

Dynamic

Science

Fiction

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Author: Winston Marks

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... SO THEY BAKED A CAKE

by Winston Marks

(illustrated by Tom Beecham)

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**He was tired of people—a "human interest" columnist,
who specializes in glamorizations of the commonplace
and sordid is likely to get that way. So ... this
starship seemed to offer the ideal escape from it all.**

Sure, I was one of the tough guys who said it would be great, just great, to get away from the boiling mess of humanity that stank up every inhabitable rock on earth.

Not being the Daniel Boone type, this was my private qualification for the job—being fed up to here with people, with the smothering bureaucracy of world government, with restrictions and rationing and synthetic diet supplements and synthetic blondes and mass hypochondria and phony emotions and standing in line to get into a pay toilet.

I hated my profession, trying to wring glamorous interviews out of bewildered heroes and press-agents' darlings and pompous politicians and snotty millionaires and brave little wronged chorus girls. Their lives were no more glamorous than their readers. They were the same mixture of greed and fear and smelly sweat and deceit and two-bit passion. My particular prostitution was to transform their peccadilloes into virtues, their stubbed toes into tragedies and their fornications into romance. And I'd been at it so long I couldn't stand the odor of my own typewriter.

Of course, I was so thunderstruck at being chosen as one of the 21-man crew for the *Albert E.* that I never got to gloating over it much until we were out in deep space. Yes, it was quite an honor, to say nothing of the pure luck involved. Something like winning the Luna Sweepstakes, only twice as exclusive.

We were the pioneers on the first starship, the first to try out the *Larson Drive* in deep space. At last, man's travel would be measured in parsecs, for our destination was 26 trillion miles down near the celestial south pole. Not much more than a parsec—but a parsec, nonetheless.

As a journalist, such distances and the fabulous velocities involved were quite meaningless to me. My appointment as official scribe for the expedition was not based on my galactic know-how, but rather on my reputation as a Nobel-winning columnist, the lucky one out of fifty-six who entered the lottery.

Larson, himself, would keep me supplied with the science data, and I was to chronicle the events from the human interest side as well as recording the technical stuff fed to me.

Actually, I had no intentions of writing a single word. To hell with posterity and the immortality of a race that couldn't read without moving its lips. The square case I had carried aboard so tenderly contained not my portable typewriter, but six bottles of forbidden rye whiskey, and I intended to drink every drop of it myself.



So, at last we were in space, after weeks of partying, dedications and speech-making and farewell dinners, none of which aroused in me a damned regret for my decision to forsake my generation of fellow-scrabblers.

Yes, we were all warned that, fast as the *Larson Drive* was, it would take us over 42 years, earth-measured time, to reach our destination. Even if we found no planets to explore, turned around and came right back, the roundtrip would consume the lifetimes of even the new babies we left behind. To me this was a perversely comforting thought.

All I wanted to know was how they expected me to live long enough to complete the journey? I could think of pleasanter ways to spend my last days than cooped up in this sardine can with a passel of fish-faced, star-happy scientists.

I was 48 when we departed, which would make me a lucky 90 if I was still wiggling when we hove into our celestial port. But the mathematicians said to relax. Their space-time theory provided, they claimed, a neat device for survival on our high-velocity journey.

The faster a body moves in reference to another, the slower time appears to act on the moving body. If, they said, man could travel at the speed of light, supposedly time would stand still for him. This, I reflected, would mean human immortality—much too good for people.

Anyway, since our average velocity for the trip was planned to come out around a tenth of the speed of light, to us on the *Albert E.*, only about five months would seem to have elapsed for the journey that would consume 42-1/2 years, earth-time.

It seemed to me they were laying a hell of a lot of faith in a theory that we were the first to test out. Our food, water and air-supplies gave us a very small safety margin. With strict rationing we would be self-sufficient for just 12 months.

That left us just two months to fool around looking for a place to sit down. I mentioned this item to Larson on the second day out. I found him at coffee mess sitting alone, staring at his ugly big hairy hands. He was a tall Swede with a slight stoop and the withdrawn manner of a myopic scholar.

