

Something Fuzzy in my Pocket



a novel for the next generation
Susan E. L. Lake

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Chapter 1

Jack was still yelling, "I won't go," as Brandye walked out of the living room and into her bedroom. At fourteen he wouldn't give in as easily as she had.

She could tell that her mother was beginning to lose patience. "Your father and I have wanted to do this for years. You know how impossible it's been to get three weeks at the same time. It may never happen again, and yes, you are going with us. This will be a family adventure." Her mom was using words like adventure to make things not sound so gruesome.

Jack wasn't buying it though. "But Mom, three weeks cooped up with a bratty nine year old sister in a four person Jeep is impossible! How can I keep up my weight training for football? You know the coach said an hour a day all summer. Three weeks at zero gravity will ruin me. Why does it have to be this year? Next year would be just as good this year."

She could hear her father joining in. "Now, son, you won't be at zero gravity for the whole time, and the experience will be worth it. Just the four of us for three weeks roughing it together will be great. Most boys your age would leap at such a chance."

Trying not to listen to the argument in the next room, Brandye took a small furry creature out of a long plastic tube stored beside her bed. "Dad doesn't know many boys if he thinks Jack will leap at this chance," Brandye whispered to Herbert in amusement. "How bad can it be?" she said as she stroked Herbert's long silky golden fur.

He had been a gift last Christmas from her Aunt Bess. Her aunt had looked around the Houston apartment and had said, "What? Not even a Poodle?" Brandye's Aunt Bess had every animal imaginable, but she lived in a place in Arkansas with bees and even a dirty pond that Brandye thought was awful. Aunt Bess had looked at Brandye's mother and said, "Kay, don't you know that a child Brandye's age needs a pet? No wonder she is so alone. That school doesn't help matters locking them up in a learning carrel all day."

"Now Bess, there's no room here, and how could we take care of a dog with us gone all day?" Of course, Brandye hadn't been supposed to listen, but 1000 square feet didn't muffle much sound. All she knew was that the hamster had been in a plastic maze under the artificial tree on Christmas morning.

Aunt Bess told Brandye to name him Herbert George Wells. That was her aunt's way of making her curious, so once she scanned the writer's name in the school's encyclopedia program. Mostly, though, she didn't think about the hamster's name. Most of the time she just stroked his fur and whispered her secrets to him as he crawled over her bed investigating each cranny. She loved him more than anyone else she knew.

The next day her folks were full of plans. She'd never seen them so excited. Usually they only talked about grown up concerns. Their conversations were about her mom's dealership and the price of new cars or her dad's worry about lost silverware. Today with their heads together they were discussing the Jeep and its weight

limitations. Her mom was saying, “The beauty of the Jeep is that it can make the trip at all, but you know it can’t hold unlimited baggage.”

As Brandye walked up, her dad turned to her. “Honey I guess you’ll be the only one who won’t have any trouble with packing too much. Three of those denim jumps you wear, and you’re ready to go. Right?”

“Sure Dad, and Herbert doesn’t weigh much.”

Her folks gave each other one of those “worried parents” looks. Her mom seemed to gulp. “Brandye, I thought you’d know. You can’t bring the hamster.”

The silence hurt everyone’s ears. Finally, Brandye broke it. “But Mom Dad! I can’t leave him. I can’t.” She knew her impassioned plea wasn’t going to get her anywhere, but she had to try.

“We’ll only be gone three weeks, and surely one of your friends can keep him for you,” said her dad.

“Friends!” She walked out of the room, hunched over trying her best to show them how miserable she was.

“Who could I trust enough? Oh, what are we going to do? You’re my best friend. I can’t leave you,” she said to the little creature with the twitching nose.

The days passed quickly. Her parents spent every night making lists and purchases. Her dad as usual worried about meals. He would suddenly look up as they walked by. “You all like spaghetti, don’t you?”

Jack was trying to find a way to carry his training weights with him. He’d even been in to ask her to share some of her allocation. “Come on Brandye, you won’t need all yours.” It seemed to Brandye that the only time he paid attention to her any more was when he wanted something. It hadn’t always been that way, but now it was.

“Yes, I will.” She couldn’t tell him that she was just as worried about her limitations. He stormed out complaining bitterly that it wasn’t fair, and it would be her fault if he were kicked off the team.

The day to leave came quickly. All their supplies were crated, and they were ready to take the moon shuttle. Doors were locked and the electronic mail was put on hold. Her parents had considered a modem transfer but decided that a real vacation would mean no messages following them around. At the last minute her mother suddenly said, “What did you do with the hamster?”

“It’s okay. Someone’s keeping him,” answered Brandye.

Her mother looked on her gently, “I know how hard that was.”

Brandye just shrugged and pushed her hands down into the pockets of her favorite denim jumpsuit, soft after many washings. It had zippered pockets everywhere, and she had worn it so much it had nearly become part of her identity. She knew from her social studies unit on the 60s that kids once had worn “blue jeans” much as she did her jumps. But with the arrival of wide spread public space travel, kids had adopted the one piece uniform worn by pilots and space personnel. Now, no one

even thought about them much they just wore them until they became more and more comfortable.

Her favorite ones nearly had holes, and once that happened, her mom would make her trash them. She hoped that wouldn't happen too soon. Already their adjustable velcro closures were barely maintaining a sticky contact. She knew she'd probably outgrow them before holes appeared. They were even getting tight across the shoulders which made her aware daily that she was beginning to bump against the smooth fabric across her chest.

She had no friends, other than Herbert, to discuss her confused feelings with. She didn't know that everyone her age felt just as frightened and unsure about being dragged into the adult world.

"Come on! Lift off is in an hour and we don't want to miss our shuttle," called out her dad from the door. She glanced down casually and went out the door to join her family on the first vacation the four had ever taken together.

Chapter 2

The lift off and trip by shuttle was exciting for each of them. Brandye had never traveled farther than Arkansas to visit Aunt Bess. Her folks had gone on business trips before, but they hadn't acted like this. They seemed as excited as little kids. Her parents kept reaching over to squeeze each other's hand almost shyly. This was a side of her parents that Brandye had never seen.

Even Jack was enjoying the experience. He started talking to a girl his age who was with her parents. They seemed to have a lot in common. She could hear them comparing notes about the impossible things their parents expected of teenagers. "Can you believe my folks said I had to come," griped Jack.

"Yes, I know, mine too. I told them it was my life, and they couldn't make me. I'm talking giant blow-up, but here I am," asserted the pretty girl sitting across the aisle from Jack.

Brandye was sitting next to the window and looked out at the unexpected expanse of black. Even in a cabin with thirty people, she felt left out of much of the fun. Everyone seemed to have someone to share the excitement with, so she took out a paperback book stuffed in one of her pockets and started to read. Brandye eventually fell asleep until the docking maneuvers with the space station woke her.

She sat up with a start, for she hadn't expected to be able to sleep. She felt guilty until she realized that she hadn't moved much. She replaced the book in the left thigh pocket and looked around as she wiggled her foot.

The excitement in the cabin was becoming greater. She knew from her astral studies class that a long tunnel would be snaking out to the small shuttle and be electromagnetically attached to the loading door.

She felt the jar of connection as the speaker announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, please remain seated until the attendants notify you, so that we may process everyone as quickly as possible. Welcome to Henderson Space Station."

She looked around to see her parents beginning to unbuckle their restraining straps. They weren't paying much attention to the announcement and were starting to stand up. Jack turned to her, "Why can't they follow instruction like everyone else? They think they're such big shots just because they do this all the time."

"Jack, you and Brandye gather your things. You want to be ready when it's our turn," called over her mother. Brandye's mother was composed and in control. As the owner and manager of a Ford Dealership, she had to be. Brandye couldn't imagine her mother any other way, but she often wondered how she did it. She didn't think she could ever be like her mother. Things never seemed to go wrong for her mother. Things never seemed to go right for Brandye.

