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## **THE PASSENGER**

By **KENNETH HARMON**

***The classic route to a man's heart is through his stomach—and she was just his dish.***

Illustrated by **CONNELL**

The transport swung past Centaurus on the last leg of her long journey to Sol. There was no flash, no roar as she swept across the darkness of space. As silent as a ghost, as quiet as a puff of moonlight she moved, riding the gravitational fields that spread like tangled, invisible spider webs between the stars.

Within the ship there was also silence, but the air was stirred by a faint, persistent vibration from the field generators. This noiseless pulse stole into every corner of the ship, through long, empty passageways lined with closed stateroom doors, up spiraling stairways to the bridge and navigational decks, and down into vast and echoing holds, filled with strange cargo from distant worlds.

This vibration pulsed through Lenore's stateroom. As she relaxed on her couch, she bathed in it, letting it flow through her to tingle in her fingertips and whisper behind her closed eyelids.

"Home," it pulsed, "you're going home."

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She repeated the word to herself, moving her lips softly but making no sound. "Home," she breathed, "back home to Earth." Back to the proud old planet that was always home, no matter how far you wandered under alien suns. Back to the shining cities clustered along blue seacoasts. Back to the golden grainlands of the central states and the high, blue grandeur of the western mountains. And back to the myriad tiny things that she remembered best, the little, friendly things ... a stretch of maple-shadowed streets heavy and still with the heat of a summer noon; a flurry of pigeons in the courthouse square; yellow dandelions in a green lawn, the whir of a lawnmower and the smell of the cut grass; ivy on old bricks and the rough feel of oak bark under her hands; water lilies and watermelons and crepe papery dances and picnics by the river in the summer dusk; and the library steps in the evening, with fireflies in the cool grass and the school chimes sounding the slow hours through the friendly dark.

She thought to herself, "It's been such a long time since you were home. There will be a whole new flock of pigeons now." She smiled at the recollection of the eager, awkward girl of twenty that she had been when she had finished school and had entered the Government Education Service. "Travel While Helping Others" had been the motto of the GES.

She had traveled, all right, a long, long way inside a rusty freighter without a single porthole, to a planet out on the rim of the Galaxy that was as barren and dreary as a cosmic slag heap. Five years on the rock pile, five years of knocking yourself out trying to explain history and Shakespeare and geometry to a bunch of grubby little miners' kids in a tin schoolhouse at the edge of a cluster of tin shacks that was supposed to be a town. Five years of trudging around with your nails worn and dirty and your hair chopped short, of wearing the latest thing in overalls. Five years of not talking with the young miners because they got in trouble with the foreman, and not talking with the crewmen from the ore freighters because they got in trouble with the first mate, and not talking with yourself because you got in trouble with the psychologist.

They took care of you in the Education Service; they guarded your diet and your virtue, your body and your mind. Everything but your happiness.

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There was lots to do, of course. You could prepare lessons and read papers and cheap novels in the miners' library, or nail some more tin on your quarters to keep out the wind and the dust and the little animals. You could go walking to the edge of town and look at all the pretty gray stones and the trees, like squashed-down barrel cactus; watch the larger sun sink behind the horizon with its little companion star circling around it, diving out of sight to the right and popping up again on the left. And Saturday night—yippee!—three-year-old movies in the tin

hangar. And, after five years, they come and say, "Here's Miss So-and-So, your relief, and here's your five thousand credits and wouldn't you like to sign up for another term?"

Ha!

So they give you your ticket back to Earth. You're on the transport at last, and who can blame you if you act just a little crazy and eat like a pig and take baths three times a day and lie around your stateroom and just dream about getting home and waking up in your own room in the morning and getting a good cup of real coffee at the corner fountain and kissing some handsome young fellow on the library steps when the Moon is full behind the bell tower?

"And will the young fellow like you?" she asked herself, knowing the answer even as she asked the question.

She whirled about in the middle of the stateroom, her robe swirling around her, and ended with a deep curtsy to the full-length mirror.

"Allow me to introduce myself," she murmured. "Lenore Smithson, formerly of the Government Education Service, just back from business out on the Rim. What? Why, of course you may have this dance. Your name? Mr. Fairheart! Of the billionaire Fairhearts?" She waltzed with herself a moment. Halting before the mirror again, she surveyed herself critically.