As commander of the ship he had the right to keep aloof, but as scribe, I had the privilege of chewing him

for information. I said, "Skipper, if it took us generations to discover all the planets in our own little solar system, what do you figure the chances are of our spotting a planet near our goal, in the short time of two months?"

He was silent while I drew my ration of coffee and sugar, then he opened his hands and seemed to find words written on his palms. His eyes never did come up from beneath his shaggy eyebrows. "If they exist," he said slowly, "we might find one. We have better telescopes and our vantage point in space will be superior."

He was a sorry-looking specimen, and I remembered that the fifty-year-old scientist had left behind a youngish wife who adored the ground he walked on. The handsome, blonde woman had stood heroically beside the ramp and watched, dry-eyed, as her husband ascended.

There had been no visible exchange of farewells at the end, as he stood beside me in the air-lock. They just stared into each other's eyes oblivious to all but the maudlin sorrow of their separation.

Then the portal had closed and widowed her, and I had the feeling that Larson was going to tear at the great, threaded door with his bare hands and renounce the whole project. But he just stood there breathing a little heavy and clenching those tremendous hands until it was time to take off. In a way I envied him an emotion that was long dead in me, dead of the slow corrosive poison of contempt for the whole human race. Dead and pickled in the formaldehyde of ten thousand columns for which the syndicates had paid me nothing but cold money.

Here was a man whose heart could still love, and I hated him for it. I said, "You look like you still have regrets. Maybe this isn't worth your personal sacrifices, after all. If we don't find an inhabitable planet we won't have accomplished much."

"You are wrong," he said quickly. "We have already served our purpose."

"Testing the Drive, you mean?"

He nodded. "This morning in our last radio contact with earth I dispatched the word. The *Larson Drive* is successful. We have passed from our solar system on schedule, and our measurements of ship-objective time check out with the theory—roughly, at least."

He spread his hands out on the table. "This was our primary goal. The expedition ahead is subsidiary. Colonization may result from our exploration, true; but now we have opened the universe."

It was nice to know that things were progressing as planned. I asked, "What do you mean about things checking 'roughly'? Is there some error?"

He nodded and swallowed the dregs from the magnesium cup. "A considerable error, but it's on the safe side. Our velocity checks perfectly, but our estimate of the time-shrinkage factor is so far off that Mr. Einstein's formulae will take some major revision to reconcile what has happened."

"We'll arrive sooner than planned?"

Larson nodded again. "According to shipboard elapsed time we will arrive in the vicinity of our destination in just ninety-two hours from now—a total of 122 hours since take-off. You were worrying earlier about our scanty supplies; this should put your mind at rest."

It didn't displease me. The lack of privacy on this tin bathtub was even worse than I had anticipated. The news came as sort of a reprieve.

I looked at Larson, and suddenly I knew why the long face. His Tina!

For her, ten years would already have passed, and as we sat there talking, weeks of her existence were fading into oblivion—and Hans Larson was begrudging every second of it. Damned fool, should have stayed at home.

I left him brooding into his empty cup and went forward to the little control dome. One wonderful attribute of the *Larson Drive* was that there was no acceleration discomfort. Gravity was nullified at the outset, and ship's gravity was kept at an comfortable one-half "g".

Mac Hulbert, chief navigator, was alone up there, one foot cocked up on the edge of the broad instrument-board that looked like a cluttered desk-top with handles. He was staring out into the void.

Yes, void! They had said it would be black in space, but not even a glimmer of light showed through the transparent dome. As you looked to the side and back, faint, violent specks seemed to catch at your peripheral vision, but it was impossible to focus on a single heavenly body.

Mac didn't turn or greet me. His face was no longer that of the carefree adventurer with whom I had tied on a fair binge less than a week ago.

"Getting you down, too, Mac?" I asked. He was about the only one aboard I could even tolerate. He wasn't as sour on humanity as I, but he granted me the right to my opinions, which was something.

