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**Title:** Lonesome Hearts

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**Release Date:** October 4, 2009 [EBook #30170]

**Language:** English

**Credits:** Produced by Greg Weeks, Stephen Blundell and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <https://www.pgdp.net>

\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LONESOME HEARTS \*\*\*

*Mjly is Yljm's love life. She is her sisters, her mothers, herself and her ancestors. But poor old Yljm can never be a mother or a sister—just himself!*



# ***lonesome hearts***

By RUSS WINTERBOTHAM

Illustrated by Kelly Freas

**I**T SEEMS unnecessary to say that my story began a long time ago, but I do not intend to be subtle. I am not clever and my lying is unpolished, almost amateurish. So I certainly could not be subtle, which requires both cleverness and an ability to tell the truth and a lie in the same breath.

Let us turn back the clock a few ages. I was lying in the sun thinking of love. I understand that you human beings have an aversion to biological discussion, so I will not go into detail. But I must remind you that my love life is quite different from yours, for I am from another planet. At the

time under discussion, I was most deeply in love.

My heart's desire had no shape, the lovely creature. She had no intelligence, the divine soul. But she was the greatest bit of protoplasm in any galaxy you could name. By our standards, I probably might be called handsome. I was young and healthy. I had all of my genes and chromosomes. My color was the dirty green that is associated with beauty.

The sun warmed my body and the tidal undulation of my planet's surface rocked me gently. And then she came into my life. She floated gently in the breeze, her dainty figure held aloft by a mere hint of levitation. Sparks of static electricity shot from her tender cilia so brightly that I was forced to exude a layer of protective fibre to protect my visual buds. She sucked a deep breath of cyanic gas into her pulmonary pouch and spoke to me sweetly with a voice like distant thunder.

"My dear Yljm, the world is coming to an end."

I could not believe her, for she had no intelligence. She only loved to talk. "Perhaps," I said, "but not today."

"Very soon, then," said she. Her name was Mjly.

I watched her with patronizing amusement. The static electricity showed that she was nervous and upset, but people often get nervous and upset over trivial matters. "Now, how," I reasoned, "could our world come to an end? The other planet has gone on for thousands of years without colliding with us. We circle it, in fact."

"No," Mjly said, "that is not our doom. Actually our world will not cease to exist. Life will end here, that is all."

"Ah," I said. "Our atmosphere is escaping into space." I sucked air, viciously. True, the air was thin. True, the atmosphere was escaping. But there would be breathable amounts for many thousands of centuries yet to come.

"Not the air. The food is all gone. Things we eat have ceased to exist."

I levitated myself and looked out over the throbbing land. A few years ago, this land had been covered with vegetation. I had come to take vegetation so much for granted that I'd ceased to notice it. Now it was gone. There were no round fruits growing from tender grasses, no tubers dangling from the fungus trees, no legume vines sprawling over the rocks. Everywhere lay desert, barren dunes shaking their crests with tidal motion.

I lowered myself to the ground and dug my big fibrosities into the sod. No green leaves grew there beneath the surface. The soil was dead. "This will seriously interfere with our future, Mjly," I said.

"We might eat each other," she replied, "but then there would be no one left."

"No one? There are many others here."

"The others are dying," said Mjly, blinking her otic nerves eerily. "We soon will be the only ones left."

It was indeed a senseless thing to do, to die just because there was no means of going on living. But I must admit that I was tempted for a moment. But I hung onto myself, for there was Mjly, and as long as she lived, there was a reason for me to live too.

"It's not a cheerful prospect," I said, "but I suppose death by starvation is the best way out. We will face death as we have lived, cheerfully and fortuitously."

"And why should we die, when there is another world so close?" she asked.

"Are you suggesting interplanetary flight, my dear?" I was amused again, even though there was little enough left to be amused at.

She crinkled her sense of smell in reply, and I realized I was not being amused at the right time. Anchoring herself by magnetic processes, she began to weave the atmosphere delicately with her taste-bud tendrils. Quickly she hollowed the air molecules into a reflective mirror, and brought it to focus on our neighboring world. I levitated myself into a position so that I could look into the mirror.

The near planet was quite satisfactory. It was the one you know as the earth. It was young. It was green. Huge fern-like plants grew abundantly on its surface. It was full of food. And near.

"The trip could be made by levitation," Mjly said.

