

ODD MAN OUT

BY LEWIS SHINER

FIRST THE DREAM. Then, when he rolled over to escape it, the bright, shooting pain in his arm. He woke up with the pain and a buzzing, throbbing head. For a few seconds he lay dazed, unable to recognize the cramped, stuffy metal room he lay in. Slowly, the memories began to trickle back. He got only pieces. He knew he was in a spaceship. He remembered that he had been to the moons of Jupiter. He had no idea what he had found there. There were four other people on board. He could not seem to recall their names. Each piece of data was isolated, conjured up no corollaries, led to no further revelations.

He got up and searched through his things. His eyes did not want to open all the way; a close, alkaline smell caught in his throat. He rubbed his shoulder absently. Finding a diary, he sat down on his narrow cot and opened it.

The writing inside shifted and blurred. He struggled to keep his eyes in focus, managed to read a few disjointed sentences. He learned that his name was Swenson. It seemed right enough, but not irrevocably correct. The names of the other crewmen were also there, and he had a fair idea of the faces. One name, Miller, echoed something from his dream. The dream itself was gone.

Someone pounded on the door. The cubicle was smaller than a broom closet, and the noise resounded in his brain.

“Okay, okay!” he shouted. “What do you want?”

“Are you all right?” He recognized the muffled voice as belonging to Jones, the captain.

He got up, careful not to bump his head on the low ceiling, and opened the door. Jones, medium height, black, ordinarily handsome, looked terrible. His eyes were bloodshot and puffy, his face drawn, blotchy and unshaven. He smelled bad as well, but Swenson knew that it was a problem they shared. His own body felt sticky and unpleasant.

Beyond him, in the cramped center section of the ship, sat Davis and Ingersol. They were equally bleary, equally morose. The air outside Swenson’s room was no better than inside, and possibly worse: thick, malodorous, hard to breathe.

“I’m okay,” Swenson said. “What’s wrong?”

Jones turned away and one of the others said, “Something fucked up in the air system.” Swenson thought it was Davis, but he wasn’t certain of anything. “We’d all be dead except that the computer finally figured out what was going on and cleaned it up.”

Swenson was lost for words. He had no experience to draw from, was afraid to ask questions. The other astronauts seemed unpleasant and distasteful to him, but he had no idea if this was unusual. Did the air always smell this bad? Should he admit his amnesia?

“I was really groggy when I woke up,” he said. The others all nodded.

“Where’s Miller?” he asked.

“Sleeping it off. We already checked him, he’s okay. Just shaky.”

He sat down at the table. He was repelled by Davis and Ingersol—their haggard faces, their heavy, sweaty bodies, their complacency. They started a canasta game, ignoring him. A book lay upside down near them; Swenson spun it around and looked at the cover. *Celestial Mechanics*. He found both the title and the concept offensive, turned the book back around. He drummed his fingers on the table.

He needed to know where they were, how long it would be till they got back to Earth, what he was supposed to do on the return trip. The emanations of hostility from Davis and Ingersol pushed him away from the table, even as the thought of returning to his coffin-like cubicle seemed unbearable. He got up and climbed the ladder to his crash couch.

The top of the central chamber was a domed display screen, with computer readouts in green superimposed over the black of space. The vertex of the dome was seven feet from the floor, and the couches grew horizontally out of the wall beneath it. His couch was in the highest rank, next to Jones’. Again, this knowledge had an objective ring to it, not the conviction of true memory.

Hoisting himself onto the couch, a sharp pain went through his arm. He winced, and a momentary flash of the dream shot across his consciousness, too fast for him to hold onto. He could not remember what had happened to his arm—could not conceive of anything on board that could have caused it. The sudden violence of it disoriented him, left him with a helpless, childlike fear.

He crawled into his couch and leafed through his mission plan. The timetables, graphs and numbers helped fill the holes in his understanding, oriented him in terms of the ship’s progress. According to the mission clock, they were only a few days out from Jupiter, with weeks to go before they reached Earth. He wondered if he would be able to stand the confinement, the smells, the alienation for that much longer.

Jones pulled himself into the seat next to him and studied the readouts flickering above them. After a moment or two he began to covertly examine his own mission book. Swenson recognized the forced casualness, knew that Jones’ memory was weak too. He wanted to say something to the captain, but was afraid of embarrassing him, forcing him into a corner.

“You all right?” Jones asked.

He noticed the room spinning a little, knew he must look green and bilious. “Not really,” he said.

“Maybe you better go lie down again.”

He nodded, and clambered back down the ladder.

Davis and Ingersol did not look up as he squeezed by them and shut himself in his own cabin.

The pain in his head had eased a little, and the cramps in his legs had relaxed. He felt more of a gentle drowsiness than the heavy stupor he had awakened with. He assumed he was coming out of it, recovering from the effects of the bad air. He lay down, forcing his fears away, wanting to sleep off the rest of the poisons in his system.

