

People think I am crazy.

This is because I keep telling my tale time and time again. After each telling I am rewarded with stares of disbelief or stares of pity, and sometimes with outright laughter. But I feel it is my duty to tell it, to inform the world that the reality we think we live in is a cosmic lie.

But people listen to what I say. They do not believe, but they listen. They listen because part of the tale is history, because I am truly the astronaut who once set forth in the starship *Zeus* for Van Maanen's Star; who brought the starship back to Earth after his fellow astronauts, Scott and Marchen, were killed.

Yes, they listen, and they believe that part, but they do not believe that the starship exceeded the speed of light, providing me, before the on-board computer self-corrected and brought the ship back below c , with a glimpse of true reality's naked face. And they do not believe when I tell them what I saw.

It is the ancient mariner, and he stoppeth one of three. "There was a ship," quoth he.

The ancient mariner is me.

But I am not truly ancient. It is true that I have been retired from the Space Service, but this was not because of my age; it was because far more time passed on Earth during the *Zeus's* flight than passed for me. The true years that went by built up my length of service to pension point, but even if they had not, I would have been retired anyway because of the injury I suffered when the meteor impact threw the computer out of whack and killed Scott and Marchen. The injury was to my hip, and despite corrective surgery I limp slightly when I walk, because my right leg is shorter than my left.

I say "true years." But the many years that passed on Earth were no truer than the few that passed for me on board the *Zeus*. Both are products of c . Basically, there is no true time, and since space and time are indivisible, there can be no true space either.

No doubt there are many people to whom I have told my tale or who have heard it second-hand who say that the real reason I was retired from the Space Service had to do with my mind rather than my hip. Conceivably they are right. Nevertheless, although it is possible for a person to be crazy and not know it, I am certain I am sane.

I am going with this girl in the small town where I live. Her name is Barbara Black, and she is a black girl. People think this is strange, too, although they never say so, at least not to my face.

You would think that by now racism would have vanished even from the minds of people who live in small towns. It has not. My parents are outraged. They have an only son who tells tall tales in bars and coffeehouses, and as though this were not bad enough, he is going with a black girl. I can understand their attitude, because they are from a much older generation than mine. Indeed, they are much more like my grandmother and grandfather than my mother and dad. But I cannot understand the attitude of the younger people in town. It is as though the callous hatred of their ancestors has been handed down to them in their genes.

Barbara does not seem to mind the virulent looks cast in our direction. She seems to walk above the paths of ordinary mortals. I feel sometimes that she is as much of an outsider as I am. Before I met her I would sometimes see her walking down the street, and her eyes would always reach out and touch mine. One time I saw her looking down at me from the window of her room in the hotel. I often saw her in bars and coffeehouses, in the background, sitting at a table, all alone. We met by chance one night. I had just told my tale in a coffeehouse and was going out the door, and she was just coming in. We did not bump into each other, not quite, but we came close enough to initiate a conversation, and not long afterward we were walking down the street beneath the stars. Barbara and I.

I have never told her my tale, but I am sure she has heard it second-hand.

I have never told her, either, about the glimpses I have been having since my return to Earth.

I have bought a Mercedes-Benz. Why not? I can afford it. But my parents think it is awful that I

should squander so much money when I am not working. They are afflicted with the Protestant ethic. They think it is sinful of me to lie around and do nothing, even though I am relatively rich. In their philosophy, a man should work, work, work.

It is summer, and Barbara and I often go for long rides in the country. Sometimes I let her take the wheel. The car is bright red in color, and the redness makes her seem blacker than she really is. Blacker, but no more beautiful. She was beautiful to begin with. It is a fine car, but I doubt that it has the power Mercedes-Benzes had of old, and probably it doesn't ride as well. But I am a poor boy grown rich, and do not miss a bit of frosting on my cake.

When I am with Barbara, I never have glimpses. And I never tell my tale in any of the bars we sometimes stop in. But she can tell from the way people look at me that they think I am queer.

I told my tale to the debriefers after I brought the ship back to Earth. They listened politely and asked lots of questions. And they recorded everything I told them. Afterward they had me tell it to one of the shrinks the Space Service employs. I could tell from the questions he asked me that he was trying hard for paranoid schizophrenia. Shrinks always try for that. I think they like to let the term loose because it sounds so erudite and mysterious. I do not think even they know exactly what it means.

He kept asking me to describe the room with the two windows in which I found myself after the *Zeus* exceeded c. I could not describe it clearly, because its walls and ceiling and floor were little more than layers of darkness. I could see through the layers to other layers, and the layers seemed to go on forever.

He kept zeroing in on the desk I had found myself sitting at. "What kind of a desk was it, Captain Royce?"

"It was just a desk."

"Was it made out of steel or wood?"

"I don't know."

"And you were sitting before it, presumably on a chair, staring at the—ah—paperweight and the spaceship lying on its surface?"

"Yes."

"And the spaceship was an exact miniature of the *Zeus*?"

"Down to the smallest detail."

"What did you think the paperweight was?"

