

GOING HOME

Betsy McCall

Darkness.

Slowly, a light comes on, illuminating from an indefinable source. Silhouetting the room's occupants.

Figures are seated around a circular table deep in conversation. Light falling on each speaker as he speaks.

"We have all the plans laid out then. The only thing we need now is assurance that the job will be done."

"Don't worry," he says, brown hair gently curling. "The plan can't fail. They'll never even know we exist once we get off the ship. This kind of celebrity status doesn't last long. There'll be other ships, other people. They will soon forget us."

"I'm afraid I don't share your optimism. There's a lot that can go wrong with this."

"Not enough to..."

Yes, enough to mess up everything. We have so much riding on the success of this venture. We can't take the chance that this will blow over and remain unnoticed."

"Jer is right. How are you planning to safeguard your identities?"

"Exactly. Do they know about your father?"

"From what we have been able to determine, they know nothing about our identities, or about my father. We are fairly certain that they don't even have a final passenger list yet. We are playing a team of geneticists that are interested in the genetic mutations caused by the Holocaust. And to compare them to the mutations caused by living in this environment. They will never suspect a thing."

"Fairly' isn't good enough, Thane. Dad would not like what we're doing. Why do you think he came here in the first place?"

"Dad is dead, and you know it. Leave him out of this. I'll not argue over what he would have done. I am not Dad. He did not have to live under these circumstances."

"Don't you think being geneticist is maybe a little too obvious? You would be doing a lot of snooping around, and we don't want it to look that way."

"Hasn't anyone ever told you the best place to hide something is the most obvious place? The beauty of it is, What can we learn from someone's chromosomes? They can't talk, can they? What are they going to tell us? Nothing! Not about what we want to know. Besides, we have two other assurances..."

"Thane, I don't think that's such a good idea. What if They discover you. What will you do about them? You know They are paranoid over there. How can you just take them into the thick of this thing with a clear conscience?"

A woman's voice. The light shifted as before, gently illuminating her golden-blond locks. "Don't worry about them Jer. The oldest is a fine young man, and may already suspect what we are doing. He's bright. If something goes wrong, you contact him and let him take care of it. He's a bright boy. As

for the other, I know. He's such a sweet boy, but then too, who would expect someone like him to be involved in something like this? There's no fear. As a mother, I understand what you're trying to tell me, but if it was dangerous for them, do you really think I would risk them?"

"You've made your point. Let's get out of here and get ready for the big day."

"Thane, have your kids sent up to my office. I'd like to speak to them. Say good-bye."

"Sure, Jer."

"Send the boys one at a time."

"Okay."

The lights fade.

Darkness.

A knock upon the door.

"Come in," a voice from within called.

The messenger opened the solid-oak door, closed it behind him, and stepped up to Mr. Terrill's desk to hand him the memo.

The desk itself, was also made of solid-oak, which, even thousands of years after the Holocaust, was extremely expensive. A gold name plate glistened on the front of the desk, the most attractive object in the room. The stark harshness of the furnishings, and the clutter on the desk itself, left one with little appreciation for the the tastes of top government officials.

Mr. Terrill, a stolid man with a hard face, mean-looking eyes--enough to scare a young child to nightmares, glanced at the memo. Then folded it, and trashed it. He leaned on his desk and rapped his fingers. The messenger backed up to leave, but Mr. Terrill stopped him with a gesture.

"So, poor Haley's son is coming back to us, eh? I think he deserves a welcoming party, don't you?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Terrill." The boy dashed off to deliver the message.

Jeremy van Hagan was waiting in his office when his nephew Ashley knocked on the door. "Come in," he called. Ashley stepped inside the door and closed it behind him. His eyes had followed his feet's movement on the floor as he entered, but now looked up to meet his uncle eye-to-eye.

The first thing that always strikes someone looking at Ashley for the first time is his eyes. Slate-grey piercing eyes that seemed to see into the depths of one's soul. This effect tended to unnerve people, leaving Ashley with few that wanted to know him better. As one gets over the shock of his eyes, one would see his thick, shoulder-length brown hair, the strong square jaw, blade-like nose, not unlike Jeremy's own.

The eyes though; they always drew one's attention. Now those eyes were glaring fiercely at Jeremy.

"What is it, Ashley? I called you in here to say good-bye to you, and you come in looking as if you were ready to shoot me. Is that any way to treat your uncle?"

Ashley walked over to the desk (though "walked" is hardly the word!) and leaned heavily upon it. His face within a decimeter of Jeremy's. "Uncle?! Ha!! You ask me that, and then look what you expect of your own brother!"

"Ashley, if you'd let me explain-"

"Explain?" he screamed, standing up. "What is there to explain?"

"You don't have to go with them if you would rather not-"

"You know that's not what I meant," Ashley said quietly, turning away to regain his composure.

"If you'd let me finish..." Jeremy chided. "It was your father's suggestion. I tried to talk him out of it, tried to convince him of the dangers, but he would not be moved. He's a very stubborn man. His son is not unlike him."

