

Space Jockey

JBitsoup.orgJ

JUST AS THEY WERE LEAVING the telephone called his name. "Don't answer it," she pleaded. "We'll miss the curtain."

"Who is it?" he called out. The viewplate lighted; he recognized Olga Pierce, and behind her the Colorado Springs office of Trans-Lunar Transit.

"Calling Mr. Pemberton. Calling-Oh, it's you, Jake. You're on. Flight 27, Supra-New York to Space Terminal. I'll have a copter pick you up in twenty minutes."

"How come?" he protested. "I'm fourth down on the call board."

"You were fourth down. Now you are standby pilot to Hicks-and he just got a psycho down-check."

"Hicks got psychoed? That's silly!"

"Happens to the best, chum. Be ready. Bye now."

His wife was twisting sixteen dollars worth of lace handkerchief to a shapeless mass. "Jake, this is ridiculous. For three months I haven't seen enough of you to know what you look like."

"Sorry, kid. Take Helen to the show."

"Oh, Jake, I don't care about the show; I wanted to get you where they couldn't reach you for once."

"They would have called me at the theater."

"Oh, no! I wiped out the record you'd left."

"Phyllis! Are you trying to get me fired?"

"Don't look at me that way." She waited, hoping that he would speak, regretting the side issue, and wondering how to tell him that her own fretfulness was caused, not by disappointment, but by gnawing worry for his safety every time he went out into space.

She went on desperately, "You don't have to take this flight, darling; you've been on Earth less than the time limit. Please, Jake!"

He was peeling off his tux. "I've told you a thousand times: a pilot doesn't get a regular run by playing space-lawyer with the rule book. Wiping out my follow-up message-why did you do it, Phyllis? Trying to ground me?"

"No, darling, but I thought just this once-"

No co-pilot is needed in space and most pilots would rather share a toothbrush than a control room. The pilot works about an hour at blast off, about the same before contact, and loafs during free flight, save for routine checks and corrections. Pemberton prepared to spend one hundred and four hours eating, reading, writing letters, and sleeping-especially sleeping.

When the alarm woke him, he checked the ship's position, then wrote to his wife. "Phyllis my dear," he began, "I don't blame you for being upset at missing your night out. I was disappointed, too. But bear with me, darling, I should be on a regular run before long. In less than ten years I'll be up for retirement and we'll have a chance to catch up on bridge and golf and things like that. I know it's pretty hard to-"

The voice circuit cut in "Oh, Jake-put on your company face. I'm bringing a visitor to the control room."

"No visitors in the control room, Captain."

"Now, Jake. This lunkhead has a letter from Old Man Harriman himself. Every possible courtesy-' and so forth."

Pemberton thought quickly. He could refuse-but there was no sense in offending the big boss. "Okay, Captain. Make it short."

The visitor was a man, jovial, oversize-Jake figured him for an eighty pound weight penalty. Behind him a thirteen year-old male counterpart came zipping through the door and lunged for the control console. Pemberton snagged him by the arm and forced himself to speak pleasantly. "Just hang on to that bracket, youngster. I don't want you to bump your head."

"Leggome! Pop-make him let go."

Kelly cut in. "I think he had best hang on, Judge."

"Umm, uh-very well. Do as the Captain says, Junior."

"Aw, gee, Pop !"

"Judge Schacht, this is First Pilot Pemberton," Kelly said rapidly. "He'll show you around."

"Glad to know you, Pilot. Kind of you, and all that."

"What would you like to see, Judge?" Jake said carefully.

"Oh, this and that. It's for the boy-his first trip. I'm an old spacehound myself-probably more hours than half your crew." He laughed. Pemberton did not.

"There's not much to see in free flight."

"Quite all right. We'll just make ourselves at home-eh, Captain?"

"I wanna sit in the control seat," Schacht Junior announced.

Pemberton winced. Kelly said urgently, "Jake, would you mind outlining the control system for the

menace from my control room."

"Leggo! Pop-he's gonna hurt me!"

The elder Schacht bristled at once. "What's the meaning of this? Let go of my son!"

