

## **Tom Purdom:** Romance in Extended Time

I didn't hear the three missiles strike when they landed on the rear wheel of our vehicle. The missiles were drops of plastic with just enough mass to make it through the air and they were moving at a relatively low speed—about ninety meters per second, I would guess. On a low-gravity planet like Mercury, a modest muzzle velocity will give you all the range you need for most practical purposes.

At the moment the missiles hit, I was lounging on a reclining chair, under an awning that protected me from bird droppings, falling insects, and other woodland indignities. I was taking some pleasure in the fact that my accommodations were a sizable improvement over the closets spaceships offer their passengers.

I was traveling at a leisurely pace through an idealized temperate-zone forest composed of well spaced, aesthetically varied three-hundred-meter trees. My conveyance had been purchased from an owner who had stocked the refrigerator and the wine chest with a connoisseur's selection of prefabricated food and wine. The fabrication unit situated near the rear wheel had been equipped with programs that could produce several hundred items that were supposed to be just as palatable as the champagne I was currently holding in my hand.

On my left—where I could give it an occasional politely conversational glance—there was a face that displayed an intriguing interplay of two themes: sensuality and alertness. Ling Chime's features were round and fleshy, but her genetic designer had tempered the fleshiness with a sharp nose, high cheekbones, and eyes that seemed to be constantly dancing around the landscape. On my right the Elector—Ling's employer—was dispensing genuinely entertaining gossip about the world of the arts. I was even willing to admit that the Elector was just as attractive as Ling was, in her large-scaled, arm-waving way.

The whole scene was permeated, in addition, with a pleasant touch of the exotic—the light that created peculiar, inconsistent shadows under the trees. The ecodesigners had created a park-like environment, but the light was a constant reminder that the only thing protecting us from the full blast of the sun was a wall that was so thick and milky it diffused the small percentage of the sunlight that slipped past its molecules.

At that time—it was 2089, according to my records—the Mercury habitat was still something of a wonder. On the Moon, people still lived in stand-alone cities dug into the rims of craters. On Mars, they were still arguing about the rights and wrongs of full scale terraforming. On Mercury, I could peer through the trees and observe the giant towers that supported a globe-circling greenhouse, three kilometers high and twenty kilometers wide. From space the habitat had looked like a thin white band that circled the planet at a sixty degree angle to the equator. Eventually, according to the developers, the urbs built into the towers were supposed to house a billion people.

"My drive wheel has developed structural defects," the car said. "I am instituting repair procedures."

Ling was the Elector's business manager—the factotum who took care of her employer's practical affairs, while the Elector concentrated on the creative efforts she considered the primary purpose of her life. Ling didn't miss a beat as she turned around in her chair and rested her finger on the car's main screen.

"Give us the details," Ling said.

The car had already slowed to a stop. "The drive wheel has developed three large cracks," the car reported. "Continued stress could result in collapse."

The Elector threw back her head. The electronic bracelets on her left arm flickered and rainbowed as she gestured at the landscape.

"I thought you told us this was a new vehicle, Joseph."

"How long will the repairs take?" Ling asked.

"Approximately ten minutes."

A small, single passenger three-wheeler lurched off the road on our right and bumped across a tree root as it jockeyed past us. The transportation modes lining up behind our rear wheel included riding animals, two-passenger carts, and four hikers who were being followed by a motorized baggage hauler. The "road" was a narrow strip that was covered with a hard mat of surface grass. It had been designed so two vehicles going in opposite directions could just squeeze past each other.

By Mercury standards, the traffic on the road was uncomfortably dense. The high speed vacuum rail had been shut down at the worst possible time. This section of the planet was approaching the beginning of its thousand-hour night. Half the people who lived in this part of the habitat had headed for the forest and a last minute rendezvous with the pleasures of "outdoor life." Now all that recreational traffic had been inflated by the people who had decided to use the road net when the rail system had stopped operating.

Ling had jumped off the car and started examining the rear wheel. Her finger traced one of the cracks. She turned around and peered through the trees. She was wearing a close fitting jacket-and-pants outfit and her businesslike movements accented her slimness.

"My repair system has detected the presence of destructive molecular entities," the car said. "Remedial action is underway."

The Elector's bracelets shimmered again. "Is that thing telling us we're being *attacked*?"

Ling hopped back on the car and bent over the fabrication unit. She ran her hands across the unit's interface and I realized she was searching its external databanks.

"I suppose we shouldn't be surprised," Ling said. "You were willing to come all the way to Mercury just to cast one vote. I suppose we shouldn't be surprised somebody might be willing to engage in a little violence just to stop one vote."

"A little violence!" the Elector orated. "Do you really consider this a *little* violence, Ling? Have you any idea what a clump of those things would have done if they'd landed on one of *us*?"