Ashley glared at him, but a smile crept into the corners of his mouth.

Jeremy became serious again and came over to stand beside his nephew. "I need to ask a favour of you." When Ashley nodded he continued, "You musn't speak of anyhting I tell you to anyone. Not your brother. Mother. Father. Anyone. No one is to know what we talk about here. Understood?"

Ashley nodded solemnly.

Jeremy got up and spoke for a few minutes to the guards outside the door. He poked his head in for a moment then shut and locked the door behind him.

"I gather that you know generally what your parents are planning to do?" Ashley nodded. "Do you know how they plan to accomplish this?"

"Somewhat."

"How good is your Terran?"

"Fluent, of course. You should know that. Mother has made me practice speaking it alone for hours everyday for the last six months. It was hard for me not to suspect something," he added.

"Then you are going to be the eyes and ears of this operation. I know that the Terran government may already know about what we're planning, and that I may be sending my brother to his death. But I also know that they will concentrate on your parents and not on you. If anyone else learns of this back-up plan, then you, too, could end up dead. You are our last resort. We need to know what Earth has been doing since the Holocaust. We lost contact with Them, and now They are so paranoid, some in the government here are afraid that They may seek to gain control here once again."

"I know my history," Ashley retorted. "You don't have to explain it. But what of Aldric? What will you do with him?"

"Aldric knows none of this, and best to keep it that way. If your parents die, hide! And fast! I don't know what they could do to the two of you, orphaned by their hands, but if you can stay free, find a way to contact me. We may be able to get you out if the worst happens.

"Also, keep in touch with me, even if they don't. I'll be wanting reports on their progress."

"So, I'm to be a spy spying on a spy?"

"Yep."

"I hope you realize, I don't particularly like this idea at

all, but I'll see what I can do." He ended with a noncommittal shrug.

"That's all I can ask for."

Suddenly, Jeremy put his arms around Ashley and hugged tight. After a moment's hesitation, Ashley joined the embrace. "I will miss you, and good luck."

"You, too."

They stepped back. "Have a good vacation, Ashley," Jeremy called after his nephew's retreating figure.

He sat down at his desk and called to the guard, "Send in Aldric now, Sam."

To many of the older Martians, the day was much like the day had been when a spaceship lifted off Mars for the first time since the Holocaust, and drifted up to meet their neighbours on Phobos and Deimos. But the technology had been restored swiftly, and today there would be no protective suits. Today they did not go to greet friendly neighbors, but many would not admit what they felt in their souls. Today they went to greet enemies in the enemies' lair.

Even so, it was a day of excitement. The young especially felt it in the air. These "vacationers" would bring back information about their lost homeworld, and news if some might ever return permanently.

The stars of the day were the van Hagens. A family on Mars, who only two generations ago, had had a fresh infusion of Earth-born blood when Haley van Hagan had escaped from his homeworld and came to Mars. They trusted the van Hagens. One member of the family, Jeremy, was a trusted member of the Martian government. The other brother, Thane, was a top-rated scientist and as well-liked as his younger brother. Thane had two sons, Ashley and Aldric, who were also going on the expedition. If it was safe enough for the van Hagens, surely it must be safe for everyone. Such was the trust given this one small family.

As the van Hagens boarded the craft, they waved back at their people and said good-bye to them, for at least the next two years.

Then they were gone. For hours people waved at the diminishing point of light. Finally, they went home.

Ashley stared out one of the portholes as they approached the Earth. The blue sphere of light he had watched in fascination as a child, "the Home of Mankind", they called it, and yet, it seemed far less exciting than he had imagined.

Yet, the thought of a light blue sky, and cherry red sunsets seemed as odd to him as the pictures of the once pink sky and blue sunsets of the old Mars. That at least would be something to see.

A mechanical voice sounded overhead: "Please return to your seats for docking. Thank you."

Sighing, Ashley went to his seat and strapped in. At least these seats were more comfortable than the seats had been in the shuttle up to the Martian dock. He certainly hoped the flight to

the Terran surface would be more comfortable.

There was barely a jolt as the ship docked with the Terran spacestation. The voice, strangely feminine, told all passengers to go aboard the station, one by one through the airlock, and report to the captain for further directions. Ashley did as he was bid, following his parents and his brother through the corridor to the airlock, and waited for the other passengers to board before he made the crossing.

They were greeted by a pleasant looking older man, looking like a man whose history had suffered millennia of genetic mutations, who directed them to the starboard airlock. They got to see very little of the ship on their way from the port side. Some of the other passengers grumbled, as did Aldric, but Ashley, at least, said nothing, and his parents far too far ahead of him to overhear.

They left the station without ceremony, and boarded the shuttle bound for Earth. They were directed to their quarters for the hour's trip to the surface by another mechanical voice. They settled in their seats and saw no one.

Ashley had taken a seat by one of the few windows on board. It was not long before the ship undocked and broke away from the station, and the Earth began to grow larger. After a time a protective covering sealed the windows for the entry into the atmosphere. The sensations were not unlike those aboard Martian vessels, except that they didn't seem to be slowing up as fast now.

