

BOB ARTER

THE SPACEMAN

NIGHT FALLS FAST IN THE DESERT. The sun reddens, bleeds the sky's startling blue, flattens and squats over the distant low brown hills, sliding the final five degrees in a half second.

Zack and Elena rocked and rolled on the splintering porch as the sudden blackness engulfed them and stars sprang time-lapse from their day jobs. Elena, rocking in her little wooden chair, strained to hear the desert bunnies that would soon invade the wild optimism of her vegetable garden and the midnight coyotes that would follow. She patted the little shotgun she'd never fired and wondered again why she ever bothered to load it. Near her, Zack rolled back and forth in his ultra-light wheelchair, peering up, out, deep into the cosmos. The Milky Way swam above him like so much sap from clover, stars blossoming in billions.

"I wonder how you get to be an astronaut," he said.

"A spaceman?"

"No, an astro — Yeah, a spaceman."

"You mean anybody?" she asked. "Or you?"

"What's the difference?"

"I think you have a problem, Zachariah," Elena said.

He finished the beer he held between his lean thighs and belched as loudly as he could; he knew it offended her. "I do? What problem would that be, Elena?"

She wished she hadn't said it. "Well. Your legs."

He blew straight up. "Why don't you give me a goddamned break for once," he said. "Do you think you could do that? Once?"

"I didn't mean —"

"You never mean, damn it! You just —" He struggled to find words, then struggled harder to suppress them. "Forget it. Okay? Just forget I opened my damned mouth."

She said nothing. Her lips firmed until they hurt.

He said, "You know, you're supposed to be helping me. Remember? That job thing?"

She leaned to carefully lay the shotgun on the porch. When she straightened up she said, "I helped. I made you your dinner. I washed the dishes, I dried the dishes. And you know what, Zachariah? You can work a dishtowel. You could help."

"You get paid to cook, right? Wasn't that the agreement, Elena? See, I could swear that was the agreement."

Elena thought of her family in Vera Cruz, living happy, dancing lives. "I don't get paid to say you can stand up from that chair and walk around on the moon."

Zack spun his chair, twice, three times. He flipped the screen door open and rolled into his little ramshackle house. Halfway through the living room, he got a grip and shouted, "You want anything?"

No reply.

He reached the kitchen, found another beer in the yellowing fridge, thought again about painting it black, with a big Harley logo. On his way back to the porch he snatched up a folded blanket from the small, slightly sprung sofa and paused for a moment to peer into his aquarium, perched atop the television carcass Elena had turned into a planter for

cactus and succulents. Zack's favorite fish was the porthole catfish. It was small and sleek and quick as a comet.

If you were fucked up bad as me, he told it wordlessly, you'd be a long time dead.

It said nothing. After watching it for a few moments, he exhaled slowly and shook his hairy head.

When he banged back through the screen door, Zack moved close to Elena. She said nothing, but her rocking lessened. He shook out the blanket and shook out his manifest frustrations and covered his lap and hers and opened his beer. They sat there for a time, quiet together, listening to the every-night wind hissing across the sand.

Elena hitched her chair closer to his, claimed more of the blanket.

As the stars pinwheeled around his tiny world, Zack watched an enormous silver moon float high from its distant mountain home, his brain lost in near-Earth orbit.

THE UNION HAD MADE ALL THE DIFFERENCE. Zack had fled the ice storms of Buffalo and hammered west through a hail of misdemeanors to Southern California's gentle mountain snowfalls. He came to rest in Big Bear City, a mile and a half high. There were good solid New Age hippies there to sell him grass and find him jobs and blow his just-past-twenty mind. He discovered Sara and lay with her in his little mountain home.

Friends found him work in the construction trade, building cabins for the tourists who came to ski, to hike, to slay the savage trout.

It was pure dumb luck that Zack had finally capitulated, joined the union and become an apprentice roofer. It was the luck of his life that he had done such a half-assed job of nailing in a roof-jack one sunny summer day and, while shingling an A-frame cabin's steep roof, stepped on the jack, felt it collapse beneath his slight weight and slid off the roof and landed on his back.