A red light flashed on top of the fabricator. The time strip on the side of the unit produced a 7:17 and held it.

"There's a car parked around that last bend," Ling said. "You can see it through the trees—right where they could have fired at us. I think there's four people in it."

"And once the repairs are made," I said, "they'll just follow us until they find another spot where they've got a good shot. And hold us up another ten minutes."

Ling gave me a quick glance of approval—the kind of glance that still evokes a foolish rush of pleasure, no matter how many times a woman who's captured my fancy bestows it on me.

"Are you telling me they merely have to stop us four times?" the Elector said.

Ling pointed at the time strip on the fabricator. "In seven minutes and seventeen seconds we can have our own version of the same kind of weapon they probably used—two minutes to download the fabrication program, five minutes and seventeen seconds to fabricate it. If you'll put your expense program on your notescreen, you can see just how much it will cost you, along with the price of half a dozen smoke bombs. The missiles we'll be firing should be the same type they're using—low impact devices equipped with moles that snip breaks in the long chain

molecules that make up the plastic in the wheel. If Joe will give me some help when the time comes, I think we can arrange things so they have to sit around waiting for repairs while we put some distance between us."

\* \* \*

The Elector wasn't really called the Elector. That was only a title I had bestowed on her in the privacy of my own mind. Her full name was Katrinka Yamimoto Oldaf-Li and the only thing she elected was the winners of a set of ten prizes. The prizes were awarded by an organization called the All-Mercury Coalition of Documented Creative Specialists and they were presented to their proud recipients once every eighty-eight-day Mercury year.

The Elector was a well-known creator of the kind of simulated habitats the less sophisticated members of the human community like to surround themselves with when they're forced to endure a few minutes of inactivity. (Not famous, please note—just well known. There's no reason you should feel culturally deficient if you've never encountered her name before.) I had sampled one of her creations during the voyage to Mercury and it had been the kind of vision I tend to favor—an imaginary world in which people spent their lives dancing in elegant settings and browsing through gardens populated by citizens who dressed themselves with understated (but unmistakable) refinement. She liked clothes that flattered tall, slender men, but that was, from my viewpoint, the only serious flaw in her work.

Citizen Oldaf-Li had been living on Mercury when she had placed her first simulation on the market. She had spent most of the last ten years enjoying the pleasures of the Earth-orbiting cities, but she had maintained her membership in the All-Mercury Coalition of Documented Creative Specialists.

Now she was apparently one of the leaders in a faction that was trying to unseat the current officers. It was hard to believe anyone would spend three months in a spaceship for such a minor cause, but I had learned at a very early age that there were no limits to the absurdities humans would commit once they began joining organizations.

If you look through the databanks, you will find several entries in which journalists and other members of the pseudo-employed compare me to the eighteenth century adventurer Giacomo Casanova. I read all twelve volumes of Casanova's memoirs during a down period in my finances when I was in my sixties. He lived in the eighteenth century and I live in the twenty-first, but we would have given similar answers to certain questions if some time traveling psychologist had bedeviled us with the same personality assessment program. We would both have agreed that sexual encounters are a flat experience if they aren't combined with romantic feelings. We had both decided, at a very young age, that we would spend our lives following the impulses of our hearts. I had been seven years old the first time I had been awakened by the strange feelings a member of the other sex could evoke. I had been sixteen—and obsessively fascinated with a woman ten years older—when I had promised myself I would make those feelings the central concern of my life. I didn't want to waste one hour of my life listening to committee reports.

I had boarded the ship as the devoted companion of a flamehaired, amusing woman who was emigrating to Mercury to escape a burdensome grown son. I had believed we could keep each other diverted for the entire ninety-three days we were going to be imprisoned in the ship. Instead, I had discovered that I had exhausted her capacity for entertaining exchanges in the first five days of our liaison. On the forty-first day of the voyage—fifty-two days before we were scheduled to reach Mercury—I had placed my investments under the total control of my alter program and put myself into deep sleep.

And then, five minutes after I trudged through the disembarkation tunnel, while I was still feeling numb and semi-conscious—I turned my head as I maneuvered through the passenger lounge and saw Ling Chime sitting in front of a panoramic screen that displayed the craters and hard shadows of the real Mercury on the other side of the wall. She was sitting at a small,

single-pedestal work table and she was staring at her notescreen as if she were planning a move in a championship game tournament.

The Elector had spent most of her time on the ship working at her trade. Ling had been less work oriented but she had spent several hours each ship day superintending the Elector's business interests. I had seen her a few times during the first half of the voyage and her face had always left me with an after-image that floated in my mind for several hours. But that had been all there had been to it.

