

Last Resort

Stephen Bartholomew

The background of the lower half of the page is a solid blue color. Overlaid on this are several bright green geometric shapes. On the left side, there is a vertical bar and a horizontal bar that meet at a right angle. In the center, there is a large upward-pointing triangle. To the right of this triangle is a downward-pointing triangle. At the bottom, there is another downward-pointing triangle. A horizontal bar is positioned above the bottom-most triangle, and another horizontal bar is positioned to its right, extending towards the right edge of the page. The text 'Project Gutenberg' is written in white, bold, sans-serif font, centered horizontally and partially overlapping the bottom-most green triangle.

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LAST RESORT

The phenomenon of "hysterical strength" at the physical level is well known. Wonder what the equivalent phenomenon at the psychological level might do....

by **STEPHEN BARTHOLOMEW**

ILLUSTRATED BY GEORGE SCHELLING

I inflated a rubber balloon and set it adrift. The idea was that in free fall the balloon would drift slowly in the direction of the leak. This was the first thing I did after I had discovered the trouble. I mean it was the first action I took. I had been thinking about it for some time. I had been thinking about what a great distance it was from Pacific Grove, California to Mars, and how I would never breathe the odor of eucalyptus again.

I watched the white balloon floating in the middle of the cabin. Light reflected from a spot on its surface, and it made me think of a Moonglobe I used to keep on my desk when I was in college. I had turned off the fan, and tried to hold my breath to keep from disturbing the air. The balloon drifted slowly a few feet aft, wobbled there for a minute or two, then began to drift forward again. I decided to indulge in the rare luxury of a cigarette. I lighted one, reached over, and popped the balloon. The piece of rubber hung in the air, limp and twisted. I had not expected that trick to work.

The rate of leakage was very low. It had been some thirty-six hours since I'd first noticed it. This was one of those things, of course, that were not supposed to happen in space, and often did. Every precaution had been taken against it. The outer shell of the ship was tough enough to stop medium-velocity meteoroids, and inside the shell was a self-sealing goo, like a tubeless tire. Evidently the goo hadn't worked. Something had got through the hull and made a pinhole leak. In fact the hole was so small that it had taken me nearly thirty-five hours to compute the rate of leakage exactly. But it was big enough, it would do.

I had held the clipboard in my hand for a long time, rechecking the little black numbers on it again and again. Then I had warmed up the transmitter, raised

Lunar Base, and reported what had happened. I had not reported before because I had not even been sure I had a leak. There's a normal seepage rate, of course; a certain amount of air will seep right through the molecular structure of the hull. That's what the reserve tanks are for. But I had been out a long time, and there wasn't enough left in the tanks to compensate for this. Not quite.

So I reported to Base. The operator on the other end told me to stand by for instructions. That was for my morale. Then I spent some time thinking about Pacific Grove, and the white house there, and the stand of eucalyptus. Then I blew up the balloon and popped it. As I was watching the piece of rubber hang motionless in the air the receiver began clicking. I waited till it stopped, then pulled out the tape and read it. It said, HAVE YOU INSPECTED HULL? I switched on the send key and tapped out, JUST GOING TO. STAND BY.

I opened the locker and broke out my spacesuit. This was the first time I had put it on since lift-off. Without help, it took me nearly half an hour to get it on and then check it out. I always did hate wearing a spacesuit, it's like a straitjacket. In theory I could have kept it on, plugged directly into the ship's oxygen supply, and ridden all the way back to Earth that way. The trouble with that idea was that the suit wasn't designed for it. You couldn't eat or drink through the helmet, and no one had ever thought up a satisfactory method of removing body wastes. That would be the worst way to go, I thought, poisoned slowly in my own juices.

When I finally did get the thing on, I went out the air lock. If the leak had been bad enough, I would have been able to see the air spurting out through the hole, a miniature geyser. But I found no more than what I expected. I crawled around the entire circumference of the hull and found only a thin silvery haze. The air as it leaked out formed a thin atmosphere around the hull, held there by the faint gravity of the ship's mass. Dust motes in the air, reflecting sunlight, were enough to hide any microscopic geyser spout. Before I re-entered the air lock I looked out into space, in the direction away from the sun. Out there, trailing far away, the air had formed a silver tail, I saw it faintly shimmering in the night. I was going to make a good comet.

I got back inside and stripped off the suit. Then I raised Lunar Base again and tapped out, HAVE INSPECTED HULL. RESULTS NEGATIVE. A few minutes later the reply came back, STAND BY FOR INSTRUCTIONS. For my morale.