And broke it.

O'Rourke, a union man, came to see Zack in the hospital down the hill. He looked florid and prosperous in his subtle pin-stripe. "You're not the first man this has happened to, son," he said. He might have been thirty.

"And I won't be the last?" Zack prompted him.

"And you won't be the last. But we're gonna take good care of you. You need anything--anything at all--you let me know." And he handed Zack a business card.

Sara took a walk. She visited him once in the hospital to tell him of the theatrical lighting job she had a chance to land in San Francisco. And then there was a guy she knew in Milwaukee. After the nighttime tears, he may have been relieved.

The union paid the hospital and rehab bills, bought the wheelchair, saw to it that Zack got his Social Security Disability check every month, helped him buy his desert shack at government auction, and sent men to ramp the whole place. When O'Rourke called to ask what else he needed, Zack thought for a minute and said, "For now, a housekeeper and a computer. Either order."

"Housekeeper need a green card?"

"I don't give a shit."

O'Rourke said, "It's already done."

UPS found him out there in the Mojave sand and the man lugged in crates of computer equipment. "Nice place you got here," he commented while Zack signed the invoice. "Bite me," Zack said.

Elena arrived the same afternoon, a shy, copper-colored woman in a flowery summer dress, size slim-to-skinny. They spent four minutes discussing her tasks, which involved cooking and cleaning and the like.

"I sleep in my own room," she told him guardedly.

"You can sleep on the roof if you want," he said, but showed her to her room. "And stay the hell out of mine," he said.

Fresh from eighteen months of care giving for a man who had finally tired and succumbed to Lou Gehrig's disease, Elena considered this job a cinch, and the pay was the same--not enough. But she had a place for her few belongings, a bed and a bath and this angry boy to buy the groceries.

She was twenty-four and had been in the country, illegally, for two years.

When Elena thought of her home in Vera Cruz, when she prayed to return, her brain filled with beaches and lagoons and the music of flowered holidays. She seldom thought of her three brothers chopping cane for a dollar a day. Her only sister had married well; Norma's man followed the tourist trade, and walked the foreign faces around, exclaiming, "Here is a waterfall! Now we will go and see the ocean."

The desert suited her. Out beyond the Southern Californian megalopolis, no one from the Immigration would come looking for an alien with only a street ID. The number on her Social Security Card had belonged to a Denver textiles man who died in 1964. Here in this way-out Flatland, Elena could settle and stay and save her small wages. Her dream was a restaurant of her own in Matetaca, Vera Cruz, a town of many witches.

She scarcely knew what to make of these twenty years of long bones and long hair and constant irritability, whom she was in some way responsible for. With Mister Carl, she had given medicine, helped him eat until he could no longer swallow, bathed his big rough body. With Zack, she cooked and cleaned and argued.

In rehab, they'd taught Zack how to care for himself. He could hoist himself from bed to chair and back. Skinny as a stick, he worked out with weights daily to maintain his upper-body strength, while the lower half wasted away. He could manage the contortions required to wash and dress himself. With three tools, he maintained his wheelchair, made sure the wheels spun true. A mad OT had taught him to drive, using the hand controls installed in his dusty old Plymouth. He learned, in particular, to unroll the adhesive latex condom-type catheter, sealing it over his penis, just as astronauts had done a generation earlier, and to attach its outlet tube to the bag strapped to his calf. He learned to glove and grease and insert the suppository well up into his rectum and to get himself onto the toilet in time.

He could do anything at all that did not require walking or an erection.

He didn't really need a housekeeper, but the word had slipped from his mouth before he thought. Well, he'd have someone to clean and cook for him. Why not? The stove and sink and cupboards were too damned high, anyway.

Longhaired boys came down the hill, tossed Zack into the front of a flatbed Dodge, slipped Elena in beside him and set out to furnish the little house at yard sales and swap meets. Beds, the old refrigerator, a picnic table and benches, the ratty sofa, heaps of throw-rugs, even Elena's rocker — they searched until they'd found it all.