They followed the passengers exiting to the space station. Brandye was surprised at the size of the room. Somehow she had imagined high ceilings and large rooms, but everything she saw was compact and not much larger than her room at home. The family moved through a long corridor until they reached the check-in point to pick up their rental. Her mother took charge as she reached for her wallet and took out her credit card. "We have a Jeep Rockette reserved." She began to type in information as the screen requested it.

"You'll be processed in a few minutes," the message on the screen assured them.

Brandye wondered where all their things were. But no one else seemed concerned. Her mother completed the forms which had been spit from the machine, and the computer screen said for them to proceed to the rental pick-up area. As they moved along the designated corridor, Brandye turned to her mother. "Mom, where's all our stuff?"

"Oh, the rental company arranged to have it loaded as soon as I checked in."

They came to the rental loading gate and waited until their name was called. They moved down a chute similar to the one they had used to leave the shuttle. This one took them into their ship. As they entered, her mother moved to the console and radio. She checked in with the control tower and was assured that she was in line for ejection from the space station. Her father was already looking through the small galley or kitchen.

The ship was a lot smaller than the shuttle, but Brandye thought it was interesting. Everything had its place. There were four bunks two on each wall. There were four chairs with harness restraints obviously designed to be used during take off and landing. The galley was at one end and the controls at the other. A door beside the galley had a sign saying, "Do not open during loading." Her dad was trying to open drawers as they heard the sound of something happening outside the ship. Over the radio came the message, "Cargo container loaded and secure."

Her mom turned to them. "Better strap in everyone. We'll have plenty of time to look in all the nooks and crannies once we are released from the station." Jack started for the front chair next to his mother.

"Whoa, kid. That's my spot," claimed his father.

“Ah, dad. Why can’t I sit in the front? I want to watch,” pleaded Jack as he sulkily took the chair in the rear. Brandye strapped herself carefully into the chair behind her mother.

“Jack can be such a pain sometimes,” she thought. She didn’t care where she sat.

They could feel the movement of the ship as it was transported along the tram system toward the releasal point. “All passengers in JR 10456 prepare for release,” announced the radio.

“All passengers secure and prepared for release,” replied her mother. They bumped along for a few more minutes until they felt the sudden release as the ship popped from the space station. The ship moved away from the space station for a few more minutes. Not until then did they feel the thrust as the engines started to fire. Brandye thought it was interesting to actually experience what she knew only from her textbooks. Maybe this could be an adventure.

Chapter 3

Once released from the space station, their ship’s autopilot took over the task of moving them toward the moon. Kay Drinker had turned her Ford dealership into one of the most profitable in the state by demonstrating to nervous customers that even someone without a commercial license could pilot today’s equipment using the built-in autopilots standard on all ground as well as air vehicles. She sat back looking confident after checking all the functions using the Granny Smith computer system which came standard with all Jeep Rockettes.

“This is a nice set-up. Granny Smiths are really fine systems. I wish Ford would wake up and switch. The others are so stuffy. You’d think they invented computers.”

“Mom, can we unstrap now?” asked Jack.

“Sure, but be careful. None of us are used to magnetic shoes and weightlessness. Kids, walk slowly and carefully until you get the hang of it. Okay. Let’s all see what we’re going to be living in for a while.” She swiveled her chair around, and then released the one next to her. “One of the features I like about this ship is how carefully everything has been designed to provide comfort as well as compactness.” She walked over, reached down, and pulled up the table recessed into the floor. A pedestal locked the table into place. Each of the chairs could be turned to use with the table.

Mark Drinker walked over to the door with the warning sign. “Any reason I can’t check our supplies?”

“No,” replied his wife, “the cargo bay was sealed before we left. I checked with the Granny Smith to make sure.”

He carefully pressed the release and opened the door. The cargo crate had a door which also had to be opened. “This is a great way to handle the luggage problem. No question about anything getting lost. Here’s my seal on the door. I packed it, so if there’s anyone to blame, it’s me.” He broke open the seal and pushed the second door away out of sight.

He walked into the movable pantry. It was crowded, but he had spent so much time packing it that he knew where everything was. "Looks like everything is fine in here."

"And everything is fine here, too," said Brandye from the door she had opened beside the galley. It was a small bathroom. Toilet and sink were placed so that there was only room for one person who wasn't going to move much. "Mom, where's the shower?"

"Oh, we haven't discussed that," her mother answered as if she didn't want to discuss it. "There's no provision in a ship this small for anything other than sponge baths."

"But, Mom, my hair! I can't 'sponge bath' it."

"Sure you can. Besides we'll be stopping at Moon Base, and you can bathe there. More importantly, until we land, we'll use these." Her mother took out a weird contraption that looked like a plastic diaper.

"Mother, how gross!" Both Jack and Brandye looked at her with disgust.

Brandye was beginning to wonder what other surprises were in store. She had never valued her privacy much. She was home alone enough that she welcomed it whenever someone else was in the house. But this wasn't the same thing. She hadn't realized that she wasn't going to have a place of her own. And she had counted on that.

Jack was staring out the small port window near the computer console. "Mom, this is something. I can see the space station from here. Will you let me drive sometime?"

"There's not that much driving to do, but I'll show you some of the controls. Much of the beauty of this little Jeep is that there is so little driving to do. Take offs and landings are controlled by the Granny Smith, and the directional signal from Moon Base keeps us on track. Without all this, the tourist industry would never have been able to take off like it has. Primitive camping on the moon has been the best thing to happen to the moon economy."

"Oh, Mother. I know all that. You act like I don't even read the newspaper."

"I didn't know that you read anything but the sports page?"

"Where are our suits?" interrupted Brandye. That had been the only interesting part of the preparation at home. They had gone to the sporting goods store to have each suit checked out and explained. Each of them had spent an afternoon learning how to get in and out of the gear as well as all the features available to them. Brandye had chosen a dark metallic blue one, Jack's was maroon, and her parents both picked silver.

"They're packed in the cargo box," said her mother. "But we won't need them for a while."

Brandye climbed up on one of the top bunks planning to claim it for her own, but Jack had other ideas. "How come you're taking the top bunk? Don't you think you could at least ask?"

“Jack, there’s no reason she can’t have the top bunk,” said her dad.

“You always let her have what she wants.”

“Jack, that’s hardly true, but I’ll tell you what. Let her have the top one tonight, and you can have it tomorrow.”

“Well, okay,” conceded Jack with little grace.

“Hey everyone, how about something to eat?” Mark Drinker held up a package. “I’ll bet this little galley has a way to heat up some of those omelet packages I paid an arm and a leg for. And my customers think my prices are high. Do you realize that if I charged as much for an omelet as I paid for these, that I could ask \$52?”

“Now Mark, we promised. No business on this trip,” said his wife. Brandye’s dad could never get completely away from thinking about “The Golden Pea.” This was the reason they seldom ate out as family. He was never able to enjoy a meal prepared by someone else. Brandye ate at the apartment cafeteria when she got tired of “nuking” a meal, but that wasn’t the same as going to some place special.

Her dad was already pushing buttons, opening latched drawers that held special restraining straps, and rummaging in the cargo hold. He turned the chairs toward the table muttering to himself that what they needed was a tablecloth. It seemed really strange to sit down to a meal as a family and even funnier when Jack kept putting down his omelet package which would then float away. Learning to sip through the juice container resulted in more laughter. Brandye couldn’t remember when they had enjoyed each other so much. Although, she couldn’t help thinking about her other problem.

Chapter 4

After lunch (or had it been dinner), everyone settled into a chair or bunk. Time seemed less rushed and not so clearly defined as at home. It was hard to remember that only the day before everyone had been living on his or her own schedule. Now there was none, and no one seemed to know what to do.