I lighted another cigarette and thought about it some more. I looked around at the interior of my expensive, ten-foot coffin. I figured I would last for about another seventy-five hours. Of course I could take cyanide and get it over with. But this wouldn't be such a bad way to go. Within seventy-five hours the last of my reserve tanks would be empty. Then I would just wait for the rest of the air to leak out of the cabin. First I would lose consciousness with anoxia. I'd hardly even notice. Then as the pressure got lower my body fluids would begin to evaporate.

Once I had seen a mummy in a museum, it was some old prospector who had been lying in the Nevada desert for a hundred years or so. I was going to look like him, dried up, yellow, my teeth protruding in a grin, perfectly preserved. With no pilot, the ship would go into a cometary orbit around the sun. Maybe in a hundred years or so someone would come and take me back to a museum on earth.

I began to think about my wife, Sandy. I got out a piece of paper and wrote a long letter to her. I thought, maybe she'll even get to read it some day. Writing gave me something to do. I wrote about the time we had gone up to the Sierras together and slept in a sleeping bag at the edge of a four-thousand foot cliff. And about the times we had gone out in our cabin cruiser, the time we both nearly drowned. And asked about our daughter Wendy, who would be four now. I remembered part of an old poem:

Christ! That my love were in my arms,
And I in my bed again!

Writing was all right, until I realized that I had begun feeling sorry for myself, and I was letting it get into the letter. I put the letter aside and wondered what else I could do to kill time. I got out some of the film plates I'd made of the surface of Mars. Of course I had transmitted them all to Lunar Base, but it would have been nice if I could have delivered the original plates. I studied them for a while but didn't find anything I hadn't seen before. Well, I had done my job at least. I had orbited Mars, I had the glory of being the first American to do that. I had dropped the instrument package and transmitted all the data I could get back to Lunar. My only failure would be in not bringing back the ship.

I remembered a conversation I'd had at the last International Space Symposium in Geneva. A buddy of mine and I had taken out one of the Soviet cosmonauts and got him drunk. He was a dignified sort of drunk, a Party member who told

long, pointless Russian jokes with an unwavering, serious expression. He sat sideways on the bar stool, holding his glass of vodka between two fingers and staring straight ahead. He said one thing that I had never forgotten.

"Do you know why we are ahead of you in space?" he had said, staring with dignity at the tall blonde at a nearby table. "It is because of your bourgeois sentimentality. You do not like risking men. You build a skyscraper in New York to house some insurance company. Two or three construction workers are maimed or killed on the job. One of your coal mines collapses and fifty men are trapped. Yet, look. You are afraid of losing men in space because of what the people at home might think. So you are too conservative, you avoid risks. So we are ahead of you. We send out a ship with three men aboard when you would risk only one. We are not sentimental, that is all. That is why we are ahead of you." He ordered another drink and stared into the mirror for several minutes, letting us think that over. Then he went on.

"Yes, you are less scientific than we, less logical. Yet that is your advantage, too. You are more alert to the unprecedented, the unpredictable. You are always ready for the Wild Chance, the impossible possibility. You expect the unexpected. You hope for the hopeless. Being sentimental, you have imagination."

His words came back to me. The unpredictable, the wild chance, the impossible possibility. That was all that could save me now. But what? Maybe another meteor would come along and plug the hole the first one had made. No. I had to think my way out of this one. But what if there was no way out?

I pushed myself to the aft bulkhead, turned and looked forward to the instrument panel. I picked out the smallest meter face. I could just read the numbers on it. I told myself: When I can't read the numbers any more I'll know my vision is blurring from the beginning of anoxia. I thought: When that happens I'll key in the transmitter and tap out, TELL SANDY GOOD-BY.

It would be dramatic anyhow.

A withered mummy in a flying tomb.



The receiver began clicking again. They're still worried about my morale, I thought. I went over and pulled out the tape. It said:

BRONSON HERE. SUGGEST YOU TRY LAST RESORT.

Dr. Bronson was the project director. It was a moment before I realized what he meant. When I did I hesitated for several minutes. Then I shrugged and tapped out, O.K.

I knew what had been happening down there. They had fed all the data I could give them through a computer, and the computer had said no dice. There was no solution to the problem, at least none that a computer could think of with the data available. There was still the Last Resort.

I wondered if cyanide might not be more pleasant. Well, the exects would have scientific interest anyway. The Last Resort was still Top Secret. And highly experimental. It was a new drug with a name a foot long, called LRXD for short. It had come out of the old experiments with lysergic acid and mescaline. I had never heard of its existence until a few hours before lift-off from Lunar Base. Then Dr. Bronson had given me a single ampule of the stuff. He had held it up to the light, looking through it. He said, "This is called LRXD. No one knows exactly what it will do. The lab boys say the 'LR' stands for Last Resort."