"Well," she said aloud, "the five years didn't completely ruin you, after all. Your nose still turns up and your cheeks still dimple when you smile. You have a nice tan and your hair's grown long again. Concentrated food hasn't hurt your figure, either." She turned this way and that before the mirror to observe herself.

Then suddenly she gave a little gasp of surprise and fright, for a cascade of laughter had flooded soundlessly inside her head.

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She stood frozen before the mirror while the laughter continued. Then she slowly swung around. It ceased abruptly. She looked around the compartment, staring accusingly at each article of furniture in turn; then quickly spun around to look behind her, meeting her own startled gaze in the mirror.

Opening the door slowly, she ventured to thrust her head out into the corridor. It was deserted, the long rows of doors all closed during the afternoon rest period. As she stood there, a steward came along the corridor with a tray of glasses, nodded to her, and passed on out of sight. She turned back into the room and stood there, leaning against the door, listening.

Suddenly the laughter came again, bursting out as though it had been suppressed and could be held back no longer. Clear, merry, ringing and completely soundless, it poured through her mind.

"What is it?" she cried aloud. "What's happening?"

"My dear young lady," said a man's voice within her head, "allow me to introduce myself. My name is Fairheart. Of the billionaire Fairhearts. May I have the next dance?"

"This is it," she thought. "Five years on the rock pile would do it to anyone. You've gone mad."

She laughed shakily. "I can't dance with you if I can't see you."

"I really should explain," the voice replied, "and apologize for my silly joke. It was frightfully rude to laugh at you, but when I saw you waltzing and preening yourself, I just couldn't help it. I'm a telepath, you see, from Dekker's star, out on the Rim."

That would explain, she thought, his slightly stilted phraseology; English was apparently not his native tongue—or, rather, his native thought.

"There was a mild mutation among the settlers there, and the third generation all have this ability. I shouldn't use it, I know, but I've been so lonely, confined here to my room, that I cast around to see if there were anyone that I could talk to. Then I came upon you considering

your own virtues, and you were so cute and funny that I couldn't resist. Then I laughed and you caught me."

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"I've heard of telepaths," she said doubtfully, "though I've never heard of Dekker's star. However, I don't think you have any right to go thinking around the ship spying on people."

"Sh!" whispered the silent voice. "You needn't shout. I'll go away if you wish and never spy on you again, but don't tell Captain Blake, or he'll have me sealed in a lead-lined cell or something. We're not supposed to telepath around others, but I've been sitting here with all sorts of interesting thoughts just tickling the edges of my mind for so long that I had to go exploring."

"Why not go exploring on your own two feet like anyone else? Have you so much brains, your head's too heavy to carry?"

"Unfortunately," the voice mourned, "my trouble is in my foot and not in my head. On the second night out from Dekker's star, I lost my footing on the stairs from the dining hall and plunged like a comet to the bottom. I would probably have been killed but for the person of a stout steward who, at that moment, started to ascend the stairs. He took the full impact of my descent on his chest and saved my life, I'm sure. However, I still received a broken ankle that has given me so much pain that I have been forced to remain in my cabin."

"I have had no one to talk to except the steward who brings me my meals, and, as he is the one whom I met on the stairs, he has little to say. In the morning he frowns at me, at noon he glowers, and in the evening he remarks hopefully, 'Foot still pretty bad?' Thus, I'm starved for conversation."

Lenore smiled at this earnest speech. "I might talk with you for a minute or two, but you must admit that you have one advantage over me. You can see me, or so you say, and know what I look like, but I can't see you. It isn't fair."

"I can show myself to you," he said, "but you'll have to help me by closing your eyes and concentrating very hard."

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She closed her eyes and waited expectantly. There was a moment of darkness; then there appeared in the middle of the darkness a point of light, a globe, a giant balloon of color. Suddenly she was looking into the corner of a stateroom which appeared to hang in space. In the center of the area stood a handsome young man in a startling black and orange lounging robe, holding on to the back of a chair.

She opened her eyes; for an instant the vision of the young telepath hung in the air over her couch like a ghostly double exposure. Then it faded and the room was empty.

"That's a terrible effort," came his thought, "particularly when I have to balance on one foot at the same time. Well, now are we even?"