“Mom, about the bathroom. I, ah.” Brandye brushed. She thought this had to be the most embarrassing moment in her life. And even Jack was listening. “What else could he do since they were all cooped up here together?” she thought to herself.

Realizing Brandye’s predicament, her mother volunteered, “Say, do you want me to show you how to use our ‘plastic diapers’?”

Brandye wondered how long someone could live without going to the bathroom. It was two days until they reached the moon; she didn’t think she could last that long.

“Why not? We’ll all need them soon enough,” agreed her father.

This was a side of her parents that Brandye had never seen. She couldn’t imagine how unconcerned her parents seemed. “Didn’t they have any shame?” Somehow she sat through a demonstration of the diaper’s grosser features.

“Who wants to be the first guinea pig?” asked her mother.

"I guess I will," volunteered Brandye. She adjourned to the tiny cupboard they were to use as a bathroom. She laughed to herself at the word. "No baths would ever be taken here." Her only consolation was that it did offer privacy even if it was nearly impossible to take off her jumpsuit. But first she unzipped the pocket on her lower left leg. Her heart nearly stopped beating until she saw that the home she had created for Herbert was working. She looked carefully at the plastic tube with the nest at one end and the food and attached water nipple at the other. As much as she wanted to, she didn't dare take him out. He blinked his little eyes at the sudden light and seemed to be asking her what was going on. "Herbert, I wish I could let you out, but you might not like floating around." He was so snugly packed into the tube that he didn't float.

She finished using the contraption and disposed of it as her mother had shown her. She zipped Herbert back into the pocket, dressed, and returned to the waiting family.

Everyone was staring as she came out. She thought that surely they must know about Herbert, but instead, each seemed merely curious about her experience.

Her dad asked, "Everything come out all right?"

She merely glared at him wondering how he could say such a thing. Each of the others then took a turn using the small room.

After that there didn't seem much to do. Her mother checked the computer once again. Her dad tidied up what little there was to do in the galley. Her brother tried doing pushups on the floor. It was nearly impossible, but he seemed to enjoy the contortions he made. Brandye climbed onto a top bunk to read. Jack found some music chips to listen to which was fine for the first hour, but eventually they got on everyone's nerves. The time passed slowly.

"Son, I think we've heard enough of "Otto and the Green Grapes." Let's all play a game of checkers. I used to do that a lot when I was a boy."

"Dad, what's checkers?" asked Jack suspiciously as he turned off the CD player.

"Why, it's sort of like chess but easier and faster," replied his dad. "I picked up this magnetic set just for this trip." Her father began to set it up on the table as he explained the rules. "You can be red, and I'll take black."

Her dad beat Jack the first two games as Brandye looked on. However, Jack soon got the hang of it, and they became more evenly matched.

"Let me try," interrupted Brandye as the other two finished a game.

"You don't know how," protested Jack.

"I've been watching. I can play as good as you do," pleaded Brandye.

"Let's let her have a turn, son," agreed her dad.

Jack grouchyly turned the board in her direction, but he stayed to watch. She lost the first game but won the next. Even Jack seemed impressed. The evening slipped away as they developed a system of rotating players. Even her mother joined in the tournament. It quickly became part of the rules that the loser was replaced by one of

the two watching from the sidelines. There was much laughter and good natured teasing with comments like “Dad, I thought you knew how to play this game” when he lost again to Jack. It was the first time Brandye ever remembered spending that much time with her family. She hated to see the board and checkers stowed away, but everyone was getting tired.

“Mom, what time is it?” asked Brandye.

“Well, we might as well maintain Houston time as a standard since we are used to that, so it is 9:15,” answered her mother.

“Is that day or night?” asked Jack.

“Night, I hope. We’ve had a long day and I, for one, am ready to turn in,” her dad added as he yawned. “How about a cup of cocoa for everyone?”

The warm drink helped everyone relax and in a few minutes each had crawled into his bunk. Jack dropped his pants on the floor after he was safely in his sleeping bag having elected to sleep in the rest of his clothes.

Brandye’s mother came out of the cramped bathroom with a long multi-colored caftan on. “I hate sleeping in clothes, so this seemed like a good choice,” said her mother as everyone looked at her. She seemed a little embarrassed at the stares.

“You’ll get no complaints from me,” teased her dad with a whistle.

Brandye was shocked to hear her father talk like that. He sounded like a character on a restricted soap opera. Her parents had never placed the restrictive code on her TV, but she never watched them. They made her nervous with all the talk of sex and time spent in bed. “This is worse than any soap opera,” she thought. “These are my own parents!”

“Mark, you’re embarrassing Brandye,” laughed her mother.

But that only made it worse. Everyone looked up at her wide eyed expression and laughed. She turned red and wished she had never agreed to come on this trip. She buried herself in her bag.

“Aren’t you going to change,” asked her mother as a way of switching the subject. Brandye had spent a lot of time trying to decide how to handle this problem, and now she was glad of the decision she had made.

“No, I decided to sleep in my jumps.”

“Okay but don’t be surprised if you change your mind,” warned her mother. “There are reading lights above everyone’s head. Just touch the pad which says light.”

Lights appeared over each pillow as her mother turned off the cabin lights. “If the autopilot encounters any problems, it will set off an alarm, so don’t be surprised if you hear one in the ‘night,’” warned her mother. “I’ve set the lights to come on in eight hours. If you wake up before that, please be quiet enough to let the rest of us sleep.”

“Okay” agreed both children. It wasn’t long before Brandye could hear the soft snores of everyone else sleeping. She reached up to turn off the light and began to

squirm in her sleeping bag. She managed to get Herbert's tube out of her jumps and tucked safely into the edge of her sleeping bag. After several tries, she succeeded in getting settled. She felt strange and alien in the ship as she listened to the unfamiliar sounds. There were whooshes of air and clicks of equipment, but soon they lulled her to sleep.

Chapter 5

She awoke to the sound of her parents' whispers and Jack's snores. At first she couldn't remember where she was, but it all came to her as she turned over. The lights were already on, so she tried to act as if she were just snuggling back down into sleep. She reached down inside her bag for the hamster's tube and found it still carefully lodged against the edge where she had placed it the night before.

Now, all she had to do was figure how to get it back into her jumps without being noticed. As she pulled it slowly toward her, she realized that something was wrong. The stopper she had used to keep Herbert from getting out of the tube wasn't there. She reached across to the place the tube had been and found the cork. But it was no longer a solid piece. As she felt it under the cover, there were pieces gnawed away. Herbert had used his nocturnal hours to escape!

Panic nearly overcame her. She had to find him, but how could she do that without the family knowing? She squirmed to the bottom of the sleeping bag hoping he might still be in the bag with her. No luck.

"Well, sleepy head. Don't you think it's time to get up?" Her mother's words caused her to jump.

"Sure. What's for breakfast?" She tried to act as normal as possible, but her heart was beating scared. Her mind kept whizzing about asking what she was going to do. She couldn't tell them about Herbert. She couldn't look for him without someone noticing.

As she climbed out of bed, she kept looking for some sign of him. At home when he got out she could always find him in the kitchen at night. But this wasn't home.

Jack was still asleep when she came out of the bathroom. She was beginning to get the hang of walking with her feet stuck to the ground and plastic diapers. Her dad was in the galley whistling as he prepared some coffee.

"Here, come carry this wonderful repast over to the table. Jack, wake up and smell the bacon. Well, not really bacon, but close," said her dad.

As Jack crawled out of bed complaining about not being ready to get up, Brandye had an idea. She walked over to Jack's sleeping bag and began to straighten up the bed. However, as she did it, she was feeling for the lost hamster.

"Whatcha doing?" asked her mother looking at her curiously.

"Just helping to straighten up a little," she explained as she clunked over to their bunks. "No luck here either. Where could he be?" she thought to herself.

