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Author: Lyn Venable

Illustrator: Ed Emshwiller

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HOMESICK ***



Homesick

By LYN VENABLE

Illustrated by EMSH

What thrill is there in going out among the stars if coming back means bitter loneliness?

FRANKSTON pushed listlessly at a red checker with his right forefinger. He knew the move would cost him a man, but he lacked enough interest in the game to plot out a safe move. His opponent, James, jumped the red disk with a black king and removed it from the board. Gregory, across the room, flicked rapidly through the pages of a magazine, too rapidly to be reading anything, or even looking at the pictures. Ross lay quietly on his bunk, staring out of the viewport.

The four were strangely alike in appearance, nearly the same age, the age where gray hairs finally outnumber black, or baldness takes over. The age when the expanding waistline has begun to sag tiredly, when robust middle age begins the slow accelerating decline toward senility.

A strange group to find aboard a spaceship, but then *The Columbus* was a very strange ship. Bolted to its outer hull, just under the viewports, were wooden boxes full of red geraniums, and ivy wound tenuous green fronds over the gleaming hull that had withstood the bombardment of pinpoint meteors and turned away the deadly power of naked cosmic rays.

Frankston glanced at his wristchrono. It was one minute to six.

"In about a minute," he thought, "Ross will say something about going out to water his geraniums." The wristchrono ticked fifty-nine times.

"I think I'll go out and water my geraniums," said Ross.

NO ONE glanced up. Then Gregory threw his magazine on the floor. Ross got up and walked, limping slightly, to a wall locker. He pulled out the heavy, ungainly spacesuit and the big metal bulb of a headpiece. He carried them to his bunk and laid them carefully down.

"Will somebody please help me on with my suit?" he asked.

For one more long moment, no one moved. Then James got up and began to help Ross fit his legs

into the suit. Ross had arthritis, not badly, but enough so that he needed a little help climbing into a spacesuit.

James pulled the heavy folds of the suit up around Ross's body and held it while Ross extended his arms into the sleeve sections. His hands, in the heavy gauntlets, were too unwieldy to do the front fastenings, and he stood silently while James did it for him.

Ross lifted the helmet, staring at it as a cripple might regard a wheelchair which he loathed but was wholly dependent upon. Then he fitted the helmet over his head and James fastened it down and lifted the oxygen tank to his back.

"Ready?" asked James.

The bulbous headpiece inclined in a nod. James walked to a panel and threw a switch marked INNER LOCK. A round aperture slid silently open. Ross stepped through it and the door shut behind him as James threw the switch back to its original position. Opposite the switch marked OUTER LOCK a signal glowed redly and James threw another switch. A moment later the signal flickered out.

Frankston, with a violent gesture, swept the checker board clean. Red and black men clattered to the floor, rolling and spinning. Nobody picked them up.

"What does he do it for?" demanded Frankston in a tight voice. "What does he get out of those stinking geraniums he can't touch or smell?"

"Shut up," said Gregory.

James looked up sharply. Curtness was unusual for Gregory, a bad sign. Frankston was the one he'd been watching, the one who'd shown signs of cracking, but after so long, even a psycho-expert's opinion might be haywire. Who was a yardstick? Who was normal?

"Geraniums don't smell much anyway," added Gregory in a more conciliatory tone.

"Yeah," agreed Frankston, "I'd forgotten that. But why does he torture himself like this, and us, too?"

"Because that's what he wanted to do," answered James.

"Sure," agreed Gregory, "the whole trip—the last twenty years of it, anyhow—all he could talk about was how, when he got back to Earth, he was going to buy a little place in the country and raise flowers."

"Well, we're back," muttered Frankston, with a terrible bitterness. "He's raising flowers, but not in any little place in the country."

GREGORY continued almost dreamily, "Remember the last night out? We were all gathered around the viewscreen. And there was Earth, getting bigger and greener and closer all the time. Remember what it felt like to be going back, after thirty years?"