So why had I responded with such a rush when I had seen Ling sitting in front of the panorama? Had it been the atmosphere created by the hard-shadowed desert behind her? Had it been the fact that she was focusing her entire attention on her notescreen and I was getting my first look at the intense competence she brought to everything she did?

I didn't know. I never would know. I just knew she had ignited the emotion that was, for me, the wine and the salt and the cream of life.

In Ling's case there was a small drawback—as there frequently is. I had picked up some information on Ling's background when I had been exploring the Elector's organizational antics. Ling had earned three doctorates and she still hadn't celebrated her thirty-second birthday.

The age entry had given me a mild shock. I can usually tell people's ages to within twenty years, no matter what they've done to keep their physiology and their appearance in peak condition. A woman of eighty and a woman of twenty-five may look almost exactly alike, but the older person will normally carry herself with an authority and sophistication that can't be simulated. I had watched Ling guide the Elector through one of the mandatory social rituals that had opened the voyage. She had been so self-possessed I had automatically assumed she was at least twice as old as she really was.

There had been a time when the discrepancy in ages wouldn't have troubled me. The older male, younger female pairing is a combination as old as the species. I didn't have any problem with the reverse situation either. When you're in your nineties, the fact that a woman is twenty years older than you doesn't make that much difference.

But that was *my* attitude. It was already becoming obvious some of the younger members of our species were developing a different outlook.

I have been living with technological upheavals since I was old enough to regard the world with some measure of understanding. I was one of the first people to implant a musical performance system in my nervous system. I've struggled with the possibilities created by personality modification technology. I watched molecular technology flower into a major force after decades in which it looked like it was destined to be one of those tantalizing daydreams that remain permanently out of reach. Nothing, in my opinion, has changed the world more than the ability to modify human genes.

Moles have given us things like personal fabrication units and projects that could circle Mercury with a fully enclosed habitat in six Earth years. Genetic technology changed what we *are*. Ling could awe me with her competence because she had a brain and a nervous system that her parents had ordered for her in exactly the same way I had ordered my clothes. She could remain cool under stress because they had chosen a set of glands that equipped her with that kind of temperament.

So why was someone like Ling working as a personal assistant to someone like the Elector? What did she think when she looked at someone like *me*? Was I just a primitive life form to her? An old man fumbling around the Solar System with an outmoded set of physical components?

The woman who had drawn me to Mercury had been fleeing a son who was six years younger than Ling. Her son apparently believed men and women my age were the ultimate enemy—a

group that was going to sit on society and block every channel of advancement for centuries into the future. *I gave him everything I could, his mother had said. A forty percent intelligence enhancement. Looks. A coordination component that would have made him a professional athlete when you and I were young. Aggressiveness. And what do I get? A son who tells me I'm as obsolete as a piece of thirty-year-old software.*

The Elector started gesturing and emoting as soon as she realized I was steering myself across the lounge toward Ling's work table. It didn't take me long to find out why Ling was working with such intensity. The Elector had planned to hop out of the orbit-to-surface shuttle and board one of the high speed rail vehicles that raced through the vacuum just outside the habitat. She would arrive, according to her calculations, three hours before the deadline for casting her vote. Unfortunately, the governing body of Mercury—the Conclave of Talents—had once again decided it had to worry about the safety and long term well being of the people it was supposed to serve. The Talents had decided this section of the rail system needed some special maintenance work. It would be six hours before a vehicle glided down the rails.

Ling was looking for a road vehicle the Elector could buy or rent. If she could find one sometime in the next half hour, they could drive past four stations and board a functioning rail vehicle. I watched Ling work at her notescreen while the Elector paced out big circles behind us. Then I slipped away to another table and opened my own notescreen.

My financial program updated its statement on my current worth and I asked it for a list of the current bids for road vehicles. The top bid on the list had been posted by Ling and it had been totally ignored. As I had expected, most of the people who already owned road vehicles weren't interested in selling.

I stared at the figures on my screen. If I doubled Ling's offer, I would be eating up almost 25 percent of the profits my alter had earned for me while I had been asleep. . . .

Most of the immediate responses came from idlers who apparently thought I was some kind of ignorant off-worlder. Five people advised me I could turn right as I left the disembarkation lounge and find a shop with a large-scale fabrication unit that could produce any vehicle I wanted within five hours.

*In case you haven't noticed, one wit expounded, you're living in a society in which you can have anything you want for the price of a little energy, some cheap raw materials, and a small payment to the people who designed the product and wrote the fabrication program. I realize you've just landed on our planet. But we have more of the civilized conveniences than you may think.*

*I said I need it immediately, I replied. IMMEDIATELY.*

It was a reckless thing to do—an invitation to squeeze me until I strangled. But it brought results. An image of a three-wheeler bounced onto my screen seconds after I finished writing. The list of accessories indicated the owner had been planning a romantic trip of her own. The asking price was 30 percent higher than the amount I had offered.