Abandoning her post by the door, she moved to the couch and sat down. "I'm really disappointed," she smiled. "I was sure you'd have two heads. But I think you do have nice eyes and a terrible taste in bathrobes." She took a cigarette from her case and lit it carefully. Then she remembered her manners and extended the case to the empty air. "Won't you have one?"

"I certainly would like to. I'm all out of them until the steward brings my dinner. But I'm afraid I'll have to wait, unless you can blow the smoke through the ventilators to me, or unless ... you bring me one?"

Lenore blushed and changed the subject. "Tell me, what do you do all day in your stateroom? Do you read? Do you play the flute? Do you telepath sweet nothings across the light-years to your girl friend on Dekker's star?"

"I'm afraid my telepathic powers are a bit short-ranged to reach Dekker's star," he replied. "Besides, what girl would commune with me through the depths of space when some other young man is calling her from the dancing pavilion? And my musical talents are limited. However, I do read. I brought some books connected with the research I intend to do on Earth for my degree, and I have spent many happy hours poring over the thrilling pages of

*Extraterrestrial Entomology and Galactic Arachnida.*"

"I came better prepared than you did," she said. "Perhaps I could lend you some of my books. I have novels, plays, poetry, and one very interesting volume called *Progressive Education under Rim Star Conditions*. But," she lowered her voice to a whisper, "I must tell you a secret about that last one."

"What is it?"

"I haven't even opened it."

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They laughed together, her merriment bubbling aloud in her cabin, his echoing silently inside her mind.

"I haven't time to read a novel," his thought came, "and drama always bored me, but I must confess to a weakness for poetry. I love to read it aloud, to throw myself into a heroic ballad and rush along, spouting grand phrases as though they were my own and feeling for a moment as though I were really striding the streets of ancient Rome, pushing west on the American frontier or venturing out into space in the first wild, reckless, heroic days of rocket travel. But I soon founder. I get swept away by the rhythm, lost in the intricacies of cadence and rhyme, and, when the pace slows down, when the poem becomes soft and delicate and the meaning is hidden behind a foliage of little gentle words, I lose myself entirely."

She said softly, "Perhaps I could help you interpret some verses."

Then she waited, clasping her hands to keep them from trembling with the tiny thrill of excitement she felt.

"That would be kind of you," he said after a pause. "You could read, there, and I could listen, here, and feel what you feel as you read ... or, if you wished ..." Another pause. "Would you care to come down?"

She could not help smiling. "You're too good a mind reader. A girl can't have any secrets any more."

"Now look here," he burst out. "I wouldn't have said anything, but I was so lonely and you're the only friendly person I've come in contact with and ..."

"Don't be silly," she laughed. "Of course I'll come down and read to you. I'd love to. What's your cabin number?"

"It hasn't got a number because—actually I work on this ship so I'm away from the passengers' quarters. But I can direct you easily. Just start down the hall to your left and ..."

"My dear sir," she cried, "just wait a minute! I can't come visiting in my robe, you know; I'll have to change. But while I dress, you must take your spying little thoughts away. If I detect you peeking in here at the wrong moment, I'll run straight to Captain Blake and have him prepare his special lead-lined cell for one unhappy telepath. So you just run along. When I'm ready, I'll call you and you can lead me to your lair."

He thought only the one word, "Hurry," but in the silence after he was gone she fancied she heard her heart echoing him, loud in the stillness.

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She laughed gaily to herself. "Now stop acting like a schoolgirl before the Junior Prom. You've got to get busy and wash and dress and comb and brush." And then to her reflection in the mirror: "Aren't you a lucky girl? You're still millions and billions of miles from Earth and it's starting already, and he's going to do research there for some time, and maybe at the university in your home town if you tell him just how nice it is, and he doesn't know any other girls, you'd have an inside track. Now you'd better get going or you'll never be ready."

"For reading poetry, don't you think this dress is just the thing, this nice soft blue one that goes so well with your tan and shows your legs, which are really quite pretty, you know.... And your silver sandals and those silver pins ... just a touch of perfume.... That's right; and now a little lipstick. You do have a pretty smile.... There, that's right. Now stop admiring yourself

and let's go."

