistake. No other flight was scheduled for months.

"Follow it," he had ordered and the trackers had kept it on the screen, flashing a message to the police as soon as they located where it landed. It was logical that it should go where it did, but he didn't think that anything about this flight was susceptible to a rational approach.

Marlowe's eyelids felt lined with sand, but that was as nothing compared to his mental irritation. The two oldsters were dead and the ship was vaporized in the Sun. But, of course, it wasn't true and he had to figure out why.

Others would be here to help him unravel the mystery, from Demarest on down. Meanwhile, he was first. There was a lesson to learn if he could figure out what it was. Damn these senile incompetents.

"Ethan and Amantha Huntley?" he asked. They didn't fit in with his preconceived picture.

"You the judge?" said Ethan. "I demand to see a lawyer. We've got our rights."

"Why don't you let our son in?" Amantha protested. "I know he's been dying to see us. You can't keep us locked up like this."

"Please! I've just come from a consultation with your son. You'll see him soon. As for being detained, you've been well treated. Most of the time, doctors have been examining you. Isn't that true?"

"What's that got to do with it?" challenged Ethan. "Never been sick a day in my life. Sure, my back hurts, and now and then my knees swell up. But it's nothing. We didn't ask for a doctor. Got our own on Mars. Young fellow, fifty or sixty."

Facts contradicted each other. They were what Marlowe expected and yet they weren't. It was hard to determine. Records showed that if the old couple were not actually senile incompetents, they were close to it. Now that they'd returned the ship in good condition, legal action against

them would be dangerous. Everyone had grandparents and knew that they were sometimes foolish. It was a spot to get out of as gracefully as the company could.

It was as training director for Interplanet Transport, however, that he was interested in them.

"You were in space for nearly four months," he said. "Few people take that much exposure to radiation at one time. We had to determine the state of your health. The evaluation isn't complete, but I think we can say you're in no immediate danger."

Did they understand? It was doubtful. No one else would have stolen the ship and attempted to bring it to Earth. But, damn it, they had done so, landing the ship on the outskirts of the little town, unobserved in the gathering storm.

The facts were painfully fresh in his mind.

"I'd like to know something of your background," said Marlowe. "What's your experience with spaceships?"

"Went to Venus in one," Ethan answered. "Also took a trip to Mars. Stayed there."

The old man had haunted the control compartment, watching how it was done. Some people did. But that was not a substitute for experience.

"That was long ago and you were a passenger. Anything more recent?"

"Nope. Except for this last trip."

That was what didn't make sense.

"Are you sure? Be honest. Check your memory."

The old man had once piloted jets. But it was not the same.

"No other experience," said Ethan. "Had training, though."

Marlowe knew it. Without training, no one could manage takeoff and landing. Somehow, the official search had failed to uncover this vital information. "Where did you take it?"

"Forget the name. Remember every word of it, though."

Marlowe nodded. It was often the case. Early memories were fresh and clear while later events blew over the enfeebled mind and left no trace. "But you didn't tell me where."

"Don't remember that part of it. It was a mighty good course. Wasn't accepted, even though I passed, after paying for my lessons in advance. They said I was too old."

Air lodged in his throat—Marlowe doubled over. If he'd heard rightly... . Good God, there were angels and correspondence courses that watched over the aged! No—give the credit to angels.

"I realized I wasn't as spry as I used to be," continued Ethan seriously. "Can't shoot off a planet or slam down on one the way your pilots do. We were at the far end of the field, quite a ways off. Everybody was busy with the pilot who was running around. They were trying to help him.

"Guess they didn't see us. They'd have laughed if they did. We went up slow, kind of wobbly. But we got off."

The old man was beaming, proud of it. He didn't know it wasn't skill but the built-in safety factor, all the stabilizing mechanisms coming into play at once. Demarest, the chief of construction, had seen to it that the ships were well designed. Marlowe would have to commend him when he got here.

A thought occurred to the training director. If the stabilizing mechanisms were there, why not use them always? Of course, it wasn't that simple. Interplanetary ship stabilizers weren't effective at high speed.

Another thought crowded in. Why such high speed? That was something over which there was no choice. The protective atmosphere had to be left swiftly. The speed was added to at every opportunity. It was possible to slow down only at the last moment. Otherwise... .

Otherwise what?

There was no escape from the conclusion—otherwise heredity was altered and mutations would result. Marlowe sat back. This was true without exception. It was the biggest factor that controlled the conditions of interplanetary flight. But—

They'd had their children!

Marlowe's pulse increased. As training director, he'd learned not to leap at things that merely looked good. He had to examine them carefully. But—well, it was a new approach, though he couldn't really expect anything from it. There was more to a crew than a pilot, more to space flight than one incredible lucky voyage, for angels took vacations, too.

"You weren't on duty at all times," Marlowe pointed out. "Then there's navigation."

"Don't sleep much," said Ethan. "Catnap once in a while." He thought it over. "When I did sleep, 'Mantha helped out." He looked at her. "I'm not the expert on navigation. You'd better ask her."

"No!" cried Marlowe.

"Why not? Just because I'm a woman?" Her eyes were bright.

"But who taught you navigation?"

Amantha sniffed. "Look here, young man, don't tell me what I can learn." She closed her eyes and imagination carried her back to the ship.

"Lots of dials and gadgets—but I used to have near as many in my kitchen before they said I was too old to cook. Anyway, you don't have to figure it out on paper. If you look at things just right, you sort of know where you are."

Amantha folded her hands. "First, you take a big handful of the Sun's attraction and mix it with a bigger scoop of the gravitation of the planet you happen to be on. For us, that was Mars. Then you add a pinch of acceleration. That's what makes you rise. When you get out a ways, you decrease Mars and add more Earth and another pinch of Sun, stirring it around in your mind each day until it feels just right."

