

Homecoming

Science Fantasy by Tom Olbert

Her fingertips touched the cloud tops of Jupiter.

She fired rocket thrusters and descended into the atmosphere. Indigo lightning reflected off her faceplate. Ammonia-methane winds buffeted her. Starfire colors lit the clouds. Things like huge jelly-fish swam the gaseous heights. She touched their fragile tendrils, gentle, caressing fingers of electricity. She smiled. Through the translucent violet/white membranes of the alien things, she saw clusters of tiny, bio-luminescent organisms moving about inside.

Thousands of the brightly glowing mites made their way down the tendrils and found their way to her. They alighted on her suit, a multitude of tiny suns. She laughed.

A cluster of them formed around her glove, as though she held a galaxy of stars in her hand.

A star that had only just failed, Jupiter nurtured life in its womb, calling to her.

Karen Wyler sighed, fighting off the nausea that had plagued her since her recent return to Earth. The NASA doctors had warned her to expect it when they'd released her from the hospital at the cape. Her body just needed time to re-adjust to this bothersome Terran gravity, they'd said with smiling faces. She groaned. It felt as though a part of her was still out there. Everything she saw and touched reminded her of it.

The darkness of her half-lit kitchen was like the interior of an excursion module. The weakly lit interior of her refrigerator was an airlock looking out on frigid vacuum each time she opened the door. The blue/orange gas jet that boiled the water for her coffee was the burning cloudscape of the Orion Nebula. She closed her eyes and tightly clenched the handle of the kitchen mug her late mother had given her. She wanted so much to go back.

She walked with damnable slowness into her darkened apartment, her muscles sore and straining, as if she were weighted down with iron chains. She clapped, bringing up the lights. She winced at the ugly brightness flooding the cluttered room.

Cheap, artificial light that couldn't compare with the pure white fire of the milky way. She switched on the vid screen, skipping quickly through the stations. Sighing, she switched it off again, bored of empty words and pale images of one war or another. Swarms of germs fighting over subdivisions of a spec of dust spinning around an insignificant, dim yellow star lost in the galactic spiral.

She switched on her stereo, choosing her favorite Beethoven disk. Stripping off her clothes and slipping on her training leotard, she practiced her tai quan-do. She moved fluidly to the music, becoming one with its strains as her muscles slowly re-learned Earth's gravity. Its limits. Shaking off the bitterness of those constraints, she learned to feel like part of Earth again. She flowed, like its rivers, like its gentle winds. She began slowly, to remember its beauty. Then, remembered its cruelty. Its lies.

Cursing and brushing aside a tear, she angrily switched off the stereo. Pulling on her sweats, she clapped off the lights and ran out, into the dark night. She pulled up the hood of her sweatshirt, hail whipping down in a cold wind. She ran, hard and fast, her sneakers slapping the concrete, fighting the sound of her beating heart. Her breath was white steam against the black sky, tiny hailstones stinging her face and eyes.



She ran until she couldn't anymore. She collapsed to the hard, cold ground on all fours, gasping for breath. Her anguished lungs labored, her face hot and flushed, melting ice running down her cheeks like tears.

She rolled over on her back, her eyes vainly searching the murky black heights for the stars she could no longer reach. She knew no matter how hard she ran or how many missions she flew, she couldn't escape him. She felt herself being drawn back to him, inexorably, like a rogue moon toward a gas giant. She sighed in resignation. She would go to him.

The crowd was wild, green laser beams flashing overhead, music blaring through the amphitheater. Her body moved to the rhythm of the deafening strains, swept up into the wild maelstrom of lights and bodies all around her. At the center of it all, there he was.

On stage with his band, his fingers blurring over the shimmering strings of his guitar. His blonde hair still flowed like a solar sail. His voice stabbed into her mind as it had the first time she'd seen him perform, so long ago.

The young women were still drawn to him, as she had been. He looked up and, she was trapped. Pulled toward him. He was like a black sun, his terrifying gravity drawing everything around him into an all-consuming whirlpool. She was swept through space, distance and matter becoming meaningless. Before she knew how, she was in his arms.