What it was *supposed* to do was increase mental efficiency in human beings. Sometimes it did. They had given it to one volunteer and then shown him an equation which it had taken a computer ten minutes to solve. He wrote down the answer at once, apparently having gone through the entire process in his head instantaneously.

Dr. Bronson told me, "It isn't just a matter of I.Q. It increases the total level of consciousness. Ordinarily the human brain screens out thousands of irrelevant stimuli. You're not aware of your watch ticking, or the fly on the wall, or your own body odor. You just don't *notice* them. But under LRXD, the brain becomes aware of everything simultaneously. Nothing is screened out. Furthermore, the subject is capable of correlating everything. The human brain becomes as efficient as a Mark 60 computer, with the advantage of imagination and intuition. We don't know how it works yet, or exactly what it does. I hate to say this. But there's even some evidence that the drug increases telepathic ability."

But then again, three of the volunteers had gone insane after taking the drug. Two had died. On some of the others there was no apparent effect at all.

"We don't even know whether the effects are permanent or temporary," Bronson had added.

So now I was supposed to take this Last Resort and then try to think of a way out of my predicament, with my I.Q. boosted up to a thousand or so. It made me think of my college days, when I had stayed up all night on benzedrine, writing term papers. I remembered Bronson's description of one of the volunteers who had gone insane, and shuddered. Well, I had nothing to lose.

"It is what its name implies," Bronson had said. "To be used only in extreme emergency. Only when you have nothing to lose."

I had put the ampule away in the medicine locker and deliberately forgotten about it. Now I got it out again and held it up to the light as Bronson had done. Milky, white. I strapped myself to the acceleration couch, filled a syringe, and swabbed my arm. I looked at the letter I had started and probably would never finish. I rammed the needle in.



The hallucinations began within five minutes. This was normal, Bronson had said. I waited, gripping the armrests of the couch, hoping I would not begin believing in what I saw.

First there was the meter face directly in front of me. It was blue-green. I had never really seen before what color it was. It was like a round, bright flame. I stared at it, becoming hypnotized. Finally I couldn't stand it any more, I reached over and switched off the panel lights. Then the meter face became the blackest darkness I had ever seen, it was no longer a flat disk, but the entrance to a long, black tunnel, endless and narrow. I wanted to enter the tunnel and—Quickly I shifted my gaze. A gas tube rectifier caught my attention. This was like the meter face, only worse. A cloud of intense blue, flickering, shimmering—As I stared at it the cloud seemed to be expanding, growing, forever flickering and shimmering until it became vast, it filled the universe, pulsating with energy, it was a kind of blue I had never seen before.... I had never seen color before. There was a red plastic safety guard over one of the toggle switches. Suddenly it seemed alive, rather the *red* was alive, the color was no longer part of the object, it was an entity in itself, blazing like flame, liberated from matter, it was a living drop of blood, afire.

I closed my eyes, trying to escape from color, but that was much worse. The colors inside my head blazed out even brighter, more savage.

I turned my head, trying to find something in the cabin to look at that was not bright blue or green or red. With horror I focused on the spacesuit locker. I had left the locker open, the suit hanging on its wire stretcher. I saw immediately that the spacesuit was alive. It stood there motionless, returning my stare, I could not look away from it. I could not move, with fear. Slowly, very slowly, the spacesuit raised an arm and pointed at me. I stared at its single, oval eye, recalling childhood nightmares. Then the suit came out of its locker and began to advance toward me, still pointing its gauntlet at my face. It seemed to take hours to walk across the cabin toward me. I held my breath, waiting. I thought I would scream if it did not reach me, it was taking too long.

Then it did reach me and, bending low above me, wrapped its metallic arms around my body. I turned my face from its mechanical, fiery breath. It began to crush me, I could not breathe, I felt my ribs begin to bend, slowly splinter. My face was pressed against its metallic chest, it was a thin gray wall....

Then there was nothing but the wall itself, dark, thin as a membrane, but impenetrably strong. I was pressing toward it, forcing my way, flattened against it, being crushed slowly between this thin, gray membrane and the tremendous weight of darkness at my back. I knew that if the membrane did not give, if I did not break through at last, I would suffocate and die. In fact I was already dead, the idea came to me with a weight of horror, I twisted, lashing out in total panic. Then the thin gray wall split and gave way, and I was free.