The breakfast was leisurely. None of them knew how to act. No one needed to run off for soccer practice or to catch the tram into town. Everyone sat there wondering what to do next except Brandye who wondered how she was going get out of the mess she was in.

“You seem quiet,” commented her mother. “Herbert will be all right.” Brandye looked up guiltily. She didn’t know how her mother knew about the missing hamster. “I’m sure your friend is taking good care of him.”

Almost with a sigh of relief she tried to smile. “Oh, I know.”

Her dad leaned back in his chair sipping another cup of coffee. “Well, we’ve got a whole day, what are we going to do with it?”

“We could play checkers again,” suggested Brandye.

“Maybe later. Right now, I think I’ll...” He was interrupted by the alarm from the Granny Smith.

Mrs. Drinker quickly moved to the console and began to type in commands. “That’s funny. According to this information, we are approaching a large astral body. But there is nothing in the files indicating it should be there.” Her mother pulled her chair around and sat down in the pilot’s position. The alarm had quit ringing as soon as her mother started work with the computer. She looked worried but in total control.

“Could it be an error?” asked Mr. Drinker trying not to look concerned.

“I wouldn’t think so, but anything is possible. I think I’ll do a little reality testing through Moon Base.” She spent the next hour running a computer verification through the Moon Base system. At the end of the check, even the on-board Granny Smith agreed that there was no large body ahead of them.

While her mother tried to determine the problem, Brandye spent the time looking helpful by picking everything up and putting it back down. She even went into the cargo pantry, but if Herbert was to be found, it wasn’t where she was looking. She was glad of the computer malfunction. Without it, she didn’t think she could have gotten away with her search.

Eventually, she could think of nowhere else to look. She climbed onto her bunk and took out a book to read. Jack was already in his bunk doing isometric exercises. However, she couldn’t concentrate on the chapter. Herbert was somewhere, and she had to find him.

Chapter 6

She could hear her parents at the console talking not in whispers but quiet enough that all one could hear was the sound of voices, not what they were saying.

Most of the time at home her parents seemed to be just living in the same house. Their talk was about business or dinner parties with clients. Somehow they appeared different to her now. They almost seemed to be friends. Brandye had never thought about whether her parents liked each other. Other parents were

always getting divorces. One of the kids in her learning pod had complained at lunch that she wished her mother would make up her mind. Brandye didn't want her parents to get a divorce, but she wouldn't have been surprised. That was just something parents did. It was like paying income tax.

Suddenly, the voices at the console became louder. "I don't know, Mark. If I did, I'd fix it. All I can go on is the data verification from Moon Base." Brandye could tell that her mother was upset.

"I know that you're just as worried as I am. I didn't mean to suggest that you weren't doing a good job. It's just that I'm not used to you being unsure of what is going on," soothed her father. Her mother visibly began to relax. The talk once again became soft.

"Jack quit bumping the bunk," complained Brandye.

"I'm not bothering you," he replied.

"Mom, he keeps hitting my bunk," appealed Brandye.

"Jack, try to exercise without hitting her bed," responded her dad in a tired voice.

"Oh, you always take her side. There's nothing to do anyway. And now we're probably going to crash because of a stupid computer error." Jack rolled off his bunk and moved over to his chair.

"Son, everything is under control. Just relax. Why don't you set up the checkers? We'll play for a while." Once again her father was calming everyone with his soothing touch.

Brandye remembered her mother talking about what it was like when she and Jack were babies and that her dad was the only one who could get them to go to sleep. Brandye hadn't thought about that much, but her dad was the one who always seemed to know what to say and do when things got tense for her at school.

Even when the other kids made fun of her name, he was able to make her feel less angry. She could never understand, though, why her parents had given them such awful names. Jack Daniel Drinker wasn't as bad as Brandye Whyne Drinker because Jack never told anyone his middle name. But Brandye couldn't even get away with that. She sometimes hated her parents for making her the object of so much teasing. Her dad kept saying that he agreed to it so that she might develop a sense of humor at an early age. She didn't think it had happened. It just made her avoid situations where people would ask her name.

The computer sounded no more alarms, and the checkers tournament lasted until lunch. Brandye was surprised at how often she won. She'd never played games much, not even computer versions. She was amazed at how much fun they all seemed to have. Even Jack didn't treat her just like a kid sister who was in the way.

Over lunch they talked about the fact that it seemed like all they had done so far on this trip was eat or talk about when or what they were going to eat. She had never in her life eaten so many meals with her family. Usually they only ate dinner together

on special occasions. The rest of the time they all ate wherever they happened to be.

"I'm going to take advantage of a little of this peace and quiet," announced her dad as he began to put away lunch preparations.

"Let me guess. A nap - right?" teased her mother. "Sounds like a great idea to me, too."

Jack put his headphones on to listen to "Otto and the Green Grapes," and Brandye picked up her book again. As she dozed off, all she could think of was that she only had a day and a half to find Herbert.

But Brandye woke from a terrible dream that Herbert had turned into a stuffed alarm clock which was going off, and she couldn't make him stop ringing. She pulled herself out of the weight of her dream and heard her mother say, "Not again."

This time it was the oxygen error message. According to the computer they had only three hours of oxygen left. Brandye's mother just shook her head and addressed the computer, "That's just not possible. We have more than enough. I don't care what you say." She frequently talked to her machinery and had the uncanny ability to get results from this technique. This time, though, the alarm continued to ring until she shut it off.

"Mom, is it serious?" asked a worried Brandye.

"I don't know. I can't imagine this computer giving so many error messages and something not being the matter. All I know is that there is plenty of oxygen according to the display panel on the storage container."

They all remained on pins and needles throughout the evening, and only began to relax after three hours had passed without a lessening of the oxygen level. They played checkers once again, but no one laughed or joked. Suddenly, the trip wasn't as much fun. They were still eighteen hours away from Moon Base where they could get help. Brandye divided her worry between Herbert and the troubles with the ship.

Chapter 7

As the time for sleep arrived, everyone went through the ritual of the night before. This time Brandye grudgingly gave up the top bunk. Jack gleefully climbed in and grinned at Brandye from the top. "Mom, make Jack quit looking at me," complained Brandye.

"Oh, children can't you get along even once?" pleaded her mother.

"But, Mom," began Brandye.

"No, buts. You two need to find a way to settle your problems. We're going to be cooped up in here for three weeks. It's too small for any arguing. And that includes you, Jack," explained her mother.

Jack looked indignant when he was included in the lecture. "But, Mom, I didn't do anything."

"I don't care who did what - I'm finishing it," sternly insisted her mother.

After the lights had been turned out, Brandye lay in the darkness trying to think where Herbert had gone. Without gravity or at least magnetic shoes, he would have floated around once he got out of her sleeping bag. He should have been easy to find. All she hoped was that he wasn't hurt or even dead somewhere. Suddenly, she realized that at home she always waited till all the lights were out to look for him. As a nocturnal animal, he had been easy to find once she figured out that he only came out of hiding at night.

"Now that the lights were out, would he follow his usual pattern. But where to look?" she wondered. She realized that over the gently whooshing sound of the air supply she also heard a tiny scurrying sound like little feet. "Herbert!!" She listened carefully, grateful now that she was on the bottom bunk. She could hear the sound of her parents' breathing. They were already asleep.

She carefully crept out of bed. She didn't want to take the chance of her parents waking if they heard her putting on the magnetic shoes. But she had never practiced free fall walking, and she bumped into the bunk as she tried to stand up. Jack grumbled from the disturbance but didn't wake up. She tried it again more slowly. It didn't take long to get the knack of floating.

The lights from the computer console made it possible to see without any other light. She stayed very still until she heard the noise again. It seemed to her that it was coming from the console, so she moved toward it. She could hear it more clearly as she came nearer. "Yes, he must be there," she thought relieved. How he got in there she couldn't imagine, but worse, she couldn't imagine how to get him out. At home she just put some food down on the floor, but that wasn't possible here.