"I've told you over and over that at the time I didn't think anything. But afterward I concluded it was the universe."

"Was it sort of like one of those little glass paperweights you pick up and shake and cause it to snow inside?"

"Sort of."

"Could you see stars in it? Galaxies? Quasars?"

"All I could see was blackness."

"Why didn't you pick it up and shake it? Maybe you would have seen stars then."

"I didn't think to."

"All right, Captain Royce, let's get to the windows. Let's take the one you looked out first, the one on your left, I believe you said. Tell me again what you thought you saw."

"I saw a mountain. But it wasn't truly a mountain. It was Marchen."

"You mean that Marchen was so large he appeared to be a mountain?"

"Yes. He was sitting on a gray plain with his knees drawn up to his chest and his arms locked around them, sort of in a fetal position."

"And the other window—what did you see when you looked through that?"

'Another gray plain—perhaps the same one—and Scott lying on it. Like a gigantic ridge. Those were the positions I found both men in, later on in the cabin, after the *Zeus* dropped back below c."

"When the meteor penetrated the hull and the cabin's air was sucked out into space, you were in the command module, were you not?"

"Yes. Marchen and Scott were off duty. The meteor not only penetrated the hull; it also jammed the interconnecting lock and affected the relays of the on-board computer, causing it to accelerate the *Zeus* beyond c . Prior to the impact, we had been traveling at just below c ."

"Captain Royce, you're an astronaut, and as an astronaut you must have enough scientific background to know that were a spaceship to exceed or even equal the speed of light, it and everyone on board would be transformed into energy. The *Zeus* couldn't have exceeded c . If it had, you wouldn't be here."

"Nevertheless, it *did* exceed c , and I am here."

"Thank you, Captain. That'll be all for now. Why don't you lie down for a while? You look as though you could stand some rest."

I did not tell the shrink about the glimpses I have been having since my return to Earth. Nor do I tell him about them when I go to see him monthly, in keeping with the Service's orders. He would like very much to put me away but has insufficient grounds to do so. Why should I lend him a helping hand?

My relationship with Barbara is platonic. I do not wish this to be so; I am in love with her, and she, I think, is in love with me. But our love seems to drive passion away. She does not even invite me up to her hotel room. It is always only a kiss and then goodnight when I take her home. It is impossible to look at her and not want her. She is goddess-tall, and her black hair falls to her shoulders. It swirls sometimes in the wind when we go driving. She wears summer dresses that bring out the graceful sweep of her legs and the smooth flow of her hips. When she walks, it is like a princess walking. I am tempted sometimes to ask her if she ever traced her genealogy; if she did, I am sure she would find she is the descendant of an African king. And then at other times I am not sure. She has an odd universal quality, as though she did not spring from any race, as though she is not part of mankind.

I do not know where she is from; she has never said, and I have refrained from asking. She is as much a stranger in town as I was when I first returned. As I still am, for my former friends have grown old and my conduct has alienated them. I am far younger than they, but in their eyes I am an ancient astronaut, deranged from his journey among the stars. An outsider. And Barbara is an outsider beside me.

My glimpses of non- c reality occur more and more frequently. They differ starkly from what I saw beyond c . I had one the other night when I was driving home after leaving Barbara at her hotel. Like its predecessors, it was of a maelstrom. It was as though mankind and the world and all the stars and everything that had ever happened and everything that will ever happen had been put into a cosmic mixing bowl and the beater turned on. I saw events, faces, scenes, constellations, quasars, pulsars whirling in the night. I glimpsed my mother's face, my father's. I glimpsed a thousand faces I had never seen before. All whirled among stars and battles and cities and primitive tracts of land, in a wild melee.

I suppose that such glimpses should not surprise me. It is hardly logical that the universe when glimpsed from within would make more sense than when glimpsed from without; that if I could sit at a desk, if indeed it was a desk that I sat at, and see the cosmos in the form of a paperweight, that the interior of the paperweight would follow the dictates of science.

A favorite question of my shrink's, when I mention the paperweight, is, "Did you think you were God?" Were I to say yes, he would have me. Schizophrenics often believe they are God, or that they sit at God's right hand. But I simply tell him the truth: that my moment beyond c was too ephemeral to allow me to think and that my thoughts since have never built up to a point where I regard myself as anything more than a mere man.

If the glimpses were the only heritage of my flight, it would not be so bad. But tonight, as I stand in my backyard looking up at the stars, I grow to the height of the moon. I reach out in wonderment and touch its cold, still face. Then the illusion vanishes—if illusion it was—and I am Earthbound again, a little Earthman staring at the stars.

My quandary has led me to Kant. I thought perhaps he could help. He touched the truth, this little old man of Königsberg. But he ascribed it to the wrong effect. It is not our *a priori* perceptions that impose space and time; it is the speed of light. *c* has built this lovely prison mankind lives in, made sense of the thing-in-itself. It has made reality real in an acceptable form. It prevents man from being a poor beggar whirling with things in spacelessness. It has created space and injected her with the lifeblood of time.