"God, yes!" he said. "Skipper tell you about the time-error?"

I said, "Yes, but what's there to be sad about? You don't mind that part, do you?" To my knowledge, Mac hadn't left anything behind but his dirty laundry.

Hulbert was in his mid-thirties, slender, balding and normally as cheerful and stupidly optimistic as they come. Now he looked worse off than Larson.

"Yeah, I mind that," he said kind of resentfully. "I thought we'd have more time to—sort of get used to the idea of—well, outgrowing our generation. But think, by now many of my older buddies will be dead. A dozen World Series will be over. Who knows, maybe there's a war going on back there?"

Of all the morbid nonsense. Yearning for the obituary column, the sports page and the headlines. But then people are rarely sensible when something disturbs their tidy little universe that they take for granted.

It was a little terrifying, though, staring out into that smothering lamp-black. We were moving so fast and living so slowly that even the light-waves from the galaxies toward which we moved had disappeared. We were reversing the "redshift" effect of receding light sources. We approached the stars before us at such a velocity that their light impinged at a rate above the visible violet spectrum.

Mac blurted out, "It will never work out."

"What won't?"

"Colonization. Not at these unholy distances, even if we do find an earth-type planet or two. People won't leave everything behind them like this. I—I feel cut off. Something's gone, everything, everybody we knew back there. It's terrible to consider!"



I sat down beside him, stared out into the India-ink and faced a few over-due realities myself. Our chances of finding a habitable planet were remote. Finding intelligent life on it was even more unlikely. That such life would resemble men, was so improbable that the odds in favor were virtually nonexistent.

So—what had I really to look forward to? A quick survey of the star-system in the company of these nincompoop ideo-savants, then a return to a civilization of complete strangers—a culture in which we would all be anachronisms, almost a century behind the times.

A parade of faces began peering at me out of the darkness. There was Bess with the golden hair, and Carol and petite Annette—and Cliff, my red-headed old room-mate who knew how to charcoal-broil a steak—and our bachelor apartment with the battered old teevee set and my collection of books and pipes, and there was my out-board jet up on lovely Lake Vermillion where a man could still catch a fat pike.

What would it be like when we got back? More people, less food, tighter rationing, crowding beyond conception.

Hell!

When the rest of the crew learned of our sharply-revised estimated time of arrival they came down with the same emotional cramps afflicting Larson and Hulbert. It was sickening, a bunch of so-called mature technicians and scientists moping around like a barracks full of drafted rookies, matching miniature billfold photos of cuties that were now approaching crone-hood. The whole venture had become a tragic affair overnight, and for the next few days all thoughts turned backward.

So nobody was remotely prepared for what happened. They were even unprepared to think straight—with their heads instead of their hearts. And Larson was worst of all!

On the last day Larson eased off our 1800-mile-per-second velocity, and as the stars started showing again, shifting from faint violet down into the more cheerful spectrum, spirits aboard began lifting a little.



I was in the control-room with Larson and Mac when we got our first inkling. Mac was fooling with the electronic search gear, sweeping for planets, when he gave a yip and pointed a jabbing finger at the scope.

"Audio," he stammered. "Look at that!" He lengthened the sweep and the jumble of vertical lines spread out like a picket fence made of rubber.

"A carrier wave with audio modulation," he said with disbelief all over his face.

Larson remained calm. "I hear you, lad. Don't shout." He studied the signal and frowned deeply. "It's faint, but you can get a fix."

As they played with the instruments I looked forward through the green shield that protected us from Alpha C's heavy radiation. Our destination star was now a brilliant blob dominating our piece of heaven. It was a difficult thing to grasp that we had travelled almost 26 trillion miles—in five days, ship's time.

Mac said, "It's a planet, sure enough, but that audio—"

Larson snapped, "Forget the audio! Give me a bearing, and let's be getting on course. That may be the only

planet in the system, and I don't want to lose it."