I was still strapped to my crash couch, regarding the instrument panel with absolute calm. Bronson had been right. I was aware of everything. I took in every meter indication simultaneously and correlated their data in my mind, without the help of the computer. I was aware of every sound, the faint hum of the gas tubes and transformers, the whir of the gyros, the reedy buzz of hydraulic actuators, the periodic clicking of the oxygen reclaim unit. I was aware of everything that was happening in the ship, as if it were my own body.

My body. I knew that I would have to explore my new self before investigating the ship. With an effort of will I shut off my new sense impressions, and—looked inside. I sensed the rhythmic muscular action of my heart, the opening and closing of the valves. I felt the surge of blood in all my vessels. I moved my hand to touch the bulkhead, and found that I could count the number of microseconds it took for the nerve impulses to travel from my fingers to my brain. Time seemed to have slowed down, it took an hour for the second hand on the panel clock to make one circuit.

In retrospect I know that this condition of super-awareness must have lasted only for a few minutes. But it seemed then that I had all the time in the world.

I found that I no longer needed to think in words, or even symbols. I could pose myself a problem in, say, four-dimensional vector analysis and see the solution immediately, like a flash of intuition. I had attained total somatic consciousness; I was able to analyze the exact relationship of the drug to the molecular structure of my own protoplasm.

It was then I knew that, although I had recorded no information about Mars that the Russians didn't already have, I was going to bring back home a piece of candy much sweeter.

Wait, now, I told myself. Wait. You have a specific problem to solve. The problem being how to stop that leak in the hull long enough to get home alive. It was a problem of basic survival. I was confident. I knew that if any possible solution to my predicament existed I would find it. I was my own data computer now, but with eyes and ears and imagination. I opened my senses again and concentrated on the flood of information coming at me from the instrument panel. I found that I had total recall, I could remember—simultaneously—every wiring diagram and blueprint of the ship, every screw and transistor and welded seam, that I had ever glanced at. I saw the entire ship as a single entity, a smoothly functioning organism. In a flash I saw a hundred ways of improving its design. But that would have to wait. For a moment I gathered all my psychic energy and concentrated on the single crucial problem of stopping that leak.

And I saw that there was no way to stop the leak. No logical way.



Back at Lunar Base I tried to explain to Bronson what had happened. But I found that it was impossible to explain in words. In fact I no longer entirely understood, myself, what had happened. It was something that had occurred—not altogether on the conscious level. Something about my becoming aware, for a time, of the separate molecules of air within the cabin as extensions of my own body-mind. But I didn't know how to verbalize it.

Dr. Bronson gave me a thorough physical and a preliminary psychological exam. The effects of the drug had worn off, but I felt somehow—changed, I didn't know just how. In fact I wouldn't know until one day two years later, when I

dropped a vial of nitroglycerine, and it miraculously did not go off. Still, Bronson pronounced me ready and fit for a long vacation, and in a few days I was headed back toward Pacific Grove.

The vacation lasted for a week. Then it was a Sunday evening, and I was sitting on the front porch of the white house nursing a highball while my wife was upstairs telling Wendy a bedtime story about a princess who kissed a toad, and it turned into a handsome prince.

I was sitting there in the evening light, inhaling the scent of eucalyptus and thinking for the thousandth time about how much better this was than bottled oxygen. Then a rented car pulled into the driveway, and General Bergen got out, wearing civilian clothes. He came up to the porch and sat down next to me. He did not pause for any pleasantries.

"Where's your wife?" he said.

"Upstairs."

"Anyone else in the house?"

"Just my daughter."

He leaned back and lighted a cigarette. I was about to offer him a drink, but he didn't give me a chance.

"Official orders. From now on, you're Top Secret. You're wanted back at the Spacemedic Center in Washington. You have twenty-four hours to straighten out your affairs."

"What?"

He waved a hand. "I wasn't supposed to tell you this yet. Keep it under your hat." I noticed that the fingers holding his cigarette were trembling. "We spent four days going over the hull of your ship—with microscopes. Then we found it. The leak. The hole was still there. It must have been a micrometeor of high density and tremendous velocity. Burned a hole right through the sealing compound—"

Once again I tried to organize words to explain what I had not been able to explain before.

"But the ship's air did stop leaking. I could never have made it back...."

"But the *hole* was still there!" Then his voice faltered. "Don't you see? My God, what we have yet to learn about psi forces, psychokinesis.... There was nothing to prevent all the air in your ship from leaking out through that pinhole, nothing except—you."

The general leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, looking out into the gathering darkness.

"We've got to find out what this drug *does*," he said.

"The space program ..." I began.

"Space program?" He pulled on his cigarette. "Hell. What are rockets, compared to this?"



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