He slept, and when he woke up this time, he remembered the dream.

The aliens looked like people. That was the most striking thing. They had normal human bodies, faces that with only a little surgery or makeup could have passed easily on a crowded street. It was their minds, their attitudes that were different. Alien, terrifying.

Swenson watched while one of them picked up the man called Miller and calmly tore him down the center of the chest with his two hands, insensible to the gushing blood or the tortured screams, his eyes registering only a mild curiosity.

The dream Miller was not the one that Swenson knew.

The Miller he knew was short, with red-brown hair and compressed features. The Miller he watched in his dream was thin and blond, with an aquiline, aristocratic face. The head had fallen off, and he could see the features clearly.

He did not question, in the dream, that the man's name was Miller. He knew it with a conviction, with a totality of awareness that escaped him when he was awake. With the same intensity, he knew he was in danger, that if he were caught in the alien base he would probably die as casually, as brutally, as Miller.

He needed to get away, quietly, to find his way back out of the underground camp, back across the frozen surface of Callisto. To warn the others that the aliens were dangerous, that they were strange and foreign, and they weren't like people at all. And that was when something grabbed his arm and he wrenched away, feeling the muscles straining, and ran for all he was worth.

A leg jerked violently and he woke up in a sweat. Before, his memory had been like a pointillist painting, but now the gaps had closed and his thoughts had depth and solidity again. He knew the dream had been more than hallucination. It had been real, authentic memory. And Miller...

Was there a Miller on board? If so, was he tall and blond? Or short, thick, and reddish-brown? He had to find out. He stood up carefully and was relieved to see that his legs were steadier.

Davis and Ingersol were still at their canasta game. Swenson squeezed past them and knocked on Miller's door. "Come in," said a voice, and he opened the door. With Miller in bed and Swenson standing carefully bent over, it was possible to close the door. He shut it and looked at Miller.

He was short, with reddish hair and a tight, wrinkled face. Part of Swenson identified him as Miller, and part recoiled from him as a total stranger.

"What's wrong, Swenson?"

He licked his lips, and had to make a couple of tries to get his voice to come. "What did you do with Miller?"

"Are you crazy?"

"Keep your voice down," Swenson said, sounding more frightened than commanding.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Miller sat up on the bed, too fast, and bumped the bulkhead above him. His face didn't even register the impact.

Swenson felt a chill run the full length of his body. "Don't you feel anything?" he asked.

Miller's eyes seemed to shrink in his head, as if the flesh had sphinctered closed around them. The movement was completely alien, impossible for human anatomy. "Go back to your hole, Swenson," he said, "and keep your mouth shut. As long as you behave yourself, I won't say anything to the others. They'd just lock you up and leave you for the rest of the trip."

Gripping the handle of the door, Swenson said, "Let me see if I have this right. One of you killed Miller, and then they fixed you up to look human and take his place. It was easier to tamper with our memories than to try and fool us into believing you were the real Miller."

Swenson stared at the alien's eyes, shrunken to an infinitesimal size. "You just need to get on the planet to do whatever it is you're trying to do," he went on, too frightened to run, to even stop talking. "Jones and I are the only ones who'll be talking to ground control, the only ones who could give you away. Ground wouldn't have known you were a ringer until you were out of the ship, and by then it would have been too late, wouldn't it? How am I doing?"

"You're stark raving mad," he said, but Swenson knew the truth, and the knowledge was visible on his face. The alien had opened his mouth to shout when Swenson hit him with the first thing he laid his hands on. It was a helmet, and it dented with the force of the blow. Even so, the alien was barely stunned and came after Swenson with a hideous yell.

He can't hit me too hard, Swenson thought, or tear me in half, or do anything that would give him away. So Swenson hit him again with the helmet, and by the time Davis and Ingersol pulled him off, the job was done. The alien was dead.

They locked Swenson in his cabin, their faces drawn and frightened. He didn't blame them. He knew how he must have looked when they found him, standing over the body, waving the bloody helmet and screaming about alien menaces. Davis had given him a shot and it was starting to work on him. Swenson didn't mind—he felt at peace with himself at last. Once they landed on Earth, they'd find out who the alleged Miller really was, and he would be a hero. He could wait.

FOR A COUPLE OF SECONDS he didn't realize where he was, and it only came back bits and pieces at a time. He knew he was on a space ship, returning from Jupiter space. There were three other men on board, not counting poor Miller, who died on Ganymede.

His face and arms were bruised, and he had no memory of how it had happened. But there were bigger gaps in his past that he worried about.

He looked outside the cubicle and saw two short, burly men leaning over a table, playing canasta. His head was reeling, his vision not focusing, and just for a second he thought he saw the farther man's eyes shrink back into his head.

He shook off the illusion and went back to his cot. He was very drowsy and disoriented, needed to sleep some more.

He wondered how soon they would be getting back to Earth.

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