The descent was smooth, though they touched down with more force than even the worst landing on Mars. This was a function of the greater gravity, and he suspected that the oddness of the descent was due to the thinner atmosphere.

All of the passengers tried to climb immediately to their feet as the shuttle stopped. This proved to be more difficult than some of them could manage, but for Ashley it was similar to the workouts he had been subjected to before they left. So that, during their year of near weightlessness, Ashley and his family at least knew the exercises to keep their body in shape so they could handle the sudden increase in gravity.

There was a slight delay in their release from their metal prison, because the computer had to be checked to make sure that everyone the "visitors" might come in contact with was inoculated against all the viruses that had adapted to the new Martian environment, and that the passengers had been inoculated against all the Earth diseases. The van Hagans, under the assumed name of Altimer for the two scientists and Andreiskii for Ashley and Aldric, sent their belongings to their hotels ahead of them and went to greet the People of Earth.

Like true diplomats, they came out of the shuttle waving to their fans. Holo-cams were everywhere. Newscasters, journalists flooded them like a wave as they descended the steps and down they aisle to the waiting limousines. These, at least, were safe from that mob for next few moments, but they would be flooded by calls for most of the next night.

Before the Altimers were whisked away in their own limousine, Ashley father whispered in his ear. "Tell the truth in all

cases, except about us. We are dead to you for our stay here, understand?"

Ashley had only looked at him gravely.

For Ashley the first three weeks of their stay on Earth proved to be very successful. He contacted Jeremy once a week in order to pass on the information he gathered; always at a different time and place so as not to be tracked.

What Ashley did not suspect had nothing at all to do with him, for They had almost no idea he existed, nor cared. All their efforts were concentrated on the Altimers. In that respect, everything was going beautifully for them. Unbeknownst to the Altimers, they were about to die. .

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"Ketti, could you bring me a glass of water. My throat has been dry for days," Thane called to his wife while he bent over what appeared to be a sample of skin tissue, but what was actually a microscopic government document.

Ketti came over with two glasses. Handing one to him she took a sip of her own. "It must be the flu or something," she said. "My throat had been real dry, too."

They were forgetting their inoculations.

Eyes suddenly blurring, Thane turned away, rubbing his eyes. He tried to concentrate on his work, but it was becoming more difficult.

Ketti only lasted until the sunset. When Thane went back to see why she wasn't answering his calls, he found her sprawled on the floor; spilled acid eating away at her silky blonde hair, the delicate flesh of her fingers. Her face.

He went to get help, but collapsed as he reached the door. Sagging against it, his weight nearly pulling the old-fashioned thing off the wall. Guards found them later. Doctors of the State, would later call it heart attacks caused by stress.

Ashley knew there was something wrong. A feeling that had lasted in the back of his mind since they landed on Earth, that only now surfaced.

At first, he tried to make himself believe they were only working late. When he called their apartment around midnight, they still had not returned.

A scream.

Ashley was startled out of his reverie. Thirteen year-old Aldric came running out of his room, tears in his eyes. Ashley had never seen him so shaken up, so out of control, even as sensitive as he was.

He bawled hysterically in Big Brother's arms; his sobbing incoherent. Ashley rocked like he had done when Aldric was smaller, trying to comfort him, but nothing seemed to work.

Slowly, unobtrusively, Ashley let his mind free. Slowly letting his thoughts drift and find Aldric's. He was so shocked by what he said, that Aldric's body jerked in backlash of Ashley's sudden emotion. Ashley managed to calm his brother enough to

stop crying.

"Aldric, go get some clothes on. A walk will make you feel better. With a nightmare as bad as you've obviously had, you'll never get back to sleep. Not right now, anyway."

Aldric nodded miserably, and went back to his room to change.

He was back out in five minutes. Dressed, though he looked like he had done it in his sleep: not very well. Ashley took him by the hand and guided him out the door and out into the night.

They just kept walking. Aldric never complained; he was asleep on his feet. But unbeknownst to Aldric, he had made a mind-link with him again, and ran through Aldric's dream again. The more he saw it, the more he believed it. The confusion, the pain. Then almost an overhead view of men and machines mutilating their bodies beyond recognition. Mother's face and hands already burned away by acid. . . . Lights burning his eyes-

Ashley's mind was ripped from Aldric's, and light glared through his closed eyelids, jolting Aldric awake. They'd found them. Damn!

The two brothers ran. Aldric didn't ask why, he just followed his brother, too scared to even wonder why. But They, in their machines followed them. Hours they ran, before they fought their way back into town and disappeared in the nearly deserted ancient subway system.

Jeremy paced his office. It had been nearly a month since Ashley's last communication. A week since the report that the "Altimers" had disappeared and Ashley had been cut off. He knew his brother and sister-in-law were dead. There would be no investigation on Earth. His two nephews, too, he feared, were dead. Ashley would have tried to contact him if it had been possible, and Aldric knew nothing about the scheme.

Jeremy sighed and left his office. The people would have to be told. . . .