She sat for a long time listening and hoping Herbert would come out on his own. But he didn't. She had no idea what to do or where to turn. She knew that if she woke up her parents, they'd be really mad. She didn't think Jack would be much help either. "He hates me," she told herself.

"What is it?" said a voice out of the night. It was Jack. "Is there another computer alarm?"

"No, I couldn't sleep, so I decided to get up," explained Brandye hoping Jack would turn over and go back to sleep. But he didn't. Instead he too got out of bed and tried to float in her direction. When he hit his head on the top of the cabin, he said some words she knew her parents would ground him for.

She started to laugh at his contortions, but instead remembering her own efforts, she whispered encouragement to him. "Pretend you are swimming. It makes it work better." For once, he didn't ignore her. Instead he tried some swimming motions and managed to reach her.

"Thanks for not laughing," he whispered back.

"Oh, that's okay. I did the same thing."

She kept hoping that Jack wouldn't hear the noises from behind the computer console. Maybe the noise of their talking would scare Herbert enough that he

wouldn't move. At that moment, little sounds of tsk, tsk, tsk came to her. She recognized the sound at once. "Herbert was eating something! What could he have found?" came the panicky thought. Worse yet she could tell that Jack heard it also. He looked quizzically at the console and said, "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"That sound. There's something wrong with the computer. I'd better wake Mom."

She almost yelled out, "No!" But she caught herself. "Why do you think something's wrong? Maybe the noise is nothing." She sounded guilty even to herself and her brother wasn't fooled.

"What do you know about this, Brandye?" inquired her brother with the same no-nonsense look her parents gave her at times.

Suddenly, she realized that she had to tell someone. She had worried all day, and now it flooded out. "Oh, Jack. It's terrible. I brought Herbert with me."

"What!! You know you weren't supposed to do that."

"I know. But I couldn't just leave him behind, so I made a special tube for him to stay in. I carried it in my jump pocket."

"What's that got to do with this noise?" Jack asked suspiciously.

"Well," she sniffed away the beginning of tears. "He got out last night, and I couldn't find him, and I think he somehow got inside the computer console."

For a few moments Jack didn't say anything. She expected him to tell her how dumb she was and that he was going to tell. But he didn't. Instead he sat there for a few puzzled moments until he asked, "How can we get him out?"

She stared at him, amazed that his question had a "we" in it. "I don't know. At home I'd put out some food, but that won't work."

"Sure it will. We just have to find some way to keep it from floating. Bring me some of the food and watch."

She floated carefully back to her bed and reached inside a pocket of her jumps for a piece of food pellet and carried it back to the console. Jack was already sticking a piece of Bubble Wonder gum onto the front of the console near the air vent. He took the food from Brandye and stuck it on the gum.

"Now, all we can do is hope," said Jack. They sat there quietly listening to the noises that came from inside the computer. Finally, Jack said, "He means a lot to you, doesn't he?"

"He's my best friend. He's the only one at home when I get there, and he never ignores me."

"I know. It's hard not to have friends," agreed Jack.

"How would you know? You have tons of friends."

"Not as many as you think. Most of them are just guys on the team. I think it's why most of us play. Just so there will be people who have to talk to us. But I remember

when I was nine. You were just a little kid, and when the folks got home, you got all the attention. You'd run in and hold up some stupid piece of cardboard from what you called school, and they'd 'ooh' and 'ah' over it."

This surprised Brandye. It always seemed to her that Jack was the one with something to tell her folks and that they were always patting him on the back congratulating him on a good tackle.

"Yes, but at least you don't have a name that everyone laughs at," Brandye added.

"I know. I used to want to change mine when I was old enough, but not anymore."

"I didn't know you could change a name!"

"Yeah, I looked it up one day at school when I was pretending to be doing a research unit on legal aspects of names. At least it was more interesting than practicing research and cross match searches."

"Well, so why aren't you going to change yours then?"

"I don't know. I guess Dad was right. It has made it possible for me to laugh a little at myself. In fact, when I meet someone now, I introduce myself with my whole name, not just Jack. Everyone laughs and asks if that's really my name, and it kind of breaks the ice. On top of that, no one forgets my name. Once they hear it-they remember it."

"I still hate mine, and I will change it when I'm old enough!" asserted Brandye.

"That's fine. But Brandye, let me tell you something I'm just beginning to learn. Whatever problems I had making friends had nothing to do with my name. Instead, it had something to do with me. Shakespeare said, 'A rose by any other name would smell as sweet,' and I've learned that a Jack Daniel Drinker by any other name would have the same problems. Look outside yourself and see if the same is true for you."

This was the longest conversation she had had with her brother since they were very small. Here they were, in the middle of the "night" in a tiny Jeep moving toward the moon waiting for a hamster to come out. It seemed almost unreal. And as they sat under the restraining net at the console, a small furry head appeared out of a hole which seemed too small for anything to go through. Slowly he pulled himself up and began to float upward. Brandye grabbed him and held him against her wanting to cry with relief and joy. She carefully placed him in the plastic tube and pushed the cork into place.

"I have some tape that I brought to use on my weight bar. You can use it to keep the cork in," offered Jack as they floated to their beds. He quietly took it out of his gear bag, bit off a piece, and handed it to her. She breathed a sigh of relief when Herbert was safely tucked down inside her bed. Her parents were still sleeping quietly, and no one except Jack would ever know about the hamster.

Chapter 8

The next morning as Brandye awoke, she once again played the squirm around in your sleeping bag trick. This time, though, Herbert was still safely tucked into a ball at one end of the tube. She looked up to see her mother move toward the Granny Smith to check on their status. And as her mother reached the console, Brandye saw what they had forgotten. The gum and food pellet were still stuck to the spot near the air vent. She lay still hoping her mother wouldn't see it. Brandye couldn't keep her eyes off it, but she worried that her very thoughts would draw her mother's eyes toward the incriminating evidence. But her mother was busy typing in commands and never looked to the right.

Slowly, Brandye began to get out of bed and tie on her magnetic sandals. Jack looked down from above her, and she pointed toward the console. He gulped and looked just as concerned as she felt. They glanced toward their father who was starting breakfast in the galley. Acting as co-conspirators, Jack joined her on the floor and moved toward their mother. Jack stood on one side of their mother to keep her attention away from Brandye's side.

Brandye reached toward the gum as she tried to watch both her father and mother. She must have looked rather suspicious because suddenly her father called out, "Brandye what are you doing?" She jumped back so hard that her feet came off the floor and she began to float upward. Jack reached over and pulled her back down looking at her as if to say, "Did you get it?"

At the commotion her mother looked up and added her question to the list, "What is it?"

"Nothing," answered Brandye trying to look convincing, but without success.

Her father pursued the subject with the one question she didn't want him to ask, "What's in your hand?"

She looked pleadingly to Jack who tried to help the best he could. "Brandye did you steal my gum? Give it back. Dad, make her give it to me."

"Brandye let me have the gum," demanded her father.

She started to hand it to Jack saying, "Okay. take your stupid gum. I don't want it." But her father reached out at the same time and intercepted the transfer.

"What's this? It looks like hamster food. What would it be doing here?" questioned her father.

With that, her mother joined the discussion. She glanced at both children without saying anything. Brandye's heart thumped hard against her chest, and she thought she might throw up. Jack didn't look any happier. "Let's all sit down and discuss this," suggested her mother.

Once again the little Jeep seemed far too small. On top of that she realized there was nowhere else to go. She couldn't even run away from home if it got too bad. Brandye swallowed hard as she sat down, pulled the mesh across herself, and snapped it into place. Neither child said anything. Her father looked at the gum and

then handed it to her mother. Everyone waited for someone else to speak. Finally, in the sternest voice she had ever heard her gentle father use, he said, "Okay, tell us about it."

