

Castaway

by Gene Wolfe

We picked him up on some dead world nobody ever goes to. We did it because we had a field problem that required a lot of tests, and that stuff is easier if you can just dodge in and out of the ship without worrying about the airlocks and how much air you're dumping every time you go outside. Bad as this place was, you could breathe—the air turned out to be real good, in fact—so we set down in a warm belt around the middle.

Warm's one of those words, you know? It was still cold enough for hightherms, and even with hightherms I blew on my fingers a lot. The sun was red and real close, but there didn't seem to be a lot of heat in it.

Anyway, he had been there twenty-seven years, he said, and I said, standard years or world years, and he said, they were so close it didn't make any difference. World years were half an hour shorter now, he said, and I should've asked why now—had they been longer a while back? Only I didn't think of it right then.

"We got hit by the Atrothers," he said; so it had been back during the war all right, back before I was born. "We tried to get home, but we could see we couldn't make it. This place was close, and we landed here."

We're not there anymore, I told him, we took off. Well, that shut him up for the rest of the week. So next time I tried not to say things like that. I know they had him up to Debriefing three times. So you know they never got much out of him, didn't get what they wanted, or they wouldn't have talked to him so much. Somebody said his mind was blown, and I guess that was sort of right.

Only he used to open up to me sometimes in the break area, and that's what I want to tell about. Then maybe I can stop thinking about him.

"There were only three of us," he said, "and Obert died the first year and Yarmouth the second year. I thought we were dying off one by one, and I'd go next year if nobody came. But I didn't. We'd hung up the distress buoy. It didn't do a bit of good, but I stayed tough."

He looked at me then like I wanted to argue. I just said, sure.

"The rations ran out," he said. "I had to eat whatever I could find. There's still a few plants. They're not good, but you can eat them if you boil them long enough and keep changing the water."

I said you were there all alone, huh? It must've been double duty.

Of course that shut him up again, but next day he came in about ten minutes after I got off shift. He sat down right where he'd sat before. All the tables are white and so are the chairs, so it doesn't make any difference

where you sit, it's all the same. Only he knew somehow, and that's where he sat. I carried my caff over and sat down across from him and waited.

About ten minutes after that he said, "There was a woman. A woman was there with me. I wasn't alone. No. Not really. Not with her there."

I said you should have told us. We'd have taken her off, too.

He just shook his head.

Later he said it was too late for her. "She's old," he said. "Old and ugly, and she can't think any more. She tries to think of new things, but nothing comes. Nothing works now, and sometimes she can't think at all. She told me. You've got a good medpod. That's what they say."

I guess I nodded.

"I've been spending a lot of time in there. Maybe it's helping. I don't know. But it wouldn't help her."

Then he reached over and grabbed my wrist—his hand was like a vise. "We could have saved her. Earlier. We could have made her young again. We could have taken her away. We could have done it. Nothing stopping us."

Next day he wouldn't talk at all, or the day after that either. I guess I should have just let him alone, but I was sick of talking to the other guys in the crew. I'd been talking to them ever since I signed on, and I knew what they were going to say and the games they wanted to play and what all their jokes were.

So I tried to figure out a way to get him going again. Everybody likes to brag, right? Especially when you can't check up on them. The next time he was in the break room, I sat down next to him and said tell me some more about this woman that was dirtside with you. I guess you got plenty, huh?

He just looked at me for maybe two minutes. I knew he was talking in his head. He'd been alone for so long. I ran into a guy once who had tended a navigation beacon way out on the Rim for ten years. You do that, and the severance pay's a fortune. Go in at thirty—you've got to be at least thirty—and come out at forty, rich for life. What they don't tell you is that most of them go crazy. Anyway, he said you get to talking to yourself. When they finally pull you out, you try to stop and you don't talk to anybody, just in your head. You haven't talked to anybody for so long that talking out loud is the same as talking to yourself, as far as you're concerned.

Finally he said, "She was old. Terribly old and dying. I thought I told you."

I said, yeah, I guess you did.

"Millions and millions of years old, and used to think she'd never die. But it was all over for her, and she knew it. We never wanted to help her. We never wanted to save her, and now we couldn't if we wanted to. It's too late. Too late ..."