There was a party. During the beer drinking and pot smoking and loud, loud rock, Elena remained secluded in her room. She wrote a long, heart-broken letter to Norma, asking specifically about opportunities for waitresses and maids at the big tourist compound in Boca Rio.

She dreamed that night, and every night, of the restaurant she would someday own, her glorious neon fish-bake palace hard by the fruitful sea.

ZACK HAD NEVER CONQUERED HIGH SCHOOL, nor really cared, so his first step at learning the uses of his computer was to throw away the manuals, fling them onto the floor as he flung his life, leaving it all for Elena to pick up and put away.

He discovered the web and was soon seducing girls in chat rooms, representing himself as strong, handsome and virile, wealthy beyond imagining, a cummerbunded, opera-going, monocled sophisticate. It finally occurred to him that these electronic girls, using net names like Lucy Doo and Sugar Pussy, were almost certainly lying as well. The thought comforted him.

There was a galaxy of porn, raunchier than he'd dared hope, and Zack drenched his eyes and parched libido in a billion blue-eyed blow-jobs, acres of breasts and widespread thighs, every configuration of genitalia he could imagine and a good many others besides. But he had no credit card, and wondered only briefly whether O'Rourke and the boys would sign him up. Worse, oceans of testosterone swelled and raged in his post-pubescent loins and he lay awake at night, prisoner to paraplegia's cruelest consequence: the inability to masturbate.

Mousing around, Zack eventually discovered NASA's web site and read the daunting instructions for would-be astronauts. There was lots of verbiage about college. And the military. Of an average of 4,014 applicants, NASA said ungently, twenty new astronauts were selected every two years. He wondered whether his wheelchair height would render him ineligible; there was a minimum of 58.5 inches. Zack was seventy-four inches *long*, but was otherwise about a four-footer.

No chance in hell, he told himself, but nevertheless downloaded Government Application Form 171, and set about lying as creatively as he could, soaring past his chat room absurdities, inventing universities and whole new regions of scientific inquiry; bolstering his physique beyond any proposition he had ever tendered to EZ2Luv or Dolly Lama. He was chemist and cosmologist; a fearless pilot who, in an imaginary military career, had logged countless hours in his Air Force T-38. *Though I am*

married to a pediatric oncologist, he wrote, I have no reservations whatsoever about leaving my wife and child each day for such lengthy periods of training that I might never again expect to see sunlight kiss their faces.

After printing the fat batch of testimonials he had written concerning and congratulating himself, kudos from professors and clergymen and squadron commanders in different fonts and downloaded letterheads, Zack finally required only a manila envelope and postage.

He fetched Elena.

The journey was some three miles of hot wind and body-clinging dust. Elena refused to ride with Zack, for he drove like a maniac. She herself couldn't drive, especially with his hand controls in the way. So they walked — as always — after Zack had bitched for thirty minutes about a universe of faulty decisions and unhappy consequences. He slung an Army surplus rucksack on his chair back, in which to carry home the provisions she would purchase at the little grocery store. The store also sold stationery and set aside a cubbyhole that fronted as the local post office, zip code and all.

There was first the half-mile of dirt road to the highway then a right turn and blacktop hike to town. "Town" had once been only a truck stop, diesel fuel and scales on Route 138, the way to Lucerne, but as people drifted out of Los Angeles and into the desert's cheap land, planting their Airstreams on concrete pads, adding butane, chickens, swamp coolers, counting on the County's visiting nurses to contain their mortal dysfunctions, up had sprung a rather elaborate convenience store, a tiny bar — "The Broken Drum — It Can't Be Beat" — and a dirt parking spot for the library van's and blood bank's erratic visits.

Elena enjoyed these outings and was actually glad of Zack's company: the desert was littered with meth labs and shallow graves, men with guns and drugs and blank women. Though she'd no idea what Zack might do to protect her — or whether he'd bother — she hated to walk around without him.

And while Zack had finally abandoned the notion of suicide, he remained unafraid of death, and bitterly welcomed the fool who might draw down on him. Wedged beneath his Roho cushion, next to his wallet, was the slim flat Beretta 9-millimeter automatic he'd stolen from his mother back in Buffalo. He kept a round chambered, just in case.