Perhaps I should add my insight to the tale I tell in bars and coffeehouses. Perhaps I should take the ultimate step and come right out and say that space is not real. Perhaps I should tell this to my shrink. But I have already implied as much, and were I to say so outright, I would be inviting laughter in the first instance, and in the second, institutionalization.

Perhaps I should tell Barbara the truth as it has been revealed to me. Perhaps I will. But first I must tell her my tale, and about my glimpses through the curtain of *c*.

I have risen again to the height of the moon and touched its cold, still face.

Someday, no doubt, I shall rise to the height of the stars and burn my fingers on some fiery prominence.

Sometimes when I look into Barbara's eyes I feel she is not real. Her eyes are infinitely deep, and sometimes I think I see stars in them. Tiny stars, far, far away. And sometimes she blurs before my gaze, and her blackness becomes part of the night. At such times I reach out and touch her face, and I find its softness reassuring. Barbara is all I have. She accepts me; she does not mind that people think I am crazy. With her at my side I feel that I can endure the mishmash my glimpses have revealed reality to be.

"Barbara, Barbara, I must tell you my tale. I must tell you, about my glimpses. Listen, Barbara, and please don't laugh."

She listens beside me in the night. I have parked the Mercedes near a woods far out of town. She listens in the night, moonlight and starlight pale upon her face, her deep, dark eyes upon me. I tell her of the maelstrom that reality has become before my eyes. I tell her of what I saw beyond *c*; of mountainous Marchen and ridge-like Scott, dead upon the plain of nowhen; of the paperweight-universe I found at my fingertips; of the miniature *Zeus*. I tell her how I have grown to the height of the moon and touched its face. I tell her about Kant and how he was almost right. And I tell her finally that I no longer believe space is real.

When I have finished, she touches my hand. "I had to wait for you to tell me, although I knew. Otherwise, it would not have been fair."

I feel her cool fingers in my mind. I sense their therapeutic palpations. "Your perceptions must be mended. They have made you a thorn in my side."

"Who are you?" I whisper.

"You must know who I am."

"No. I don't know."

"I am black but comely.' Would you not agree?"

"Behold thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair.' "

"Would you prefer a maelstrom? Or would you rather, waking in the morning, see the gentle light of the new day in your room? And walking down the morning street, see trees standing straight and tall, and high, high above them, the blue sky? And later on, in seeming time, would you not rather look up into the sky and see a moon you could not touch? Is it not far, far better for the stars to be in their proper positions? That which seems to be, is, but for this to be so, one must see through a glass, darkly."

Her words seem to come from far away. It is as though she has left me. And yet there is a black girl sitting on the seat beside me. The black girl who looked at me when she saw me passing on the street; who looked down at me from her hotel window. Who almost bumped into me one night after I had told my tale. Who walked with me beneath the stars. Yes, sitting there beside me. Barbara Black.

Yes. Barbara Black. I have been to space, and I have come back and found her. In space, I was injured by a meteor impact that killed Marchen and Scott. I dreamed a grotesque dream that I thought

was real, and after my return I told it again and again in bars and coffeehouses. And I kept imagining I could perceive the thing-in-itself.

The night is warm around me. The sky is bedighted with stars. Such lovely stars! And there, high above, is that "orbed maiden with white fire laden, whom mortals call the moon."

I look into Barbara's eyes and see the stars again. I kiss her, and her lips are still and cold. Still and cold, like the moon. I have a tenuous memory of touching the moon. It vanishes before the kiss is done.

"Tomorrow," she says, "I am going away."

"Don't go—please. Or if you must, take me with you."

"I can't."

I kiss her again, and her lips are even colder than before. In a sense, she has already gone away. At length I drive her home. "Goodnight," she says when I drop her off. But what she really means is goodbye.

I have taken a job in this little town where I live. I have taken it partly to please my aged parents but mostly to fill the long days of dying summer.

Barbara is gone.

I tried to find out where she went, but she told no one, and she left no forwarding address at the hotel. None of the bus drivers I have talked to remembers a goddess-tall black girl. I checked the airlines in the nearest city. There was no record of her booking passage anywhere, and no one remembers having seen her.

I am all alone.

"This room with the two windows you found yourself in, Captain Royce. Please describe it for me again."

"There was never such a room."

"You told me about one. And you told me about an anthropomorphous mountain and an anthropomorphous ridge that you saw through its windows."

"It was all in my mind."

"And the paperweight-universe and the miniature starship. Were they merely in your mind too?"

"They were part of the same dream."

"Very well, Captain Royce. I don't think it will be necessary for you to come here any more."

Nights, as summer fades into fall, I often go outside and look at the stars. They have a strange new beauty for me. The stars, and space. One night, looking up into the immensities, I glimpse Barbara's face. Stars, like diamonds, glitter in her long black hair. There is a stellar earring attached to each of her ears. Her face is black, and beautiful.

I feel a gentle wind around me. It does not come from the east or west or north or south. Its fingers touch my cheek with the lightness of a kiss. The face fades away, but I know now I am not alone.