"Don't," she forced out weakly, pushing him away. He sighed as he stepped back, bitter disappointment in his eyes. Those eyes were just as she'd remembered them. Dark, inscrutable pools, like twin brown dwarf stars. The crows' feet that had set in at the corners hadn't detracted from the rich golden-brown texture of his skin. The beauty that had so cruelly hurt her once still lived. Alone with him in his dressing room, she felt like that scared, stupid college girl she'd thought she'd so long ago left behind. The Air Force Academy, the years of arduous training, the missions. That it should come back to this.

“So, why’d you come back then? Just to push me away again,” he snapped, lighting a cigarette. “You deign to set foot on lowly terra firma, lower yourself to us mere ground-dwellers again. And, of all the places you could have gone, you come here. Why? Just to play hard-to-get?” He sat down on his leopard-skin sofa, bowing his head over his leather-chapped knees and gave a mock laugh. “That ship has sailed, my dear. What-do-you-want?” He said each word slowly and distinctly as he looked up at her with anger in his eyes.

She forced the words out, like a child’s whimper. “I need to know if you love me.”

A look of overwhelming relief crossed his face as he smiled and shook his head. “Karen...Darling,” he said softly, setting the cigarette in an ash-tray and picking up his guitar.

“You’ve always known the answer to that.” His fingers gently plied the strings, the velvet tones of a song he’d written for her long ago coming back to him as though the intervening years had never happened.

The starlight in your eyes.

The silver moonlight in your hair.

Like a shooting star you rise, my love, beyond my reach, but never beyond my heart.

It all came back; his warm lips, his hands upon her under the stars. Her breath grew short. His pull grew stronger, as though she were approaching event horizon. She had to change course quickly, or she would be trapped forever. She touched his hand.

“Evan, stop,” she said, pulling her hand away quickly. “That’s not who I am, anymore.”

He sighed, setting the guitar on a chair

. “Isn’t it? You didn’t run away from me, Darling. You ran away from yourself. What, you thought you’d find your soul out there in the Big Black Empty? Here...”

He took her gently by the shoulders and turned her toward the full-length mirror on the wall beside his band poster.

“Is that you, or just a reflection? What’s space but a mirror? You can’t feel it. You can’t touch it. You can’t even know it’s there except through... scans and readings and science and shit. Just facts and figures come back. All you really see is yourself looking back. But, not the real you, though.”

He stroked her cheek with his finger.

“Just a hard, cold reflection of what others tell you to be. Now, this, on the other hand...”

She clenched her fist and writhed, her nails digging into her palm as he produced a little plastic packet filled with white powder.

“This opens up the real you. Just like I do, babe.” He kissed her tenderly on the cheek. She trembled, breaking out in a cold sweat.

“This is what you ran away from. And, back you come.” He started to open the packet. She was sinking into his gravity well. Fire rockets. Reach apogee. Escape.

“Stop it!” She spun, knocking the packet out of his hand.

“What the fuck’s wrong with you?!” he screamed. She tensed, expecting him to try to hit her, as he had before. She relaxed a bit as he swept the spilled ex-4 back into the packet. Stiffing a curse and bottling up his anger, he turned his back on her and gently drummed his fist against a table. Sniffing a little of the white, he put the packet away and got a bottle from his liquor cabinet.

“I’m sorry, babe,” he said, pouring two glasses of white wine. “Didn’t mean to snap like that.” He offered her a glass. Her hand trembling slightly, she accepted. He smiled, weakly. “To old times.” He clinked his glass against hers, and they both drank. The wine calmed her nerves, a little. He sighed and sat back down on the couch, lowering his head and swishing the wine in his glass.

“Look...you think I wanted you to lose the baby? I didn’t force you to O.D.” Her fingers clenched on the glass, her teeth grinding.

“According to what you told the cops, you’d barely heard of me!” She threw the glass across the room, shattering it. He stood up. “Do you know what happened to me in that place?!” She let the tears come, her anger exploding like a nova. “How many nights I cried waiting for you to come? Never even so much as a stinking letter!”

“What was I supposed to do?! You know they were after me! How would me going to prison have helped you, huh? For God’s sake, I had a career to think about!”

She waved her hand in disgust. “Pathetic. So much for love.”

She had made it, she realized. She’d broken free of his pull and was flying free. “Goodbye, Evan.” She turned and walked toward the exit. Her vision began to blur, the room pitching as her hand groped in vain for the door knob. She felt as if she were suffering from oxygen deprivation. Her sense of up and down failed, as if she were suddenly in zero-gee.