"Your precious son cut in the jets."

"Junior-did you do that?"

The boy shifted his eyes. "No, Pop. It . . . it was a meteor."

Schacht looked puzzled. Pemberton snorted. "I had just told him how the radar-guard can blast to miss a meteor. He's lying."

Schacht ran through the process he called "making up his mind", then answered, "Junior never lies . Shame on you, a grown man, to try to put the blame on a helpless boy. I shall report you, sir. Come, Junior."

Jake grabbed his arm. "Captain, I want those controls photographed for fingerprints before this man leaves the room. It was not a meteor; the controls were dead, until this boy switched them on. Furthermore the anti-collision circuit sounds an alarm."

Schacht looked wary. "This is ridiculous. I simply objected to the slur on my son's character. No harm has been done."

"No harm, eh? How about broken arms-or necks? And wasted fuel, with more to waste before we're back in the groove. Do you know, Mister 'OldSpacehound ,' just how precious a little fuel will be when we try to match orbits with Space Terminal-if we haven't got it? We may have to dump cargo to save the ship, cargo at \$60,000 a ton on freight charges alone. Fingerprints will show the Commerce Commission whom to nick for it."

When they were alone again Kelly asked anxiously, "You won't really have to jettison? You've got a maneuvering reserve."

"Maybe we can't even get to Terminal. How long did she blast?"

Kelly scratched his head. "I was woozy myself."

"We'll open the accelerometer and take a look."

Kelly brightened. "Oh, sure! If the brat didn't waste too much, then we just swing ship and blast back the same length of time."

Jake shook his head. "You forgot the changed mass-ratio."

"Oh ... oh, yes!" Kelly looked embarrassed. Mass-ratio under power, the ship lost the weight of fuel burned. The thrust remained constant; the mass it pushed shrank. Getting back to proper position, course, and speed became a complicated problem in the calculus of ballistics. "But you can do it, can't

"Good!"

"Not so fast. It saves fuel but not enough. You can't possibly get back in your old groove - and then match T without dumping."

Pemberton let it sink in, then said, "I'll tell Kelly."

"Wait a minute, Jake. Try this. Start from scratch."

"Huh?"

"Treat it as a brand-new problem. Forget about the orbit on your tape. With your present course, speed, and position compute the cheapest orbit to match with Terminal's. Pick it!, new groove."

Pemberton felt foolish. "I never thought of that."

"Of course not. With the ship's little one-lung calculator it'd take you three weeks to solve it. You set to record?"

"Sure."

"Here's your data." Weinstein started calling it off. When they had checked it, Jake said, "That'll get me there?"

"Maybe. If the data you gave me is up to your limit of accuracy; if you can follow instructions as exactly as a robot, if you can blast off and make contact so precisely that you don't need side corrections, then you might squeeze home. Maybe. Good luck, anyhow." The wavering reception muffled their goodbyes.

Jake signaled Kelly. "Don't jettison, Captain. Have your passengers strap down. Stand by to blast. Minus fourteen minutes."

"Very well, Pilot."

The new departure made and checked, he again had time to spare. He took out his unfinished letter, read it, then tore it up.

"Dearest Phyllis," he started again, "I've been doing some hard thinking this trip and have decided that I've just been stubborn. What am I doing way out here? I like my home. I like to see my wife."

"Why should I risk my neck and your peace of mind to herd junk through the sky? Why hang around a telephone - waiting to chaperon fatheads to the Moon - numbskulls who couldn't pilot a rowboat and should have stayed at home in the first place?"

"Money, of course. I've been afraid to risk a change. I won't find another job that will pay half as well, but, if you are game, I'll ground myself and we'll start over. All my love, "Jake"

He put it away and went to sleep, to dream that an entire troop of Junior Rocketeers had been

quartered in his control room.

The closeup view of the Moon is second only to the space side view of the Earth as a tourist attraction; nevertheless Pemberton insisted that all passengers strap down during the swing around to Terminal. With precious little fuel for the matching maneuver, he refused to hobble his movements to please sightseers.