"Thirty years cooped up in this ship," grumbled Frankston. "All our twenties and thirties and forties ..."

"But we were coming home." There was a rapt expression on Gregory's lined and weathered face. "We were looking forward to the twenty or maybe thirty good years we had left, talking about what we'd do, where we'd live, wondering what had changed on Earth. At least we had that last night out. All the data was stashed away in the microfiles, all the data about planets with air we couldn't breathe and food we couldn't eat. We were going home, home to big, friendly, green Earth."

Frankston's face suddenly crumpled as though he were about to weep and he cradled his head against his arms. "God, do we have to go over it all again? Not again tonight!"

"Leave him alone," ordered James with an inflection of command in his voice. "Go to the other section of the ship if you don't want to listen. He has to keep going over it, just like Ross has to keep watering his geraniums."

Frankston remained motionless and Gregory looked gratefully at James. James was the steady one. It was easier for him because he understood.

Gregory's face became more and more animated as he lost himself, living again his recollections: "The day we blasted in. The crowds. Thousands of people, all there to see us come in. We were proud. Of course, we thought we were the first to land, just like we'd been the first to go out. Those cheers, coming from thousands of people at once. For us. Ross— Lt. Ross—was the first one out of the lock. We'd decided on that; he'd been in command for almost ten years, ever since Commander Stevens died. You remember Stevens, don't you? He took over when we lost Captain Willers. Well, anyway, Ross out first, and then you, James, and you, Frankston, and then Trippitt, and me last, because you were all specialists and I was just a crewman. *The* crewman, I should say, the only one left.

"Ross hesitated and almost stumbled when he stepped out, and tears began pouring from his eyes, but I thought—well, you know, coming home after thirty years and all that. But when I stepped out of the lock, my eyes stung like fire and a thousand needles seemed to jab at my skin.

"And then the President himself stepped forward with the flowers. That's where the real trouble began, with the flowers. I remember Ross stretching out his arms to take the bouquet, like a mother reaching for a baby. Then suddenly he dropped them, sneezing and coughing and sobbing for breath, and the President reached out to help him, asking him over and over what was wrong.

"It was the same with all of us, and we turned and staggered back to the ship, closing the lock behind us. It was bad then. God, I'll never forget it! The five of us, moaning in agony, gasping for breath, our eyes all swollen shut, and the itching ... that itching." Gregory shuddered.

EVEN the emotionally disciplined James set his teeth and felt his scalp crawl at the memory of that horror. He glanced toward the viewport, as though to cleanse his mind of the memory. He could see Ross out there, among the geraniums, moving slowly and painfully in his heavy spacesuit. Occupational therapy. Ross watered flowers and Gregory talked and Frankston was bitter and ... himself? Observation, maybe.

Gregory's voice began again, "And then they were pounding on the lock, begging us to let the doctor in, but we were all rolling and thrashing with the itching, burning, sneezing, and finally James got himself under control enough to open the locks and let them in.

"Then came the tests, allergy tests. Remember those? They'd cut a little row of scratches in your arm ..." Each man instinctively glanced at his forearm, saw neat rows of tiny pink scars, row on row. "Then they'd put a little powder in each cut and each kind of powder was an extract of some common substance we might be allergic to. The charts they made were full of 'P's, P for positive, long columns of big, red 'P's. All pollen, dust, wool, nylon, cotton, fish, meat, fruit, vegetables, grain, milk, whisky, cigarettes, dogs, cats—everything! And wasn't it funny about us being allergic to women's face powder? Ha! We were allergic to women from their nylon hose to their face powder.

"Thirty years of breathing purified, sterilized, filtered air, thirty years of drinking distilled water and swallowing synthetic food tablets had changed us. The only things we weren't allergic to were the metal and plastic and synthetics of our ship, *this* ship. We're allergic to Earth. That's funny, isn't it?"

