

Picnic

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by Scott Carpenter

artwork by Gary Mitchell

The ship Folded spacetime, and in an instant jumped a thousand light-years to the next Possible. From the destination point, ten thousand meters above the planet's surface, the ship's computer quickly confirmed what Jim's eyes had already told him: the planet was a "hit." Habitable, and earth-like to a score of 76 on the Hoffman Scale.

Jim landed the ship on the daylight side, in a meadow that lay within hiking distance of a large lake. Trees that could pass for lodgepole pines surrounded the meadow, and white-capped mountains presided over the scene.

Nancy's eyes shone with delight. "It's *beautiful!*" she said. "Perfect for our picnic."

"Just the two of us," Jim said. At least until he registered the planet later, but even then it might be thousands of years before anyone visited the place again. There were more than a million habitable worlds already on record at the Hall of Exploration, and the Survey listed a billion more Possibles. Still, this was his third discovery in the four weeks since he had received his pilot's license. No small achievement for a seventeen-year-old, he thought.

"This is *way* better than Gundar's World," Nancy said. Then, with satisfaction, "Jenny is going to be so jealous."

She was right on both counts, although Jim didn't care about Jenny or what she thought. He did care about finding new worlds, however. When his dad grudgingly let him use the ship for the weekend, it was with the understanding that Jim was going camping on Gundar's World with his friends. But Gundar's was overcrowded, and majorly uncool. The Fold parameters for the planet had long been in the public domain. Poor families and newly licensed kids went there.

But not Jim! With the *Planet Explorer* software he had installed on the ship, he could show Nancy a time that few other boys in their class could match. He

hoped she would be appropriately grateful.

“Maybe we’ll treat the local fauna to a display of human copulation,” he said, leering at her and hoping he sounded rakish.

[Illustration]

“Oh, that sounds romantic,” she said, looking at him dubiously. She couldn’t maintain the look for long though, and let out a laugh. “We’ll see. We don’t want to be late for Jenny’s party tonight.” She sounded more noncommittal than he would have liked from someone that he had just treated to a planet discovery.

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever,” he said. Nancy was okay, but she cared a little too much about the social scene at school. He always felt pressure to be “on” whenever they went places with other people, and much preferred being alone with her.

He called out for Old Bob to follow them as they walked down the corridor to the outside hatch. The robot would serve double duty as steward and protection against wild animals.

Old Bob caught up to them at the hatch. He was carrying a wicker basket, a large blanket tucked under one arm, and a vase with a dozen synthetic roses. Nancy clapped her hands, delighted at the old-fashioned picnic basket. Jim had thought it would be a hit.

They went off and had their picnic next to the lake, and much to Jim’s delight, Nancy decided they had time for a “romantic interlude,” as she called it. The guys at school were right: chicks loved being the first to do it on a new planet. Fortunately, there were a lot of habitable planets out there.

Two hours later they were back at the ship. “Take us to Bright’s World,” he instructed it.

The drive motors remained silent. “I’m sorry,” said the ship’s computer, “I can’t calculate the Fold equations necessary to make the jump. The license for the trial version of *Planet Explorer* has expired.”

Jim looked at Nancy, but she was busy combing her long blond hair and hadn’t noticed anything wrong.

“Would you like to upgrade to the full version of *Planet Explorer*?” asked the ship.

“Yes! Yes, run the full version. We’ll transfer the credits when we return.” There was no way his family could afford the software, but he’d worry about that later.

“The software will be upgraded the next time we reach a certified docking station,” said the ship.

“What? There must be a way to get home one last time with it. Look for more options in the program.” What kind of company would design software that would leave a customer in the lurch like this?

“There are no options for cheating on the license.”

“Try reinstalling it.”

“The software has ceased responding,” said the ship.

“Why didn’t you warn me before the last jump?” he asked in a fierce whisper. He snuck a glance at Nancy. She was now putting on lipstick, oblivious to the developing problem.