Zack rolled down the highway's margin, an unconsciously gallant gesture that herded Elena off the road and onto the sand. Eighteen-wheel

rigs hurtled by, crashing along through the desert's vast silence. Some nearly blew him off the road, but he steadfastly ignored them.

Actually, they pissed him off.

"Why are we going to town?" Elena asked. She didn't care why.

"You need to buy food. I need to mail some stuff."

"For the Social Security?"

"For the National Aeronautics and Space Administration."

Another truck, a green and yellow Peterbilt so clean and shiny the driver had to own it, came whining up from behind and thundered past.

Zack cursed it, rocked, steadied himself. "I'm applying to become an astronaut," he said.

She considered his words, shrugged. "Why do Americans," she said, "have such grand dreams? Me, I could be so happy if one man would give me children and take care of us."

"Won't be me, either one."

"Oh, Zachariah." Elena wanted to shake him. "I know. And I did not create this pain for you."

"Don't worry about it."

She sighed. "So tell me about these astronautics."

He examined her closely, looking for any hint of sarcasm. There was none. "Have you heard of the International Space Station?"

"No."

"Well, they're building one. In space. It goes around the Earth."

"It's like a ball?" Elena pictured satellites, the animated ones she had seen on television in Mr. Carl's death house.

"It's a big steel... thing. And I know they'll need hard hats, guys who can turn a wrench."

“You could turn a wrench right here, in a shop for bicycles.”

Zack sighed. “In space?”

“Why are you so crazy for space?”

He stopped and stared at her. And said, “Because there isn’t any gravity there.”

Elena considered this and resumed her pace. A quarter-mile down the road, pausing to admire the spring bloom on a saguaro, she exclaimed, “You want to fly!”

“Something like that.”

She thought about the flying men of Matetaca, and tried to picture Zack in a brilliant red coat and embroidered vest. Gazing at the cactus’s pink surprise, she added, “But you know they will never take you, Zachariah.”

Zack suppressed his anger. “I need,” he said slowly, “one guy. A name and a face. I can make him see that I can do it. Can you understand that?”

Elena stared at the paperwork in his hand. She did not say, “What about me?”

Instead, she turned from the saguaro’s spiny bulk and plodded on.

AT THE LITTLE STORE, Elena mourned the staples that were unavailable, especially fresh produce. Dried chilies were okay, but she badly wanted fresh tomatoes, tomatillos, jicama, scallions, and especially cilantro. Shaking her head, she murmured a prayer for her garden. She took what they had, and what they had was either elderly or canned.

She wished they would always shop on Wednesdays, the day the truck came, so she could buy and cook the fresh red snapper for which Vera Cruz was renowned, and get reliable *chorizo* to fry with their eggs for breakfast. Fortunately, food was her concern, not Zack’s. He didn’t care what he ate—canned ravioli, peanut butter, cornflakes. It was no way to stay alive, but she was forced to concede his good health: he remained reed-thin and vigorous, acquiring a swarthy tan from the two one-hour stints spent daily sweating away on his weight-bench between the house and its falling-down outbuilding.

Still, his state of body was her responsibility, and she was determined to feed him well. She sometimes wondered how much of her concern for him was selfish, parasitic; whether she and her garden were more than a gesture toward her someday restaurant. She didn't explore the question very deeply.

Suddenly Zack was roaring, "What the fuck is this? Is this any way to treat a veteran?"

Elena whirled to see that the store had been rearranged; the little postal cubbyhole was now behind a rack of chips. The rack blocked Zack's path.

She rushed to his side. "Be quiet," she said urgently, trying not to hiss. "Let me help."

Sputtering, Zack thrust the stack of papers into her hands. "The address is right on top," he said. "I'm going to the Drum for a beer."

She nodded, and watched him whirl and streak out the door, a finger for the clerk by way of goodbye.

Elena looked down at the thick sheaf of papers. She looked at the ceiling and again through the door. She wished the bananas were fresher.

At her restaurant, she would always have plantains.