Gregory began to rock back and forth, laughing the thin high laugh of hysteria. James silently walked to a water hydrant and filled a plastic cup. He brought Gregory a small white pill.

"You wouldn't take this with the rest of us at supper. You'd better take it now. You need it."

Gregory nodded bleakly, sobering at once, and swallowed the pellet. He made a face after the water.

"Distilled," he spat. "Distilled ... no flavor ... no life ... like us ... distilled."

"If only we could have blasted off again." Frankston's voice came muffled through his hands. "It wouldn't have made any difference where. Anywhere or nowhere. No, our fine ship is obsolete and we're old, much too old. They have the spacedrive now. Men don't make thirty-year junkets into space and come back allergic to Earth. They go out, and in a month or two they're back, with their hair still black and their eyes still bright and their uniforms still fit. A month or two is all. Those crowds that cheered us, they were proud of us and sorry for us, because we'd been out thirty years and they never expected us back at all. But it was inconvenient for Spaceport." Bitter sarcasm tinged his voice. "They actually had to postpone the regular monthly Trans-Galactic run to let us in with this big, clumsy hulk."

"Why didn't we ever see any of the new ships either going out or coming back?" asked Gregory.

FRANKSTON shook his head. "You don't see a ship when it's in spacedrive. It's out of normal space-time dimensions. We had a smattering of the theory at cadet school ... anyway, if one did flash into normal space-time—say, for instance, coming in for a landing—the probability of us being at the same place at the same time was almost nil. 'Two ships passing in the night' as the old saying goes."

Gregory nodded, "I guess Trippitt was the lucky one."

"You didn't see Trippitt die," replied James.

"What was it?" asked Frankston. "What killed Trippitt? So quickly, too. He was only outside a few minutes like the rest of us, and eight hours later he was dead."

"We couldn't be sure," answered James. "Some virus. There are countless varieties. People live in a contaminated atmosphere all their lives, build up a resistance to them. Sometimes a particularly virulent strain will produce an epidemic, but most people, if they're affected, will

have a mild case of whatever it is and recover. But after thirty years in space, thirty years of breathing perfectly pure, uncontaminated air, Trippitt had no antibodies in his bloodstream. The virus hit and he died."

"But why didn't the rest of us get it?" asked Gregory.

"We were lucky. Viruses are like that."

"Those people talked about building a home for us," muttered Frankston. "Why didn't they?"

"It wouldn't have been any different," answered James gently. "It would have been the same, almost an exact duplicate of the ship, everything but the rockets. Same metal and plastic and filtered air and synthetic food. It couldn't have had wool rugs or down pillows or smiling wives or fresh air or eggs for breakfast. It would have been just like this. So, since the ship was obsolete, they gave it to us, and a plot of ground to anchor it to, and we're home. They did the best they could for us, the very best they could."

"But I feel stifled, shut in!"

"The ship is large, Frankston. We all crowd into this section because, without each other, we'd go mad." James kicked the edge of the magazine on the floor. "Thank God we're not allergic to decontaminated paper. There's still reading."

"We're getting old," said Gregory. "Some day one of us will be here alone."

"God help him then," answered James, with more emotion than was usual for him.

DURING the latter part of the conversation, the little red signal had been flashing persistently. Finally James saw it. Ross was in the outer lock. James threw the decontaminator switch and the signal winked out. Every trace of dust and pollen would have to be removed from Ross's suit before he could come inside the ship.

"Just like on an alien planet," commented Gregory.

"Isn't that what this is to us—an alien planet?" asked Frankston, and neither of the other men dared answer his bitter question.


A few minutes later, Ross was back in the cabin, and James helped him out of his spacesuit.

"How are the geraniums, Ross?" asked Gregory.

"Fine," said Ross enthusiastically. "They're doing just fine."

He walked over to his bunk and lay down on his side so he could see out of the viewport. There would be an hour left before darkness fell, an hour to watch the geraniums. They were tall and red, and swayed slightly in the evening breeze.

—LYN VENABLE

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