She smiled. "I never did hold with too much measuring."

The muscles in Marlowe's chest felt cramped from holding his breath in. While she spoke, he could almost believe she knew what she was doing, that she had a knack for it. Perhaps she did—brief flashes of clarity swept over her senile, beclouded mind. And the same with the old man. These instances of sanity—and luck—had pulled them through.

The ship was back, unharmed. He shouldn't ask for more. And yet—they had made it to Earth.

The chute in the desk clattered noisily and ejected a packet. Marlowe looked at it—it was for him. The full medical report; it had been slow in coming. But this was a small town. The doctor who had looked them over was good, though. Marlowe made certain of that.

He opened the report and read. When he finished, he knew that though luck and angels had been with them on takeoff and part of the passage—along with dimly remembered fragments of unrelated skills that had somehow coalesced into a working knowledge of how to run a ship—it wasn't the whole story. When they landed on Earth, it was no miracle. They had known what they were doing.

"What is it?" asked Ethan. "Habeas corpus?"

"No," said Marlowe. But in one sense it was, though of a kind that no mere judge could return a verdict on. He read the report again.

"No evidence of mental senility," it said in part. "Micro-samples of brain cells seem to be taken from someone about forty or fifty. Physical reactions are slow but firm and consistent. There are puzzling aspects. Certain obscure functions apparently are those of septuagenarians. Others are in keeping with the mental age. The weakest organs govern, of course; they should live another thirty years, as if they really were in their seventies. However, locomotion and judgment should not be impaired until the very end. Query: Are you sure these are the people I was

supposed to examine? I couldn't find that deep, inoperable, though non-malignant tumor the man was supposed to have."

Marlowe folded and refolded the report. Radiation could kill. But it could also cure. It was a standard treatment. But never so drastic and not on the aged for this purpose. He had come at once on two monumental discoveries, both by accident. How many discoveries *were* accidental?

These two wouldn't live longer, but they would have a better life and in full possession of their senses.

"Sure, we borrowed—stole the ship," said Ethan abruptly, interrupting Marlowe's thoughts. "You got it back, but that don't change things. We've got money. We might have enough to pay for most of the fuel."

"It's not necessary. We'll charge it off as an experiment." Marlowe tried to frown. Perhaps he succeeded. "In return for not prosecuting, I want you to abandon your pension and go to work for Interplanet Transport."

Ethan's joints creaked as he sat up eagerly. "Work it off? Sounds fair." There were wrinkles on his face and there never would be any less, but they weren't as deep as they had been, not when they formed the network of a smile. "I can sweep out a ship. Maybe you'd even let me go on a trip once in a while. I could be a cabin boy."

They had been considered useless and incapable for so long that they still didn't realize what he was saying. They weren't childish, but they thought they were. Re-education would have to proceed slowly.

"I had a trip in mind for you," said Marlowe. "And Amantha will have to go to work, too."

"Young man, it's been a long time since I cooked anything but one canalberry shortcake, but you just watch what I can stir up."

"I've got just the place for you," Marlowe answered. "One more stipulation—don't talk about your experiences. If reporters come around, and I think they will, say merely that we traced the ship and, after conferring with you, decided to drop all charges. Understand?"

Amantha nodded. "Look bad for you, wouldn't it? Not guarding the ships any better than that, I mean."

He was thankful their minds had merely been resharpened, that they would never regain their original edge. She was right—it *would* look bad. Also, the company had competitors. And by the time *they* got wind of it, he wanted to have a head-start. Only a few of the aged would fit in with his plans, though the rest would benefit, and by more than a change of status.

Marlowe nodded. "That's it. Report tomorrow and we'll go over your assignments."

"Guess you don't know what we're like," said Ethan. "We've hardly seen our littlest grandson yet. What do you suppose we stole—experimented with the ship for?"

Marlowe watched them go and, as the door closed, began to write hurriedly. The others would be here soon. He wanted to have it summarized by the time they arrived.

Half an hour later, he looked at what he'd put down. It was on the back of the medical report.

"Memo: Change the design of our latest ship. Instead of a heavy-hulled, superfast rocket, requiring the utmost in bodily coordination and stamina, reverse every specification. Permeability to radiation no objection."

He chuckled. Demarest would threaten to resign. It violated every precept he had ever learned. But the engineer would change his mind when he saw the rest of it.

Marlowe read on: "Top speed need not be high. Emphasis should be placed on safety. Must be maneuverable by operators whose reactive time is not fast, but whose judgment and foresight are trustworthy. Stress simplicity.

"Memo No. 2: Inaugurate another class of service. In addition to fast speedy passages when planets are close, a freight system that can operate continuously is now possible. The planets will open up faster if a steady supply route can be maintained. Older passengers will be a mainstay, especially since therapeutic value is sure to be disclosed. Estimated time to prepare for first run—one year minimum.

"Memo No. 3: Recruiting. Do not overlook the most unlikely skill. It may indicate undisclosed ability of high order.

"Training: Blank. Improvise as you go along!"

Marlowe got up. He thought he heard planes overhead. If so, he had something for them. He'd have to argue, but he felt up to it. The sand had disappeared from his eyes. His step was lighter, too.

And that was because of another item he hadn't written down. He wouldn't forget.

He was in the mid-forties and would have to begin learning. It was the awkward age—too old—too young. He couldn't hope to pilot the murderously fast ships currently in use. And he couldn't take his place in the clumsy tubs that would soon be swinging between the planets, opening up space to commerce. He would have to wait, but what he learned now

would be useful some day. It would be better integrated for having been long buried in his memory.

A vintage aspiration.

When he was immune to the mutating effects of radiation, old and nearly sleepless, he could retire from this career—into a better one.

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