SHE WATCHED HIM FROM HER KITCHEN WINDOW four days later, watched him roll up to the sun-bleached redwood bench and push himself up and over, onto it, supine. He was shirtless and had rubber-banded his long hair into a ponytail. Elena was listening to Mexican cowboy music on a Sonora radio station and dicing pork into tiny cubes. "Dinner pretty soon," she called through the window. "Something very good!"

She had written to Norma that she'd decided to call her restaurant *La Casa de Siete Brujas*. Watching Zack take his customary deep breaths, she thought again of the flying men. Ablaze in their scarlet finery, four of them climbed a pole, twenty meters or more to the top. Around the pole were wound four ropes, one for each earthly direction, each wrapped thirteen times and tied at the top.

Lowering himself onto the bench and reaching back for the weight bar, it occurred to Zack that she had been awfully pleasant of late. He gave the matter little thought, but experienced a twinge of guilt that he tried mo-

mentarily to identify. Then he shrugged it off and began his afternoon presses, counting the reps, muscles loosening as he sweated. His mind drifted.

Elena saw each man seize the end of a rope and launch himself, swinging around and down in a widening spiral, thirteen revolutions around the sun. In her mind, every man was Zack.

Losing himself in the heat and rhythm, Zack reached for the handgrips on either side of the airlock's opening and eased through, pausing there to check his tether before floating out into the golden void on the spacecraft's sun side. Emerging, he glanced up and to his right to see Africa roll into another night. He imagined the predators of the Sahel, emerging from their burrows to creep out for water and game.

The next Zack leaped from the pole in Matetaca, and thirteen more weeks, a season, passed.

Inertia carried him fifteen meters from the Station's side and he adjusted his course with several tiny burns of the jets at the base of his life-support backpack. Arriving at a partially installed VHS antenna-*transponder*, he guessed from its shark-fin shape, remembering the blade on the belly of his T-38—he removed a big socket wrench from the magnetic panel and fit wrench to bolt and life to limbs, the only limbs he needed out here in the endless fall of orbit.

Each red-jacketed Zack dropped finally to the ground, arms raised in triumph, the village crowd shouting its approval. *Another good planting season.*

He turned the wrench and spun his wheels, squinting in the sunny night to stay the wobble of the wheelchair he'd never need again.

Four longhaired, red-clad boys orbited the pole, thirteen turns apiece. Fifty-two weeks in the year, or cards in the deck.

When he'd finished the job, Zack turned and walked away.

THE DREAM STAYED WITH HIM after Elena eclipsed the sun to hand him a cold bottle of Miller's—a surprise; she normally lectured him about drinking. It stayed with him during the *carnitas* and black beans and soft flour tortillas they had for dinner, after which he dried the dishes and listened to songs concerning *troqueros borrachos*.

The dream stayed with him always, and in the night Zack slept in a

sandwich of nets, which prevented him from floating away in zero-g and maiming his skull against a bulkhead, a cabin hatch, a virtual ceiling. It floated him likewise through his days and lightened him to the touch of the tendrils of her mind, her narrowing black eyes.

It softened him, the dream, mellowed and completed him. He ate her excellent food with something approaching gusto and gradually stopped creating rancor where none existed. He became an easier man, a fuller man, and an awareness of him grew within her.

Six days a week, Zack rolled the long way down the dirt road to the asphalt intersection and the mailboxes that huddled there. When he returned with the day's mail, Elena would study the counter or busy herself with her *chipotle* chilies.

Two more shopping trips came and went, on successive Wednesdays.

Then came a day, perhaps it was a Monday, when Zack did not go for the mail. Nor did he lift weights in the morning, but in the afternoon he found black enamel paint in the outbuilding and began to paint the refrigerator. Elena moved in and out of the kitchen, stepping around him, talking past him, looking for things to pick up or scrub or launder or sweep.

At four-thirty she said, "Are you going to exercise today?"

Zack shook his head, a little dreamily. He glanced up at her with a shy smile. He rolled over to the counter and turned on the Mexican cowboy music. And returned to his painting.

At five she said, "I need to start the dinner, Zachariah."