His arms pumped and his big hands pawed at the controls as he brought the inertialess drive into manual manipulations.

For the next few, tense hours we stalked the planet at a discreetly low velocity. When his navigation problem was complete and we were on a slow approach orbit, Mac began playing with the communication rig again.

The ship's intercom was cut in, and we had to chase people out as excitement mounted over our discovery. Finally, when his elbow had been jostled once too often, Larson ordered the control room cleared of all hands but Hulbert and me.

When we were alone Larson said, "This is fantastic."

Mac's face was tied into an amazed scowl, too, as he studied the feeble little patterns on his wave analyzer. "You said it," he breathed. "We've got ourselves a sweet little earth-type planet, if we can believe the spectro, and unless I'm stark space-happy, there's something or somebody down there beaming a broadcast smack in our direction, following us around like the string on a yo-yo."

"How do you figure that?" Larson wanted to know.

Mac replied, "At this distance the field strength is too strong for anything but a beamed transmission. Mister, *they have us bracketed.*"

Mac swung to the panel on his left and cut in the communication circuit. "It's strong enough to listen to, now. Let's see what kind of gibberish we can wring out of that carrier wave."

He threw a couple of switches and hunted for the exact frequency. A whisper and a rustle of the carrier brushed the speaker. Mac centered in and turned up the volume.

Then even I sucked air. A voice issued from the sound-cone. A man's voice: "—Icome to New Columbia. Welcome, *Albert E.* Come in, please. Welcome to New Columbia. Welcome, *Albert E.* Come in please."



It repeated over and over. Larson let his breath go first with a nervous snort. Mac and Larson both looked at me as if maybe I had something to do with it. Hands trembling, Mac picked up the microphone and reached for the transmitter switch. Larson grabbed the mike from his hand. "Not so fast, dammit!"





"But they know we're up here," Mac protested. "They even know the name of our ship!"

"And our language," I added. I wasn't bored any more.

Larson nodded slowly. "What kind of devilish intelligence have we run into? I need time—to think."

The way he said it sent a cold draught down my spine, and then my imagination started catching up to his. At our rate of approach to the star system, how could any living being have had time to sense our presence, pick our brains to learn our ship's name, our language, master our method of communication, contrive a transmitter and get on the air?

The magnitude of the accomplishment sent the importance of our little triumph of space travel tumbling into a cocked limbo of insignificance.

For a moment I considered the old curvature of space concept. Could we have somehow doubled back—completing a mystic circle? Was that old Sol up there burning through our green shield? What a laugh that would be! The mental giants of our times backtracking and circling like a tenderfoot lost in the woods on Lake Minnetonka.

Mac cut off the transmitter reluctantly, but he said, "Yeah, I guess I see what you mean, skipper." Larson got to his feet and paced the crowded wedge of space, punching a fist into his other hand with meaty slaps.

He stopped and listened to the soft muttering of the speaker and shook his head. "It makes no sense. It's impossible. Utterly impossible!"

The man's voice from the planet implacably continued repeating the message—no trace of an accent, nothing to suggest an alien origin in its tone, pitch or enunciation.

Perhaps that's what threw Larson so hard. If there had been the faintest taint of other worldliness about it, I think he'd have hauled stakes and gotten us out of there. But the song of the siren was too powerful—the irresistible mental image of a fellow human out here in the bottom of space was salt in the bleeding wounds of Larson's loneliness.

He stared out where the planet must be, some million miles before us. Suddenly the tenseness relaxed from his face and he got the damndest expression of mixed incredulity, hopefulness and sorrow. Tears began welling from his eyes and streaming down the rugged contours of his cheeks.

It didn't add. Nor could I reason a motive for his laconic command: "Intersection orbit, Mr. Hulbert. We'll take her down," he said quietly. That was all. He hunched over the control board and moved things according to Mac's computations.



Soon I could make out the planet. We came in from an obtuse angle with its sun, so it showed first as a crescent of pale, green silver. Then it filled the viewing dome, and Mac began working the homing equipment. "May I acknowledge their message now, skipper?"