She moved to the bookshelf, frowning now, considered, selected and rejected. Finally she settled on three slim books bound in russet leather, in glossy plastic, in faded cloth. She took a little purse from the table, put the cigarette case into it. Then, with a laugh, she took one cigarette and slipped it into a tiny pocket on her skirt.

"I really meant to bring you one," she whispered to the empty air, "but wasn't I mean to tease?"

In the corridor, she walked quickly past the rows of closed doors to the tiny refreshment stand at the foot of the dining room stairs. The attendant rose from his stool as she approached, and came to the counter.

"I'd like two frosted starlights, please," she said, "on a tray."

"Two," said the attendant, and nothing more, but his eyebrow climbed up his forehead, hung for a second, then slowly drooped back to normal, as if to say that after all these years he no longer puzzled about a lovely young girl who came around in the middle of a Wednesday rest period, dressed like Saturday night and smelling of perfume, ordering two intoxicating drinks—when she was obviously traveling alone.

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Lenore felt a thrill of secret pleasure go through her, a feeling of possessing a delicious secret, a delightful sensation of reckless gaiety, of life stirring throughout the sleepy ship, of a web of secrets and countersecrets hidden from everyone but this unconcerned observer.

She walked back down the corridor, balancing the tray. When a little splashed over the rim of the tall glasses, she took a sip from each, tasting the sweet, cold liquid in her throat.

When she came to the head of the stairs, she realized that she did not even know her telepath's name. Closing her eyes, she said very slowly and distinctly inside her head, "Mr. Fairheart?"

Instantly his thought was with her, overpowering, as breathless as an embrace. "Where are you?"

"At the head of the central stairs."

"Down you go."

She went down the stairs, through more corridors, down more stairs, while he guided her steps. Once she paused to sip again at each glass when the liquid splashed as she was going down. The ice tickled her nose and made her sneeze.

"You live a long way down," she said.

"I've got to be near my charges," he answered. "I told you I work on the ship; I'm a zoologist classifying any of the new specimens of extraterrestrial life they're always picking up. And I always get stuck with the worst quarters on the ship. Why, I can't even call all my suite my own. The whole front room is filled with some sort of ship's gear that my steward stumbles over every meal time."

She went on and on, down and down. "How many flights?" she wondered. "Two or twelve or twenty?" Now, why couldn't she remember? Only four little sips and her mind felt so cloudy. Down another corridor, and what was that funny smell? These passages were poorly ventilated in the lower levels; probably that was what made her feel so dizzy.

"Only one more flight," he whispered. "Only one more."

Down and along and then the door. She paused, conscious of rising excitement, conscious of her beating heart.

Dimly she noticed the sign on the door. "You—you mean whatever it is you're taking care of is in there with you?"

"Don't be frightened," his persuasive thought came. "It can't hurt you. It's locked in a cage."

Then she slid the bolt and turned the handle. Her head hurt for an instant; and she was inside, a blue and silver shadow in the dim anteroom, with the tray in her hand and the books under her arm and her pulse hammering.

She looked around the dim anteroom, at the spidery tangle of orange and black ropes against the left-hand wall; then at the doorway in the right-hand wall with the warm light streaming through. He was standing in the second room, one hand on the chair for support, the other extended toward her. For the first time he spoke aloud.

"Hello, butterfly," he said.

"Hello," she said. She smiled and walked forward into the light. She reached out for his hand.

Then she stopped short, her hand pressed against an impenetrable wall.

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She could see him standing there, smiling, reaching for her hand, but there was an invisible barrier between them. Then, slowly, his room began to fade, the light dimmed, his figure grew watery, transparent, vanished. She was standing, staring at the riveted steel bulkhead of a compartment which was lit only by the dim light filtering through the thick glass over the transom.

She stood there frozen, and the ice in the glasses tinkled nervously. Then the tray slipped from her fingers and clattered to the floor. Icy liquid splashed the silver sandals. In the silent gloom she stood immobile, her eyes wide in her white face, her fist pressed to her mouth, stifling a scream.

Something touched her gently at head and wrist and ankle—all over her body. The web clung, delicate as lace, strong as steel.

Even if she had been able to move, she could not have broken free as the thing against the wall began to clamber down the strands on eight furred legs.

"Hello, butterfly," he said again.

—KENNETH HARMON

### **Transcriber's Note:**

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