“You bastard,” she gasped, turning, Evan’s gloating face blurring before her. “You drugged my wine.” She was dimly aware of pain and of Evan’s voice. She realized she was on the floor. She felt his hands on her.

His face...angry, hateful...glaring down, an inch from hers. She felt his hot breath, smelled the bitter wine.

“Think you can do that to me, huh,” he hissed through gritted teeth as he began unfastening her clothes. “Think you’re something, huh? ‘Think you’re better than me just because you climbed into your little rocket and blasted off into the Big Black Yonder, huh?! You’re nothing without me!”

He started to unfasten his pants.

“I’ll give you a trip! Nothing you saw or did out there can top this!” She cringed. His face darkened like a dying star about to implode, collapsing into a black singularity. She was being pulled into him, little by little, and there was no escape. He was devouring her.

“Don’t fight me,” he shouted, the pull growing stronger. He was draining her energy, like a black hole bleeding away a neighboring star’s surface, stellar gas accelerating through space in a river of fire...

That was it! Her last chance. Don’t fight the gravity, she told herself. Use it. Straight ahead, into the source. Faster. Faster! She had to accelerate to critical velocity before she hit event horizon. Before her energy was trapped inside him forever.

She smiled. She’d made it. Light speed. She was pure energy now. “AAAAAHHHH...!!!” He screamed, pulling back from her, shielding his eyes. Searing white light surrounded her, an explosion of energy, like a newborn star achieving critical mass and blasting off the extraneous layer of matter in which it was formed.

“What the fuck? Oh...my...God.” As she stood up, new strength flowing through her, he tried to look at her from behind upraised hands. Like a man trying to look directly into a solar eclipse. “What are you?”

She turned and looked at the mirror. Brilliant white globules of light were appearing like pustules of radiant energy, all over her body. Her eyes seared like flaring white suns. She looked at her hand, white light oozing from every pore. The glowing white microbes from Jupiter, she realized with joy! A cluster of them formed around her hand like dew drops.

She looked up at the mirror and saw that thousands of them were swirling about her body as energy consumed her, layer after layer of her flesh melting away. “Karen, for God’s sake...you’re killing me!”

She turned and looked through him. She could see right through his clothing, now, and through the thin layer of flesh beneath, his bones plainly visible in a jacketing shimmer of silver light. She was obviously emitting a powerful cascade of X-rays. “Help me!!!” His flesh was dissolving in what she guessed must be a potent surge of gamma rays. One last scream, and he was gone, a steaming puddle on the floor.

She scarcely noticed, as the light grew brighter, spreading across her skin. She barely noticed the government troops filing into the room in their protective space suits, sheltering behind their radiation shields.

“Lt. Karen Wyler, USAF,” a man’s voice grated through a loudspeaker. “You have been infected by alien spores. You are ordered to submit to quarantine immediately.” Spores. Is that what they were?

Colonies of them had been found in so many places throughout the known universe, she recalled. Nesting inside the lifeforms she’d found in Jupiter’s upper atmosphere. Swirling in fiery pinwheel patterns through the dense, organically rich nitrogen clouds of Titan. Swimming through the tails of comets. Some said they were simply a recurring phenomenon of cosmic radiation.

Others said they weren’t even completely stable in normal space-time. It had been theorized they might exist, at least partially, in some sub-space dimension, omnipresent throughout our universe.

Were they part of something older than the universe, she wondered. Something to which the stars and the planets they sustained were but wombs in which new life was sired and nurtured? Sometimes, that life failed. Stillborn. Other times...

“This is your last warning,” the voice blared. “Submit to quarantine, or we will open fire.” The last of her prison of flesh and bone dissolved, and she was free, spreading wings of pure energy as she cast off a constraining cocoon of matter.

Distance was meaningless, now. She was everywhere. She reached out a hand, her finger lazily stirring the wind-scorched russet sands of Mars. She reached out her other hand, her finger tips skimming across the ice rings of Saturn. She spread her wings and ascended into the universe, a wing tip brushing the moons of Neptune as she left the solar system.

She danced along the milky whorls of the galaxy’s spiral arms, drank energy from the flaring plumes of novae, and played among the globular clusters. She soared effortlessly beyond the spinning galaxies of the super-clusters, toward the distant quasars. She laughed joyously, new universes waiting to be born inside her.

She had come home.