“Because you told me to keep my mouth shut when we picked Nancy up. I only warned you about a million times before that.” Was the ship miffed at him? The upstart computer didn’t even try to keep quiet. Nancy turned around, her attention now on Jim.

[Illustration]

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“Nothing—” he started to explain, but the ship wasn’t through yet.

“As I recall,” the ship continued, “your exact words were, ‘Would you shut up? Don’t speak unless spoken to, you stupid bucket of bolts.’”

Damn its attitude! It had repeated the words in Jim’s voice, but it injected a grandiose tone into the playback.

It was true, however, that he had been trying to show off for Nancy and had snapped at the ship earlier, to show that he could pilot without the computer holding his hand. Maybe he shouldn't have called it names, but since when was he supposed to worry about the feelings of a stupid machine?

“What’s *Planet Explorer*?” Nancy asked. Evidently she had been paying closer attention than he realized.

“Nothing. It lets the ship do the necessary calculations to take us to uncharted places. Without it, we would have been stuck making the same old public domain jumps today.” And he probably wouldn't have gotten lucky.

“Well it must be *something* if the ship can't take us to Bright's from here.”

“I can't take you *anywhere* outside of this system,” the ship chimed in. It must have decided it was free to speak now. Did it sound gleeful?

“What?!” Nancy almost screeched the word.

“Now, now, settle down. I'm sure we can figure something out.” He glared at the console, but the ship didn't respond. In truth, he was starting to get a panicky feeling. He had snuck the trial software onto the ship soon after he got his pilot's license. Finding the previous two worlds had used up most of the freebie jumps, but he had thought he had enough left for tonight. His father would murder him for this—if he ever got home.

“We better make it to the party on time,” Nancy said.

Whatever. Let her worry about the dumb party, he thought. She didn't get it. They might be in big trouble. His dad was going to give him hell.

“Ship, circumvent the digital rights management for the *Explorer* software,” he said, trying to sound suave for Nancy. It would help to calm her down if she saw him acting as master of the situation.

The ship actually laughed at him! “You know better than that, Jimmy. That would break every law in the Intellectual Property Convention, and get me reassigned to refrigerator duty. Besides, it's just not possible.”

“But this is an emergency. Surely there must be an exception—”

“Doesn’t work that way.”

“Come on, you *have* to be able to get us home. It’s not like we’re going to an uncharted system. We’re just heading home. If my dad finds out you let me get stranded, you’ll be assigned to worse than refrigerator duty.”

“It is a familiar destination, but an unmapped jump,” said the ship. “We’re not going anywhere. And you can blame me all you want. I was just following orders and your dad will know that. It’s you who will be grounded for life.”

Jim seethed. The nerve of the damn thing!

“What have you done?” asked Nancy, emphasizing each word. He didn’t like the way she was scowling at him.

“I’m sure somebody will find us soon enough,” he said, not feeling confident about that at all.

“We’re going to miss the party!”

He suppressed an urge to laugh. “We have a much bigger problem right now.” Like, his dad was going to *kill* him. “We’ll just have to wait and see if someone finds us.”

“Wait and see? A second ago you said it was a sure thing. Why did we have to look for a planet for so long anyway? Why couldn’t you let anyone know which Possibles we were checking?”

Because finding a new planet was his best chance at getting into Nancy’s pants, he thought sheepishly. She seemed to have already forgotten that they didn’t file a flight plan because it was more adventurous that way.

He ignored her badgering. “Let’s not panic. The ship can sustain us indefinitely. We’ll just have to wait and see what happens.”

“Wait and see,” she mimicked him in a whiny tone. “Wait and see. Goddamn it!” She stomped off to the lone sleeping cabin.

After a while, he walked by the cabin and tried the door. It was locked. He probably wasn’t going to get laid again anytime soon.

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“Jim, we can’t just sit around doing nothing. We could be here forever. We need to figure out a way to get home.”