For the first time in her life, Brandye decided to protect Jack. So she blurted out just as Jack began to speak. "It's all my idea. He didn't know anything about it, and he shouldn't be in trouble." She took a deep breath and continued with her tale of the lost hamster. As she went on, her mother looked more and more worried.

When she finished, no one said anything at first. Then her mother looked straight at her and said, "Do you realize the danger you have placed us in? I don't know what damage Herbert may have caused in that console, but let's hope it isn't anything serious. If he has chewed through any connections, I can re-solder them, but what has me worried is that he may have left small hairs behind which will interfere with the circuitry connections when it's critical."

"Mom, I promise. I never meant for this to happen," she said as she began to cry. The tears floated away from her face, and her dad used a tissue to capture them. The silliness of the action broke the tension in the air, and her mother reached over to hug her.

"I know you didn't mean it. Now let's hope we can fix it. Where's Herbert now?" asked Mrs. Drinker

"In my sleeping bag," replied Brandye. She walked over, took him out, and carried him back to the table. He seemed unaware of the commotion he had caused as he slept securely in his tube.

"Let's tape him up to this wall near the galley. You're sure he can't get out again?" asked her mother.

"Yes, Jack gave me tape last night to keep the cork in."

"I thought Jack didn't know about him?" questioned her dad.

Caught in the lie, Jack jumped in. "Oh, she was just trying to keep me out of it. Actually, I found out last night and helped her catch him. That was the first time I knew about it."

"Son, I would have expected you to be more responsible than to try keeping something like this from us." Once again her parents' sternest looks were on them.

"Well, I didn't think about any possible damage. I just didn't want Brandye getting into trouble. She really loves that hamster. I never had a pet, but if I had, I would have done the same thing."

Her father looked over at her mother with a strange expression, almost one of pride. "I suppose that's not a bad reason. However, in the future, think your actions through a little more carefully. I think we need to let this drop for the moment and consider breakfast."

Looking toward the Granny Smith, her mother added, "Whatever damage has happened isn't going to get any worse, so I suppose I can wait a little longer before I have to take off that console cover."

At breakfast they all laughed at the tale of the night's watch waiting for a hamster to appear in search of a piece of bubble gum. The atmosphere seemed different as breakfast came to an end. It was almost as if all four of them had become conspirators in the hamster search. Jack and Brandye's relationship had changed, too. It didn't mean that she and Jack didn't argue over whose turn it was to dispose of the breakfast containers, but their arguments no longer sounded like two enemies at battle. Now, their arguments sounded like two friends with different points of view.

Chapter 9

The task of taking apart the computer took some time. It hadn't been designed to be dismantled in transit, but it hadn't been intended as the home for a lost hamster either. Her mother crawled far under it until she found the screw holes she was looking for. They were deeply recessed, but she was able to release them after several tries.

Everyone gathered around her as she lifted the metal cover off the computer console. She then taped it to a nearby wall so it wouldn't float in the way. Everyone was curious about the workings of the machine which was keeping them alive as well as seeing that they arrived at Moon Base. "Gosh, I'd forgotten how pretty Granny Smiths are on the inside," commented Mrs. Drinker.

"Fine, but do you see anything in there that seems to be a problem?" wondered Mr. Drinker.

"Here's where his nest was," pointed out Brandye. Even in a ship this clean, the hamster had found a few pieces of lint and dust balls to use to start a new home. "I wonder what I heard him chewing on?"

Her mother's eyes widened, "You heard him chewing on something! When? You didn't tell me that."

"It was while I was waiting for him to come out," explained Brandye hoping this didn't make things worse.

Her mother carefully examined each circuit board. The only damage she was able to find was a piece of solder which showed signs of nibbles. She removed the loose pieces and checked the remaining connection. "It looks better than I expected. Maybe it will be okay. At least we haven't had any more alarms since Herbert came out."

With a little help from the others, she removed the cover which had been taped to the wall and placed it back. Once again she struggled to get the screws back.

When it was finished, they sat around the table finally able to relax. With the tension so much less now, soon everyone began to think about the arrival at Moon Base. "How long will we stay at Moon Base?" asked Jack. "Will we have time to look around?"

"Mom, do they have stores at Moon Base?" joined in Brandye.

Her mother laughed and asked, "Do you mean do they have a shopping mall?"

This time even Brandye and Jack laughed at their own questions. “You can’t blame a guy for trying,” offered Jack.

“As a matter of fact, they are supposed to have a well-equipped supply depot, but I don’t think it’s what you have in mind. Besides, weight limitations need to be used for food and water. But let’s wait to see what they have when we get there,” suggested their mother.

Their dad added, “Our itinerary is to stay the night at Moon Base, bathe...”

“Hurray,” interrupted both children. “How soon do we get there?”

“Yes, but remember on Moon Base, water is nearly as limited as it is in this ship. And expensive too.” The children looked disgruntled, but then the excitement took over again.

“Okay so we’ll take expensive baths, then what?” asked Jack.

“We’ll have to check in with the multi-national park service to verify our site selection. Once we’ve made sure all the paper work is in order and our supplies are adequate, we’ll leave the next day.”

Everyone was too excited to care much about lunch, and the remaining hours passed slowly. Finally, her mother gave in to Brandye’s pleading and let her release Herbert. “Just don’t lose him again. You may hold him for a few minutes and then put him back.”

Brandye carefully pulled off the tape, pulled out the cork, and turned the tube up, so Herbert would begin to fall toward the opening. Except it didn’t work as she had hoped. Without gravity to help her, he stayed snugly stuck. He’d already had one adventure in weightlessness; he didn’t seem to want another. It took considerable coaxing for him to come to a point where she could reach him.

She stroked his fur, purring at him. He snuggled up against her, and she told him how frightened she had been when he was lost. She then told him all about the plans at Moon Base as if he would want to know. However, after a few minutes, she ran out of things to tell him. Somehow, it wasn’t like being home alone after a day at school. She didn’t need to tell him about being lonely and left out. So she placed him back into his tube and taped it back to the wall. It gave her a good feeling just being able to look at him.

Her mother was making contact with Moon Base, and her father was making sure the storage pantry was secure. It wouldn’t be much fun to clean up if any of their supplies broke loose during landing.

Jack surprised Brandye when he offered to play checkers. She supposed he must be bored. “Boy, you must be desperate,” answered Brandye.

Jack retorted, “You don’t have to play if you don’t want to.”

“No, that’s fine. What color are you?”

“You choose. I did last time.”

They played quickly but intently until their mother called out, "Stow the checkers and the table. We're due to land in 15 minutes." The moon had not been visible through the small port because of the position of the ship. But as Jack and Brandye looked up from their game, it now filled the screen.

"Wow, why didn't you tell us?" they cried out.

"To tell you the truth, I've been too busy to notice. It's worth the trip, isn't it? Mark, take a look."

He clanked his way out of the storage pantry over to the window. "You know, I've made this trip at least five times on business. Remember when I did the consulting for the Golden Pea franchise? But I never looked at the moon from this point of view. It's pretty amazing that tomorrow we will be totally isolated on the surface of the moon, perhaps in a spot that few people have ever visited." The excitement and awe in his voice was something Brandye had never heard before.

Soon they were all strapped in, and the chairs had been placed in a landing lock position. The Moon Base computer would direct the landing procedure through their on board Granny Smith. The pilot only had to verify the commands. The ship's auto-pilot fired at the correct moment, and the landing was no rougher than that of a commercial airline's. The ship began to move again almost as soon as they felt the shock of landing. Without ground wheels, the ship would have had to stay in its landing position until lift off. However, that space was needed for other incoming traffic. So moving on a cushion of air, the ship was pulled to its docking sight by a small robotic ferry. Only minutes after landing, the Drinkers could hear the sound of the transfer tube being attached to the door. "Docking site secure and passengers may depart at leisure," came the announcement that told them they were on the moon.