He backed up and swung the door open. "You'll get paint on your dress," he said. "Tell me what you need."

Elena stared at him for a moment. Then her dress. She said, "I forgot. I made it after lunch, the meat and the... the... *jugo de lima, y naranja, y cerveza, y...*"

"Right." He got himself a beer, closed the refrigerator door and picked up his brush.

Her cheeks hot, she tended to the paper-thin steaks she'd left soaking for *carne asada* in a bowl of citrus juices, beer, crushed cilantro and several

seasonings. Sprinkling them with salt, she tried to remember if she had rubbed them with garlic.

When she was about to sear the beef, Zack went outside to clean his brushes and hands in turpentine. He came in and, opening another beer, joined her at the table.

He waited patiently while she prayed, then swallowed some beer. When a corn tortilla hovered near her open mouth, he said, "You didn't mail it, did you?"

Elena stopped. Without looking at him, or speaking, she rose and left the room. When she returned, she removed the papers from her big woven bag and put them down beside him.

He leafed through them. Looking at one, he chuckled, without much mirth. "Dear sir," he said. "It has come to my attention." Now he laughed. "That the National—" he paused, sputtering, "the National Aero—" By now his laughter consumed him. He attempted to start again but could not.

Elena sat frozen, staring at him.

At length it subsided and Zack fetched the bandana tucked beneath his cushion and dried his eyes. He blew his nose and said, "Why'd you do it, Elena? Huh? Why?"

She looked into his steady, bloodshot gaze and said, "I need you."

He stared. "*Need* me? *Goddamn*, Elena, what for? There's not one chance in hell they'd ever take me! You know that—you *told* me that! Did you honestly think they were going to shoot me up there to work on their goddamned jillion-dollar contraption?"

"You said one man—"

"I said a lot. I was kidding myself that it could happen. It can't. It's okay."

He drank more beer and stifled a belch behind the bandana. Elena looked bewildered.

"Then why send this thing?" She began slowly and gathered velocity. "At all? Why do you read the computer every day about this space? Why do you lift the weights? Why—"

He said, "*La Casa de Siete Brujas.*" His pronunciation, he thought, was improving. Perhaps there were courses online.

She was flabbergasted. He said, "I read your mail. From Norma. As much as I could in Spanish."

"No!"

"Sure did. Restaurant in Witch City, Vera Cruz. Your dream. You have a dream, I have a dream. Mine won't come true. I can live with that. How about you?"

She said nothing. He said, "Where's the fucking money? There are what, six guys in Vera Cruz with any money at all? American corporations? Resort chains?"

She stared at her untouched dinner and said nothing.

"I mean, a few people own everything, right? And hire locals to do the scut-work? How are you ever going to buy a restaurant, Elena?"

She lowered her head and her voice. At length she said, "I'm not."

"There you go," he said, finishing his beer. "How bad do you need me now?"

NEAR MIDNIGHT, as Zack sat up in bed, staring through his window at another silver moon, his door opened slowly and Elena entered his room for the first time. He silently watched her approach.

She scrunched her shoulders and her thin cotton robe, all swaying leaves, slipped off. She caught it as it fell, folded it and placed it carefully onto the jeans and t-shirt slung over the back of his wheelchair. She looked at him across the moonlit fabric.

He turned down the sheet and blanket.

Elena wore plain white underthings and her own dark skin. Her hair hung straight and black, framing her face, long enough to enshroud one white cup. She filled up Zack's eyes and head and heart, and stung his senseless groin. He sat, unmoving, as she climbed across his body and slipped beneath the sheet, waiting for him to slide down beside her. She reached across the little distance and learned his face for the first time,

hand lingering over his hawk nose and bony substructure. She touched his hair.

She whispered, "I'm sorry."

Zack looked out at the moon. He thought about the Beretta, such an exquisite piece of engineering. Like bicycles, or his wheelchair, or the Space Station. Three tools. He could think of nothing to say.

She thought about the snapper, the tomatillos, the jicama salad she could make, and her brothers cutting sugar cane. She had nowhere to go.

They lay there, side by side in the Mojave, and considered their dreams.