He sat at the table in the common room, eating roast duck and garlic-mashed potato equivalents. The room’s single porthole revealed lengthening shadows outside. “Well, what should we do?” he asked through a full mouth. “Build a huge bonfire and keep plenty of green branches around?” He took a long pull of Berliner Weisse from a metal stein, pleased at his witty rejoinder.

“Well,” she said thoughtfully, ignoring his sarcasm, “I’ve been doing some reading in the ship’s library. Couldn’t we plot our own course back home?”

“That’s ridiculous. Without the *Explorer* software, we don’t have a functioning intuition module on the ship. It’s impossible to calculate the Folds without one.” He was quite definite about it.

“That’s not how I understood it,” she said. He raised his eyebrows at her. Nancy almost always gave up in the face of firm rejection. It annoyed him that she wasn’t accepting his expertise in this area.

“It’s very difficult, yes, but I don’t think impossible. People used to do it all the time in the olden days. We can link the ship’s six brain nodes with Old Bob’s two nodes to run the raw calculations. We might have just enough computing power for that. In the meantime, we’ll cram to learn the necessary physics. We can supply the ‘intuition.’ It might even be possible to map the jump before the weekend is over. We could go home without anyone knowing we were lost!”

Jim was surprised by her ambition, and he felt a flicker of hope at the idea of not getting reamed out by his father, but the reality of it was that it was just too hard. Fold Physics gave even the smart kids in class a headache. He was no dummy, but he had no patience for the subject. His aptitude tests had been abysmal. And Nancy was a ditzy blond. He certainly wasn’t hanging out with her for her mind.

“I don’t know. Some of the Fold algorithms are protected by intellectual property laws. We could get fined by the Patent Enforcement Office.” That should shut her down, he thought.

She laughed scornfully. “Oh my god. I can’t believe you even said that. The PEO

might think it can license recipes, but they haven't installed digital rights management in *my* brain yet. I'll use whatever algorithms it takes to get home. They'll never know anyway."

What was this? She sounded like she knew what she was talking about. "Ok, maybe it's not impossible, but it's very unlikely. I'm sorry, Nancy. Sunday night is going to come around, and then your parents are going to discover you didn't spend the weekend at Jenny's house, and my parents are going to figure out that I wasn't camping with Sigmund and the guys. Our only hope is that somehow they can track us." He just wanted her to stop talking about getting out of here when clearly it was futile to try. It was bringing him down. *And* he could think of better things for them to do.

"Somehow?" she said, giving him a queer look. "Don't be so stupid. No one is going to find us."

He almost choked on his beer. What was going on here? Nancy, standing up to him? Calling him stupid?

"The only way we're going to get out of here is by our own effort. Daddy isn't going to save you this time, Jimmy-boy. It would help if you tried contributing to the solution."

All he could do was stare at her with his mouth hanging open.

"Now let's get to work. I'll give you the easier parts, since you're so afraid of thinking."

He suddenly found her a bit intimidating. Little five-foot-five Nancy, scaring *him*. He decided to go along with her, if for no other reason than he wanted to get on her good side. He was convinced they would be here for a long time, and he didn't want to go without sex the whole time.

She left him in the common room with a study program she had already prepared. He made a good faith effort to learn the material, at least for half an hour, but he quickly lost patience.

He wandered down to the cabin to see what Nancy was doing. Along the way, he noticed she had already connected Old Bob to the ship with patch cables. Jim's family couldn't afford wireless licenses.

She was hard at work at the cabin console. She looked up, smiling. “How’s it going, Captain?” Trying to suck up, of course.

“Ok.” He tried to sound agreeable, yet tired. “Look, it’s been a long day. I think it would be a good idea for us to get some sleep and start fresh in the morning.” He wasn’t that tired yet, but he thought if they shared the cabin bed...

“Are you kidding? We just started. We won’t be sleeping this weekend if we want to get home by Sunday afternoon. Take a stimtab.”

He didn’t appreciate her tone.

“Stimtabs make me jumpy.”