Around the bulge of the Moon, Terminal came into sight - by radar only, for the ship was tail foremost. After each short braking blast Pemberton caught a new radar fix, then compared his approach with a curve he had plotted from Weinstein's figures - with one eye on the time, another on the 'scope, a third on the plot, and a fourth on his fuel gages.

"Well, Jake?" Kelly fretted. "Do we make it?"

"How should I know? You be ready to dump." They had agreed on liquid oxygen as the cargo to dump, since it could be let boil out through the outer valves, without handling.

"Don't say it, Jake."

"Damn it - I won't if I don't have to." He was fingering his controls again; the blast chopped off his words. When it stopped, the radio maneuvering circuit was calling him.

"Flying Dutchman, Pilot speaking," Jake shouted back.

"Terminal Control - Suproreports you short on fuel."

"Right."

"Don't approach. Match speeds outside us. We'll send a transfer ship to refuel you and pick up passengers."

"I think I can make it."

"Don't try it. Wait for refueling."

"Quit telling me how to pilot my ship!" Pemberton switched off the circuit, then stared at the board, whistling morosely. Kelly filled in the words in his mind: "Casey said to the fireman, 'Boy, you better jump, cause two locomotives are going to bump!'"

"You going in the slip anyhow, Jake?"

"Mmm-no, blast it. I can't take a chance of caving in the side of Terminal, not with passengers aboard. But I'm not going to match speeds fifty miles outside and wait for a piggyback."

He aimed for a near miss just outside Terminal's orbit, conning by instinct, for Weinstein's figures meant nothing by now. His aim was good; he did not have to waste his hoarded fuel on last minute side corrections to keep from hitting Terminal. When at last he was sure of sliding safely on past if unchecked, he braked once more. Then, as he started to cut off the power, the jets coughed, sputtered, and quit.

The letter from Phyllis was affectionate-and superficial. She did not mention his sudden departure; she ignored his profession completely. The letter was a model of correctness, but it worried him.

He tore up both letters and started another. It said, in part: "-never said so outright, but you resent my job.

"I have to work to support us. You've got a job, too. It's an old, old job that women have been doing a long time-crossing the plains in covered wagons, waiting for ships to come back from China, or waiting around a mine head after an explosion-kiss him goodbye with a smile, take care of him at home.

"You married a spaceman, so part of your job is to accept my job cheerfully. I think you can do it, when you realize it. I hope so, for the way things have been going won't do for either of us. Believe me, I love you. Jake"

He brooded on it until time to bend the ship down for his approach. From twenty miles altitude down to one mile he let the robotbrake her, then shifted to manual while still falling slowly. A perfect airless-landing would be the reverse of the take-off of a war rocket-free fall, then one long blast of the jets, ending with the ship stopped dead as she touches the ground. In practice a pilot must feel his way down, not too slowly; a ship could burn all the fuel this side of Venus fighting gravity too long.

Forty seconds later, falling a little more than 140 miles per hour, he picked up in his periscopes the thousand-foot static towers. At 300 feet he blasted five gravities for more than a second, cut it, and caught her with a one-sixth gravity, Moon-normal blast. Slowly he eased this off, feeling happy.

The Gremlin hovered, her bright jet splashing the soil of the Moon, then settled with dignity to land without a jar.

The ground crew took over; a sealed runaboutjeeped Pemberton to the tunnel entrance. Inside Luna City, he found himself paged before he finished filing his report. When he took the call, Soames smiled at him from the viewpláte . "I saw that landing from the field pick-up, Pemberton. You don't need a refresher course."

Jake blushed. "Thank you, sir."

"Unless you are dead set on space-to-space, I can use you on the regular Luna City run. Quarters here or Luna City? Want it?"

He heard himself saying, "Luna City. I'll take it."

He tore up his third letter as he walked into Luna City post office. At the telephone desk he spoke to a blonde in a bluemoonsuit . "Get me Mrs. Jake Pemberton, Suburb six-four-oh-three, Dodge City, Kansas, please."

She looked him over. "You pilots sure spend money."

ever doubted her.