Ling was still hunting down possibilities when I hurried back to her table. "Please excuse me for interfering in your problems," I said. "I have just been reassessing my own plans. As it happens, I ordered a touring road vehicle before we left Earth. If you would be willing to share my accommodations for the next few hours. . . ."

\* \* \*

Ling pulled two sections of a weapon out of the fabrication unit and fitted them together. Her new possession was a practical-looking device with a skinny barrel and a wide, bulky stock.

"There's five smoke bombs in the fabricator, Joe. Can you drop two of them over the side when I

give the word? Then tell the car to move. And drop more bombs as you roll."

"I don't think that will put too much stress on my martial capabilities."

"What makes you think they won't fire through the smoke?" the Elector demanded. "They'll still know exactly where we are."

"I'm assuming they're not trying to kill us," Ling said. "They can't fire through the smoke without running the risk they'll hit one of us."

I watched her as she slipped around the front wheels and started working her way through the trees. Fashion was once again going through a period in which clothes and body styles emphasized the classic sexual differentiators. Women were spotlighting their breasts, wearing long skirts, and even draping themselves in the kind of elaborate gowns the Elector favored. Men were developing their shoulder muscles and adopting clothes that drew attention to the results.

It was a development I could support with enthusiasm. What was the point in having two sexes if there wasn't any difference between them? I was too short to look physically impressive but I had grown a beard and put myself through a training program that made me look solid and muscular. Ling had managed to conform to fashion without compromising her ability to function. She had picked clothes that emphasized her liveness and the gracefulness of her movements. Her hair had been cut so it bobbed just above her shoulders.

There have been times—many times, unfortunately—when people have looked at the woman who had currently aroused my interest and wondered why she had paired off with someone like me. In this case, I honestly thought we would make an attractive couple. If I could lure Ling away from her employer for a few tendays, we could enjoy an interlude that would be a nice mix of companionship and sensuality. We could follow the temperate zone, perhaps, as it moved around the planet. Or would Ling prefer the kind of long twilight we were currently experiencing?

"Don't you think it might be best if you didn't stare at her?" the Elector said. "Even if they didn't see her leave the car, they might wonder why you're so fixated on that part of the landscape."

I stood up and glanced into the fabricator. Five oval objects had been lined up on a storage shelf.

The car's main screen emitted a trio of discrete trumpet notes. *There's a red activation button on the side of each bomb, a written message from Ling announced. You can release the bombs whenever the car tells you the wheel's repaired.*

I examined one of the bombs without pulling it out of the fabricator. The Elector was eyeing me with an ironic smile.

"You have intriguing tastes, Joseph Louis. I have to confess I thought *I* was the one you were interested in."

I shrugged. "My reactions to women are totally unpredictable. I thought about having them modified many years ago. But I decided I'd rather just let them lead me where they will."

"And that's why you've led such an adventurous life?"

"Believe me, it's been much less turbulent than the entries in the databanks indicate. Most of the time, it's just a matter of a few hours with this one, or a few tendays with that one. I'm interested in pleasure, not excitement."

"And how much time are you planning to spend with Ling? I should warn you—we're heading back to civilization ninety-eight hours after I cast my vote."

I stared at her. "You're going to turn right around and pen yourself up in a spaceship for another

three months?"

"I can do my kind of work wherever I am. I'm far happier, in fact, when I'm someplace where I don't have to put up with *weather*. I moved into this place two years after it opened and I got tired of hearing people lecture me about it before I'd been here a single Mercury year. Every time we had a rain storm I had to listen to somebody telling me I should be happy I was living in an environment that was so big it could maintain its own cycles *just like the Earth does*. Personally, I'd rather pay the extra rent and live in environments that have to be managed down to the last molecule of air."

"The repairs have been completed," the car said. "I await your orders."

I turned away from her before she could see the gloom that was settling over my face. My hands ripped two bombs out of the fabricator and dropped them onto the road surface. Two red clouds enveloped the car.

I watched the clouds expand along the road. We had been traveling toward the night side of the planet, so the wind inside the habitat was actually blowing in the direction we had been moving. The temperature difference between the night side and the day side could have built up enormous winds inside the habitat, but the engineers had arranged things so the air flow remained mild and steady. The habitat had been designed with several doglegs, and the landscaping had included hills that could act as windbreaks. The trees probably helped, too.

I ordered the car to resume progress and we edged forward. Puzzled faces stared at me through the fog as two three-wheelers passed us going in the other direction.

The smoke had covered the entire width of the road behind me. I looked back and saw Ling skimming through the mist with the long strides of the expert low-gravity runner. I had spent several tendays mastering that skill when I had first emigrated to the Moon. I wasn't surprised to discover I would never do it as well as she could.