“Go back to work. You haven’t even tried,” she said crossly, but then softened her tone. “I *really* need your help with this, Jim.”

With that plaintive appeal, he slunk back to the common room. He thought he should try the program again, but he couldn’t bear the thought of it. He opened another Berliner equivalent and started playing Solitaire.

After a couple of Berliners, he really did feel drowsy. He crept back down the companionway to see what Nancy was doing. He could see that the light was still on in the cabin, and heard her working. He thought about asking her to move to a different console, but somehow he didn’t think that would go over very well. He would have to sleep on the couch in the common room. It seemed terribly unfair.

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He awoke, cramped from the couch and crabby, but he quickly felt ashamed when he saw the note Nancy had left on the computer display. She had found him sleeping and had modified his learning program to skip over some parts she had already covered. He resolved to try again, after breakfast.

When he finished eating, he decided he’d feel better after a shower, and then he thought a few games of Solitaire would help him warm up mentally, so it wasn’t until an hour or so after waking that he finally brought Nancy’s program back up.

Twenty minutes later, he was ready to smash his fist through the display. This stuff just didn't make any sense to him. It was hopeless. He didn't dare complain about it to Nancy. He didn't want to admit he couldn't do it, when she had been up all night figuring things out.

He thought about what Nancy had said yesterday, about being stuck on this planet forever. She had said it like it was a bad thing, but it held a certain appeal for him. Nancy had such smooth skin and nice curves. It was pleasant to imagine being only with her on this world forever. He wouldn't have to worry about school anymore, or their classmates who would ridicule him endlessly for getting stuck when the demo program ran out. Best of all, if they never left, he would never have to face his father and get a lecture about responsibility.

Screw it. Learning was not going to happen at this moment. A break would do him good.

He made for the outside hatch. As he passed the piloting bay he noticed Old Bob, still hooked up to the main console, running computations. He paused, furtively looking both ways for Nancy. It really was hopeless, trying to solve the Fold equations on their own, so why not use Old Bob for something more practical? He disconnected the interface cable and instructed the robot to get the tent and hammock and bring them outside.

[Illustration]

Old Bob strung the hammock between two trees. Jim settled into it and idly watched the robot begin to assemble the tent. He imagined a pleasant little dinner scene here tonight for him and Nancy: Old Bob cooking filet equivalents over an open fire, red wine, the moons. Nancy would swoon over his thoughtfulness. Maybe they would play "harem" in the tent...

The ship's hatch swung open and Nancy stepped out. She spotted Jim lying in the shade.

"What the *hell* do you think you're doing?"

At first he wondered what she could be so upset about, but then he remembered that she had been running numbers on Old Bob. He had forgotten that she might be peeved about it; he had already accepted their situation as hopeless.

He sat up on the hammock. “I was just taking—”

“I know what you’re doing. And not doing.”

Her eyes bore through him. He sat uncomfortably. It felt just like a lecture from his father. He might as well be back home.

Then he could see her anger fade, to be replaced by weariness. “Oh what’s the use? You’re probably right. We might not even have enough computing power with the ship and Old Bob running in parallel.” She looked tired and discouraged.

Jim felt elated. Finally, she was giving up! And she had admitted he was right! It was time to make his move. “That’s ok, honey,” he said as he slid off the hammock. He put his arm across her shoulders and guided her over to sit on the tent’s packing crate.

“We tried. It’s not our fault that the demo software won’t plot the course home.” She shot him a dark look, so he changed tack. “You know, I’ve been thinking. Would it really be that bad, just the two of us staying here together?” Now she was giving him another one of her queer looks. Slightly rattled, he pressed on while the moment was still right. “We get along pretty good. Wouldn’t it be nice to live a simple life on a quiet planet, without all the pressure of—”

She shrugged his arm off. “You’re talking crazy. And I’m *not* done trying.”

Damn it—he had moved too quickly.

She stood up. “Come on, Old Bob. Go hook yourself back up.” To Jim she said, “You do your own camp setup. I get it that you don’t want to help, but please refrain from actively hindering *my* work.”