Chapter 10

For a few moments they all just sat there. It didn't seem quite possible. For a few seconds even the children thought of this trip as a true adventure. Their mother broke the enchantment. "Let's go see what the moon has to offer." She unbuckled her restraining straps and the others followed suit.

Brandye checked that Herbert had suffered no ill effects from the landing. In fact, he was still asleep and totally unconcerned about his situation.

They still had on their magnetic sandals, and it took a moment before they realized that they were no longer necessary. It seemed strange now that they could walk without the familiar clank.

"Okay, Mom, where's that bath you promised?" asked Jack.

"That's first on the list." His mother turned the heavy wheel that had locked them in just two days earlier. It had been a long but worthwhile two days. Now they were to rejoin the world for at least a short time. Each of them was almost shy about being with others again.

They trooped out and down the connecting tube. Even the air smelled different, more like people. Once again they typed information into the waiting computer screen which verified their docking berth. Brandye's mother inserted her credit card in payment and completed the process. In response to the next prompt, she typed in, "We have reservations at the Lunar Hilton. How can we get there?"

The message on the screen informed them, "Pick up the robotic ferry outside this door and type in K-8 when it asks for instructions. That will take you directly to the hotel. Have a nice visit." The screen returned to its gray fuzz.

Just as the computer promised, a ferry waited outside the door which connected with a wide and busy passage. It seemed like there were hoards of people; even though, at home they would have taken it for granted.

As the ferry bumped along, Brandye asked, "Mom, what would keep someone from taking our ship?"

Her mother laughed. "What a worrier! For one, they would have to know the code to punch to open the door, and then they would have to prove to the traffic controller that they were us. Without a ferry to place the ship in its proper place, it can't take off. 'Star Wars' type escapes in ships other than your own just aren't feasible."

Within a short time and after several turns down connecting passages they arrived at the door of their hotel. It didn't look much like the hotels at home which had large parking lots and landscaping welcoming one to a gigantic lobby, usually with even more shrubbery. This one looked rather unspectacular. True, its door was wider than those they had passed, and the name was extravagantly displayed across the top in gold letters. But it sure didn't look like the Hiltons at home.

They entered the door and once again were met by a blank computer screen. "Welcome to the Lunar Hilton," greeted them when they touched the screen. In a moment the prompt appeared, "Please type in name. Thank you. Now, please insert your credit card."

Brandye's mother once again took out her American Express card and pushed it into the appropriate slot. "A family suite with two rooms and a connecting bathroom has been reserved in your name."

"That sounds right up our alley," chimed in their dad. "It will seem like heaven after that Jeep."

A small piece of cardboard slipped out of the computer screen. "This will give you the code for your room. Please keep it secure. Do you need a ferry for your luggage?"

"No," answered her mother.

"Take the elevator to the floor indicated. It will be necessary to type in your room code to use the elevator. Have a nice stay and feel free to contact us if we can be of further service."

Their room was only a few doors down when the elevator stopped to let them off. They trooped in and bounced on the beds a few moments. Jack went to the TV

immediately. “Mom, why can’t we have a TV on ship? I feel like it’s been forever since I’ve seen anything but a computer monitor. I was nearly ready to watch gray dots yesterday.”

His mother laughed. “Surely you can survive a few days without morning cartoons,” she teased. “A TV couldn’t receive signals, and I just didn’t think it made sense to watch the same video tapes day after day. Besides, this is a vacation.”

His dad was reading the bathing instructions located on the bathroom door. “Okay. Everyone, pay attention. I don’t intend to have this hotel own us because one of you decided to take a long shower. Five gallons of water is allocated for each bath. So if you want to wash your hair, you get it wet using the fine mist, turn it off, shampoo, rinse, and so on. Then the water that has run off your hair will remain in the holding tub. You can then bathe in it.”

“Dad, that’s gross. I can’t bathe with the same water I wash my hair with! What happens if I need more than five gallons?” asked Brandye. She wished she had short hair like her mother, but she’d always enjoyed her long blond pig tails.

“Your great great grandmother crossed the prairies with less water than that. I know you can manage.”

Brandye had never had to manage anything before. She got whatever she wanted whenever she wanted it. This was a strange feeling; one she wasn’t sure she liked. It was almost as strange that her father who never refused her anything was so unsympathetic. Brandye thought, “At least we won’t have to use those awful plastic diapers.”

“As a matter of fact, Brandye, once we get to our campsite, we’ll have to be just as careful. Water isn’t something they take for granted here.” Even Jack was looking interested in his dad’s lecture. This was a side, he too, had never encountered.

Four baths later everyone was more relaxed. Brandye was amazed that five gallons of water used carefully would wash her hair although she wouldn’t mind returning home where she didn’t have to manage so carefully.

They descended once again in the elevator and requested a ferry and the name of a good restaurant from the computer terminal. Brandye thought that vacations weren’t too bad if this was any indication. They chose a competitor of her dad’s, a restaurant she had never been to before but always wanted to. The Purple Onion was supposed to have the best onion rings in the world. As much as she like The Green Pea, its onion rings were not her favorite.

They had a good time, and even Mr. Drinker seemed to see the fun in eating at a competitor’s. When they were finished, they set off in search of the supply depot. Brandye looked forward to having a chance to shop. It was right up her alley.

Chapter 11

The two children looked impatiently for something resembling a shopping mall. They had grown up in the one at home. From as early as Brandye could remember, she had spent her free time in the shopping area located in her housing complex. After

she had eaten in the communal cafeteria, she would wander for hours sometimes wishing that someone would ask her to play. Her brother always met his friends there, and they played in the grassy area maintained for just such a purpose. Brandye had always thought it funny when she read books about small town life in an earlier age. It had seemed so much like the complex she lived in. They ate, played, shopped, and visited in the communal mall. It was as much a part of home as their small apartment.

She thought that getting to visit a lunar mall was too exciting for words. As the robot ferry carried them through the passage ways, she and Jack kept looking for the recognizable cluster of shops. Instead, they stopped at a door very much like the one at the hotel. "Lunar Mall" was the sign over the door. "Oh, I guess they have the shops inside," commented a confused Brandye. Her dad just smiled a little secret smile. She didn't know why he seemed to be teasing her.

They walked through the door to a small waiting room with the ever present computer terminal. Her dad walked up to the screen and pushed the service key. A message appeared, "Welcome to Lunar Mall. We have the most complete inventory found this side of New York. Please indicate which shopping guide you would like."

"You're kidding, Dad," exclaimed Jack. "You mean this is it? Who would want to shop like that?"

His dad began to select items from the grocery list. "Why waste space on displays just to satisfy your need to walk around a store? Actually, we could have done this from the hotel, but you two were so excited about shopping. They'll deliver our merchandise directly to the docking station. Now, let's see what else we need."

In a few minutes and after much discussion about load limitations, they had completed the transaction. "Dad, what really gets to me is that you can't even buy a souvenir," complained Brandye.

"Oh, is it a souvenir you want? Well, tell you what, I'll let you have the copy of our bill from this trip when it arrives."

"Oh, Dad, quit teasing me." Brandye was in no mood to let adults act superior. "I'll get a souvenir somehow," she thought to herself.

They returned to the luxury of the hotel. Even at partial gravity, the beds seemed harder than those at home. In only two days Brandye had begun to enjoy float sleeping held in only by the restraints of a sleeping bag. Her last thoughts before slipping off to sleep were of Herbert. She'd left him plenty of food and water, but she hated leaving him alone. She worried, "What if he got out again?"