I hung back. "Animals might live there. We'd be devoured."

"I am not afraid," she said.

"We might not get hungry for a time. Let us linger here awhile. Later when we get desperate, there will be time enough for interplanetary flight." I hated the thought of stuffing myself full of air enough to last for the long trip.

Mjly lowered her visual buds. "I am going to become a mother," she said.

"Go then, and become a mother. I'll stay here till I get hungry and then join you."

Mjly unflexed her sense of touch and I felt sorry for her. "If I could be sure," I said, "that no wild animals live on the earth, I'd go sooner."

She snapped her sense of balance in happiness. "I will go first," said she. "If everything is pleasant and safe, I will return and let you know."

I nodded my otic nerves and off she went.

As you human beings are doubtless aware, space levitation is quite complicated, but not beyond accomplishment. Once you are able to reach the speed of escape the rest is easy. But Mjly was young and strong and soon she had disappeared from sight traveling at a tremendous velocity. I followed her as long as I could with the telescope and then I lowered myself to the tidal crest of a nearby sand dune and lost myself in metaphysical thoughts.

Almost half a year later I realized that Mjly had been gone longer than I expected. Either she had been eaten by wild animals on the earth, or she had forgotten me.

I was beginning to get lonesome and in a few more months I would get hungry. At the thought of enduring two such excruciating pains at a single time, I decided to risk my life. I would travel through space to the earth and try to find my beloved.

As you may have guessed, the planet on which we had been living is the one you now know as the Moon, and the distance to the earth is comparatively small. The sand dunes now have hardened and the tidal sway of its surface can be felt only slightly. The moon no longer turns on its axis and it has no sweetly scented cyanide in its atmosphere. It has no atmosphere of any sort. But it stands now as it did when I left it, glorious in death. Since I departed, no living thing has trod its soil.

My scientific sense instinctively came to the rescue as I approached the earth. I felt a strong gravity wrenching at my vitals and so instead of trying reverse levitation, I spread my processes so that the atmosphere caught in the folds of my skin and I came floating gently down to the ground without harm.

The earth was much as it had appeared through the molecule telescope. It was covered with green vegetation, good, rich, nourishing stuff. And there was enough to feed Mjly and me for a million years.

There were no animals of any sort. Again I went to my scientific sense for the answer. I realized that while vegetable life was far advanced, animal life had yet to appear. Mjly was the first of this type of life ever to set foot on terrestrial soil.

But where was she? On the moon, I could often locate her a thousand miles away by a simple radio call. Although the earth was much larger than the moon, I did not doubt that she was within a thousand miles. So I generated power and issued a call.

I waited for the response. It came feebly to my antenna.

Using my sense of direction, I pushed through the vegetation in search of her. I did not levitate, because the feebleness of her call indicated she might be hurt and on the ground. Besides, levitation is much more difficult on the earth than on the moon.

The reply came stronger to my next call and I sensed through seven of my senses that she was near. She was on the ground, probably injured, which explained why she had not returned as she had promised.

I came to a patch of wilderness, a great marshy plain. In the middle of this swamp was a crater, like those caused by meteors, a deep, ugly scar in the mud. I shuddered at the thought that my darling Mjly might have landed there. Her weaker scientific sense might not have given her the cue to use her skin as a parachute and she might have made the fatal mistake of trying to reverse-levitate.

"Mjly!" I called, speaking aloud now. "Mjly! Where are you?"


"Yljm! I am here!"

Yes, the voice came from the crater. Gliding to its rim, I looked down. A pool of water lay on the bottom. A greenish scum covered the surface. The scum moved with a million tiny wriggles.

"Yes, Yljm," came Mjly's voice. "It is I. But I am no longer one being." And her voice sounded like a million tiny chirps joined together. "I landed with such force that I came apart. Now each of my body cells lives a life of its own. And now and then each cell grows fat and becomes two. I am my sisters, I ..."

Let's not be subtle about it. Mjly was a microbe, the beginning of animal life on the earth. She lives today, she is and always will be her sisters, her mothers, herself and her ancestors. But there are few ancestors, for microbes do not die—just part of themselves die.

And I do not die. For I crept away into a hole in the ground, where I will live forever. I do not starve, for roots reach me here. But I miss my love life with Mjly. I can never be a mother or a sister. I will always be me, a lonesome old bem.



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\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LONESOME HEARTS \*\*\*

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