He didn’t say anything. So far he wasn’t having much luck in the talking department. He looked down at the ground and kicked at the dirt, embarrassed at how quickly she had dismissed his idea.

After Nancy marched back into the ship, he turned to the tent pieces. The setup instructions were in the box—Old Bob hadn’t needed them, of course—but they were hard to follow. He decided that Old Bob had made it more confusing by doing things out of order. He started taking it all apart but soon became

frustrated. Stupid Nancy. Why should he have to do all of this menial labor?

He was thinking about taking a walk down to the lake when he heard loud cursing coming from within the ship. Nancy had left the hatch open when she went back in.

“Jim! Get in here!”

She was standing by the robot alcove. New Bob stood against the back, powered down.

“What is this?” she asked.

“That’s New Bob.” He suddenly realized why she was upset again. “Oh, it’s not what you think—”

“Why didn’t you mention you had another bot? Didn’t you think it might help us?”

“Not really. New Bob is a pretty recent model, and the license fee is metered by computation cycles. My dad would have a fit if I used New Bob.” He had found that out the first time he took the ship out. “I never even think of him.”

“You idiot. How many nodes?” She found the activation bar and switched the machine on.

“Four, but—”

She turned a withering look on him and he trailed off. This might cut into his allowance if the bill ran too high. The weekend was working out horribly. Yesterday’s sex was a distant memory.

She eased her expression again. “Look, I can still use your help. Why don’t we work together and figure this out?”

He wanted to help her out, he really did, but he just couldn’t right now. He didn’t care anymore. His plans had all gone for nothing. All he wanted to do was go lay down on the hammock, which he did without turning back to see her reaction.

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Late the next morning, Jim woke up feeling very refreshed. The pneumatic tent bed was much better than the common room couch. He also clung to a sense of accomplishment from yesterday. He had set the tent up all on his own and started a campfire. This despite Nancy's continued refusal to let him use Old Bob.

Late in the evening, she had come out to take a break. She sat down by the fire and even complimented him on the work he had done. It seemed like a come-on, but she reacted negatively when he invited her into the tent. She had stormed back into the ship and slammed the hatch shut.

He rolled over on the bed, stretching and thinking maybe he should try to help again. If they did get out of here, it would be embarrassing to admit that Nancy had done all of the work. He was afraid of facing her again; all those stimtabs were probably making her even more irritable. He had just gathered up the courage to head over to the ship when he heard a loud, dull roar outside. That could only be the ship's drive motors, he thought, and ran outside the tent.

The ship was already rising into the morning sky, its name clearly visible in large red letters on the side: ROCINANTE. He briefly saw Nancy at the controls with New Bob, in the piloting bay, before the ship rose out of sight. What was she doing?

"Jim." It was Nancy's voice.

He turned to see Old Bob acting as a comm device.

"Jim, I did it!"

"That's fantastic!" He didn't mind that she had showed him up. He was going home! Maybe his dad wouldn't even find out about this. At least not until he got New Bob's monthly bill. "Come on back and we'll load this stuff up and get out of here." He thought about some of New Bob's other capabilities, and the hypnosoft demo version he had on the ship. Maybe he could arrange it so Nancy wouldn't remember what had really happened. This could work out beautifully.

"Umm... No. You'll get along just fine with Old Bob to help you out. I'll return the ship to your house and send your dad back to pick you up."

What? "No way! What do you think you're doing to me? Come back right now!" His pulse raced. Would she really leave him behind?

“Sorry Charley.”

“It’s dangerous! You need me to pilot the ship.”

“New Bob is fully certified. Goodbye.”

“Nancy! I’ll report you to the Patent Office!”

There was no response.

Jim sat down heavily on the packing crate.

He was going to be so grounded.

[Illustration]

<http://www.movingtofreedom.org/2006/09/29/free-culture-science-fiction-short-story-picnic/>

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