After that he started to cry. I listened to it and sort of tapped his shoulder and talked to him for as long as it

took to finish my caff. But he didn't say anything else that day.

The next day he sort of motioned to me to come over and sit with him. He'd never done that before. So I did.

"She could make pictures in your head." He was whispering. "Show you things. Did I tell you about that?"

He never had, and I said so.

"They're trying to make me forget the leaves. Billions and billions of leaves, all sizes and shapes and shades of green, and the rising sun turning them gold. Sometimes the bottom was a different color, and when the wind blew the whole tree would change."

I wanted to ask what a tree was, but I figured I could just look it up and kept quiet.

"She used to show me birds, too. Wonderful birds. Some that could sleep while they flew. Some that sang and flew at the same time. All kinds of colors and all kinds of shapes. You know what a bird is?"

Naturally I said I didn't.

"It's a kind of flying animal. Some of them made music. A lot of the little ones did. Singing, you know, only they sounded more like flutes. It was beautiful!"

I said, did they know "Going to Bunk with You Tonight," because that's my favorite song. He said they didn't play our music, they played their own, and he sang some of it for me, looking like he was going to kiss somebody. I

didn't like it much, but I pretended I did. I wanted to know how she had showed him all this and made him hear it, because I think it would be really nice if I could do that, and useful, too. He said he didn't know, and after that he was pretty quiet 'til I'd finished my caff.

Then he said, "You know how a man puts part of himself into a woman?"

I said sure.

"It's like that, only in the brain. She puts part of herself into your brain."

Naturally I laughed, and I said was it as good for you as it was for her, and did you feel the ship jump?

And he said, "It wasn't good for her at all, but it was wonderful for me, even the time I watched the last bird die."

There was a lot of other stuff, too, some of it happy and some really, really sad. I will remember it, but I don't think you would want to hear about all of it. Finally he told me how sick she had been, and how he had sat beside her night after night. He would pick up her hand and hold it, and try to think of something he could say that would make her feel better, only he could never think of anything and every time he tried it was just so dumb he made himself shut up. He would hold her hand, like I said up there, and sort of stroke it, and after a while it would melt away and he would have to look for it and pick it up all over. I didn't understand that at all. I still don't.

But finally he thought of something he could say that didn't make him feel worse, and he thought maybe it had even made her feel better, a little. He said, "I love you." It seemed like it worked, he said, and so he said it again and again.

And that is all I remember about him except for when we set down and he left the ship. Only I want to say this. I know he was crazy, and if you read this and want to tell me I was crazy too to hang out with him in the break area like I did for so long, that's all right. I knew he was crazy, but he was somebody new and it was kind of fun to pull it out of him like I did and see what he would say.

Besides, he was a lot older than I am and his face had all these lines because of being down there so long and practically starving, so he was fun to look at, and the other thing was the color. The ship is all white, the walls and ceilings and floor and everything else. That makes it easy to spot fluid leaks and sometimes shorts that start little fires someplace. But all that white and the white uniforms and so on seem like they just suck the color out of everything except blood.

Only it never sucked the color out of him, and that made him special to me. Nice to look at, and fun, too. I remember seeing him walking along Corridor A the last time. He was headed for the lock and going out, and I knew it from the old, old dress blues and the little bag in his hand. And I thought, oh shit, that's the last color we had and now he's going and this really licks.

And it did, too.

So I ran and said goodbye and how much I was going to miss him and called him Mate and all that. You know. And he was nice and we talked a little bit more, just standing there in Corridor A.

Of course I put my elbow in it, the way I always did sooner or later. I said about the woman that had been dirtside with him, was she still alive when we took him off, because he'd said how sick she was, and I thought he wouldn't go off and leave her.

He sort of smiled. I never had seen a smile like that before, and I don't ever want to see another one. "She was and she wasn't," he said. "There were things inside her, eating the corpse. Does that count?"

I said no, of course not, for it to count they would have to have been part of her.

"They were," he said, and that was the real end of it.

Only he turned to go, and I wanted to walk with him at least 'til he got to the lock. Which I did. And talking to himself I heard him say, "She had been so beautiful. Just so damned beautiful."

All right, his mind had blown, like everybody says. But sometimes I can almost see him again when I'm in my bunk and just about asleep. He smiles, and there's somebody standing behind him, but I can't quite see her.

Not ever.