

Officer anxiously awaits Ong mission to escape dreary spaceship routine



Editor's note: This is the first episode of a weekly fiction series.

The end of the second shift was 10 minutes away and Jack Frost, maintenance officer, was hungry and tired. A space voyage is a collection of countless problems and vexations: This day had yielded more than its share of those.

Jack's ship, the Argus, had picked up 150 new personnel from the planet Veloah, most of them technicians. The existing facilities onboard the Argus would have had no difficulty in accommodating the new personnel but for one detail. The Veloans were of a species wherein five wholly different sexes were required to procreate one new individual. They had five sexes, whereas earthlings had two. The problem was that the Veloans demanded a separate restroom for each sex, which the Argus' existing facilities could not provide for. After months, the Veloans would endure their predicament no longer.

So Jack had spent the shift drilling holes and setting up partitions and hanging up signs. It had been one of those days. Jack had lost a flashlight and had to waste an hour filling out forms on where, how and when he had lost it. He had accidentally dropped the flashlight down one of the ship's toilets. Retrieving the flashlight would be easy enough in a primitive culture, but onboard the Argus, the toilets were anti-matter vacuums. Anything falling into their depths met with a flash of blue light and was gone forever — a set of keys or a coin dropped in was lost — period.

One thing Jack hated about space travel was thinking too much. You had nowhere to go, so you started to go inward, always thinking. You were on a 200-yard leash. You saw the same people every day until you knew each other too well. You could watch an endless amount of videotapes until the very act of watching them became repugnant. Everyone onboard had mastered pool, pingpong, shuffleboard and chess to the point where a game was only a matter of who made a mistake first. Everyone had aced all the video and pinball games onboard — it was nothing for someone to keep racking up game after game for up to seven hours.

But tomorrow would be different. The Argus had orders to send a pod down onto an unexplored planet. Jack had volunteered to land with the patrol. There was a certain amount of danger involved.

A dissonant buzzer went off, startling Jack. His shift ended. He hurried to the mess elevator — waiting in line for 20 minutes was the last thing he needed now.

After eating, and a short visit to the game room, Jack decided to turn in early. In the breakroom, everybody was making bets and shouting. Two clones, Boyd and Lloyd, had argued over who was strongest and began arm wrestling. Fifteen minutes had gone by and neither had won. They were probably still at it.

Jack entered his tiny room and flopped down on his bunk, scattering a flock of tiny parrots like sparks from a forge. The birds were like macaws, each about the size of his thumb. Seven in all, there were three neon blues, two scarlets, one yellow and one albino. Jack had bought them at a pet store on Veloah, where the science of genetic engineering was honed to a fine art.

Jack had gotten them in trade. The parrots, which were worth \$100 apiece, for a box of Milk Duds. Processed sugar was rare in those parts and immediately addictive to the Veloans.

Onboard personnel weren't supposed to keep pets, but everybody did. The captain himself had a little mastodon, which was about the size of a chihuahua. He boasted that it had been made from a hunk of frozen mastodon flesh found in glacial ice.

Matt Piersol

Jack had brought some food back from the salad bar for the parrots. He took it from his pocket: a handful of seeds that looked like lima beans and tasted vaguely like brazil nuts. He singled a few out onto his dresser — a few would be enough — and tapped them with the heel of his boot. Once pulverized, he scraped them onto a magazine, which he placed out on the floor. The birds watched this enterprise with interest, then, waiting until Jack had returned to his bunk, fluttered down to their supper.

Jack was trying to get the birds to speak. He switched on a pocket tape recorder, adjusted it so that it repeated this phrase over and over, so that the parrots might pick it up: "Help! He

changed us all into parrots!"

Somebody at the pet store had taught one of them to repeat the phrase "fur shurr..." over and over and Jack was getting damned tired of hearing it. He contemplated tossing that bird down the toilet before the others started mimicking him.

Watching the parrots eat, Jack thought that maybe he was back on Earth in some nice city on a nice map, in some nice institution feeding the nice ducks. And all this was just some overblown dream from which he couldn't wake up.

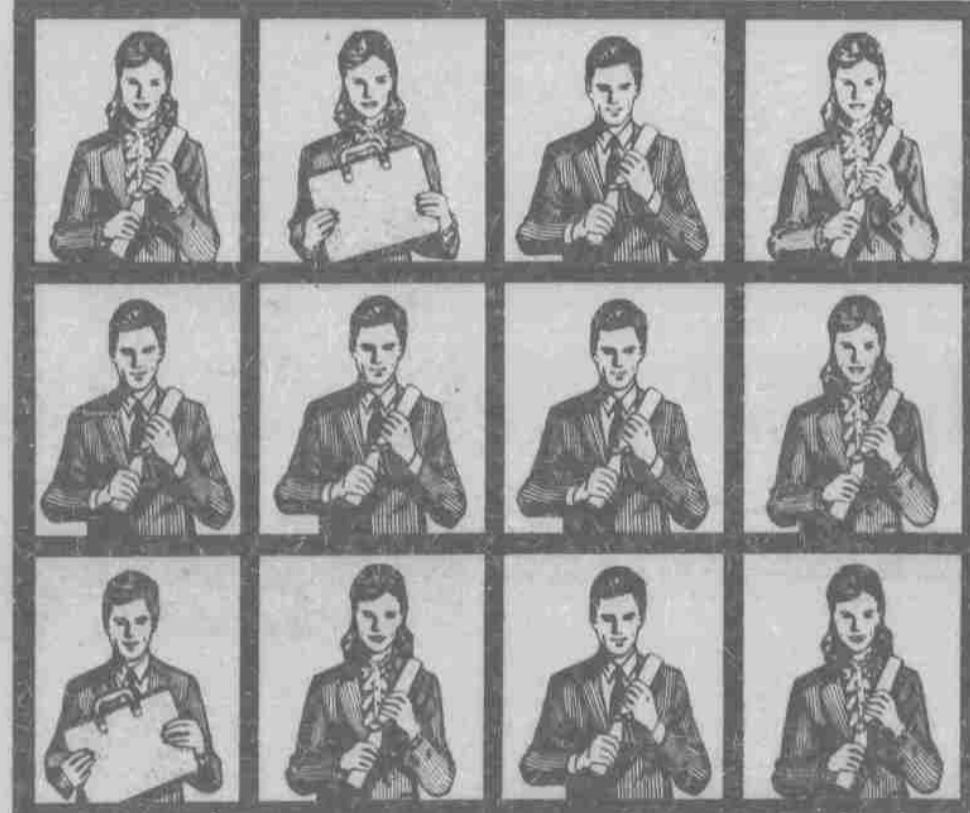
No, it was real; the parrots were making crunching sounds and his travel bag was heavy as he lifted it and placed it by the door. Even if he could get back to Earth, everyone he knew would be 80 years older.

In eight hours he would be riding down to the surface of the planet Ong. The prospect set his stomach in motion, like before a big game when he was a hot dog on his high school basketball team. The tension was exhilarating after the unrelieved predictability of an 18-month voyage.

Face down in the pillow, Jack noted that his heartbeat sounded like footsteps, like someone walking through cornflakes. The droning hum of the ships systems lulled him to sleep.

He dreamt briefly that he was on the inside of an enormous conch, and that he was running up the slippery sides and sliding back down with a whoosh.

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