Larson shook his head with compressed lips.

"But if we are going in anyway—" Mac argued.

"No!" Larson exploded. Then his voice softened. "I think I know the mystery of the voice," he said. "It must be, it must be! But if it isn't—if I'm wrong—God alone knows. We must chance it. I don't want to know differently—until it's too late."

This was just real great. Larson had some fantastic notion, and he wanted it to be true so damned badly that he was taking us into blind jeopardy when we had the means to probe it first. Real scientific, that.

Humans! Men, and their so-called sense of reason! Larson was a crowning example of the sloppy-hearted thing I was fleeing when I embarked on this joy-ride, and now it would probably be my undoing.

We were homing in on the transmission from "New Columbia", easing down into the atmosphere, and now clouds and land and water formations took shape. The beam led us to the sunlit rim of dawn, and suddenly we were hovering over a great forest, slit at intervals with streaks of glittering blue that looked like deep, wide rivers.

Now Mac touched a switch, and the CW whistle gave us a tight audio beam to follow to the source of the signal. Larson switched to the micro landing controls to ride in like a jet liner on the Frisco-Shanghai run. We slanted gently down until the forest became trees, and the little blue-green splotches were lush, grassy meadows.

And there was the tower, and the low buildings—and the spaceship!

Something happened to me inside when I saw that. It was a kind of tremolo feeling, like a note in a new symphony, a note that springs free and alone, wavering uncertainly, and you don't know which way it will turn.

In seconds that seemed like hours, we were on the ground, the ramp was jammed out and Larson was

blundering down it crying like a baby.

I stood in the port breathing the warm air redolent with exotic new scents and yawped like an idiot, trying to make sense of the huge banner strung a hundred yards across one whole side of the little village. The banner read:

**WELCOME, HANS!
WELCOME ALBERT E.
WE KNEW YOU WERE COMING,
SO—**

And near the center of the banner was the largest chocolate cake, or facsimile thereof, in all creation. It must have been ten feet high and twenty feet in diameter.

But Hans Larson wasn't amused by the cosmic gag. He galloped off that gang-plank like a love-sick gorilla. And I'm a comet's uncle if Tina wasn't there, racing out to meet him, Larson had guessed the truth, and no wonder he hadn't had the guts to test it beforehand!

By the time I got down, out and over to where they were all wrapped up mingling tears, I had it pretty well doped out myself.

I don't know why we had figured that all progress and improvement in interstellar flight would cease just because we had left earth. The eternal, colossal conceit of men, I guess.

When our last signal back to earth had given the okay sign, sure, they started building bigger ships and recruiting another crew. But by the time that the *Albert E. II*, was ready to take off for a more extended expedition, the *Larson Drive* was now the *Larson-McKendrick Drive*, with a velocity of a full half the speed of light, some five times our velocity.

Somehow, Tina had managed to get herself in the party, as Hans had sensed she would. And the time-differential, as it worked out, wasn't serious at all. Tina had been only 32 when we left her on earth. Including the year and a half she had already been with the colony on New Columbia, she was still quite a bit younger than Hans, and just twice as pretty as the day of their separation.

The tremolo note was rising now, the soft, mystic pitch of excitement inherent in the new world.

I turned to Mac, who was grinning like to split his face. I said, "Looks like you were wrong, old boy—about the impossibility of colonizing."

He nodded his head readily, but he wouldn't tear his eyes away from that monstrous, preposterous chocolate cake. The attraction, I discovered, was a little bevy of on-lookers who stood at its base. They were a dozen or more most attractive colonists in the younger age-bracket and unmistakably of the opposite sex.

Mac said, "Yeah, I was wrong about colonizing prospects. Dead wrong. Aren't you glad?"

And now the tremolo feeling split into a crescendo of sub-harmonics and overtones, a magnificent chord of attunement with life and humanity everywhere in the universe. And all at once I knew *I was glad*, happy as hell to see these people from the old hometown of earth.

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