The next morning they took the robot ferry back to the ship. It had been fun to stay in a real room, but the Jeep seemed like home already. The moon itself hadn't been too exciting except that partial gravity made walking easier. They hadn't talked to anyone and only saw those people traveling in the passageways. They began to talk excitedly about the day ahead. "Well, Dad, what's on the agenda?" The "Jack", who was convinced he would hate the whole trip, was just as excited as the others.

“It will only take us a short time to reach our designated camping spot. I looked on the map, and we’ll be 125 miles from Moon Base. Once we’re there, we’ll be able to break out our new suits and see how they work.”

“Can I take Herbert in my suit with me?” The glare that Brandye received from everyone, even Jack, told her immediately that they didn’t think that was a good idea. “Oh, maybe I won’t,” she said with a grin designed to get her out of hot water.

They reached the docking site, checked in with the computer, and entered their “home away from home.” Brandye went over to the tube attached to the wall. Herbert was still curled up and seemed unaware of her absence. She carefully untaped him and shook him out. He was warm and cuddly. She whispered to him that she was glad she had brought him along. His little nose twitched at her as if to say that he was glad too. She dropped him into the pocket of her jumps while she cleaned out his tube and refilled the water and food. She could feel him squirming around tickling her as he explored the pocket. He was used to being dropped into her chest pocket. She had smuggled him to school at least once that way. However, with the suit getting tighter, he didn’t have as much room in that pocket as he used to.

While Brandye was taking care of Herbert George Wells, her dad was checking over the supplies which had been delivered. As he unpacked the box, Jack carried each item to the place his father directed. “I wish I could have purchased all of this at home, but there just wasn’t room. At least two days of supplies got used up on the trip out.”

“What’s this?” asked Jack as he carried a small maroon box to the pantry locker.

“Oh, just a little surprise,” said his father with a secretive smile. “Just put it in that drawer to your right.”

It didn’t take long for everything to be stored away. Since they had eaten in the hotel room, they prepared for take off when they finished. “We should have eaten breakfast here. My omelet would have been much better than that yellow rubber one we had from room service.”

“Mark, quit fretting about the omelet. It was fine, and after all, this is a vacation.” Brandye’s mother finished the contact with Moon Base, and soon a ferry was pulling them along to the lift off point. Everyone strapped themselves in and waited for the ferry to deliver them.

“Did the docking crew remove the waste and refill the water and fuel?” asked Mr. Drinker.

“Yes, I checked the levels before I let the ferry attach,” answered his wife. “Who would have thought that trash disposal was going to be the biggest worry in the use of space travel? And now that all major countries have signed littering agreements, we can’t even jettison it like they used to.”

Jack interrupted. “Mom, you know that we couldn’t continue to treat the universe like our private trash can.” He had been given considerable instruction in school about the responsibilities of members of the United Space League. He knew that not only

his family, but also his nation, would be fined heavily if they were caught disposing of waste and trash into the vacuum of space.

His mother sighed. "Believe me, I know. To insure compliance the government keeps careful records of weight at lift off and return. If we had landed at Moon Base with less than the correct weight, there would have been a major investigation."

She continued to monitor the computer and through the small port window they could see ahead of them the lift off of another ship. Soon they were in place, and the ferry released itself. "I hope the maintenance crew was right about this computer. It seems to be working fine now, but the thought of a hamster running amok still scares me. Well, here goes nothing. All personnel secured and ready to lift off?"

Chapter 12

The takeoff was smooth and quiet. The autopilot quickly shut off the engine, and the family soared in an arc toward their new landing site. In a few minutes, other engines fired, and they began their descent toward a much scarred landing pad. Mrs. Drinker commented to no one in particular, "You know it was truly brilliant thinking when the lunar tourist bureau realized the profit possible in paving spaces at 100 mile intervals across the moon. It is a gold mine that requires no mining equipment and no personnel. All the bureau has to do is issue permits to park. The seclusion and primitiveness appeal to hundreds of tourists each year who want to follow the fantasy of discovering the moon for themselves."

The landing was somewhat harder than that at Moon Base, but the jarring seemed to hurt no one. "We made it," breathed everyone with a sigh of relief. They unstrapped and began to move about. Each person checked that which he or she was most concerned about. Supplies, computer, and hamster were all fine.

After the initial excitement, everyone wandered around somewhat lost. Finally, Jack took the initiative. "When do we get to go outside?"

His dad agreed. "That's what we came for. No reason not to try out those suits." All four of them spent the next few minutes getting into their suits; they were glad of the practice at home. Brandye finally got the last connection made and turned on her air supply. The others were just as awkward as she. At last they were ready. Brandye laughed. "Mom, I don't think you'll make the best dressed look."

"Look's who's talking." Her mother grinned at her. "Where's Herbert?" she asked suspiciously.

Trying to look innocent, Brandye assured her, "He's in his tube taking a nap. Besides, I can't find anywhere to stuff him. These suits don't have much spare room. And I don't think he'd like going without air."

"Excellent point," added her father. "It's a good thing this model comes with an airlock, or he'd be in real trouble when we left the cabin."

"Just how do we get out of here?" wondered Jack out loud.

"Haven't you noticed the round plate in the floor?" asked his mother. "Only one person at a time can leave the ship. Instead of using the door which connected us to

the passageways when we docked, we'll use this small escape hole in the floor of the cabin." His mother inserted a special key into the hole and then pulled up the plate. They could hear the slight whoosh of air as its vacuum was released.

They all peered in to see a narrow passage with a ladder leading down. "All you do is climb down until your feet reach the last rung. For you Brandye it may be easier, but for the rest of us it will be a tight fit. It's designed to waste as little as possible of our cabin air. The lower plate cannot be opened as long as this upper plate is unlocked, so once you are in far enough, reach up and lock the upper plate. The release switch for the lower plate is right here." She pointed down inside the passage. "After you have locked the upper plate, feel for the switch. It'll be dark, but when the lower plate opens, you will be able to see your way. There's another ladder which is an extension of the one you see. It is released when you open the lower plate. It will need to be locked in place so that the lower plate can be closed for the next person."

"Sounds complicated and right up my alley," volunteered Mr. Drinker. "I'll go, and then you kids follow. Your mother needs to be last to check last minute details. We don't want to leave the coffee pot turned on." This kind of silly teasing was a strange side to Brandye's father. At home he seemed so serious to her. On this trip he seemed to her to be nearly as bad as Jack.

Mr. Drinker climbed down and out of sight closing the plate. In a few moments the others heard the clang of the lower plate closing. Brandye's mother released the upper plate again. Brandye followed her father's descent. It was spooky pulling the lid down and feeling for the lower plate release. But soon she was closing the lower plate and on the ladder climbing toward the ground. As Brandye reached the bottom of the ladder, her father reached up to help her to the ground. Even with the ladder, the jump was several feet for her.

Brandye turned around to stare at the flat airless plain. For the first time in her life, she felt awe. That was a feeling she did not recognize. The space shuttle, the Jeep Rockette, and even the Moon Base had seemed just part of her extended world, but this was different. It was nearly magical. All she could do was inhale a sigh of amazement. Standing next to her father who still held her, she suddenly felt a closeness with him that she never had before. For the moment, it was just she and her father in a world no one else lived in.

He gave her a squeeze around the shoulders just as the plate above them opened, and Jack climbed out. As he landed beside her, she could tell he too was experiencing the same feeling of awe. It was the first time she remembered ever knowing what he was thinking. Without a thought, she reached over and took his hand in hers. He didn't pull away. And soon Mrs. Drinker was standing beside Jack. No one said much. They moved away from the ship to see better, but they did not separate. Instead, they remained protectively close.

The spell took a while to fall away from them. They spoke in whispers as if they were afraid to disturb the silence. "This is unbelievable," said Mr. Drinker.

"Look over there, where the sun catches those rocks," pointed out Jack.

“It’s like no one has ever been here before,” added Mrs. Drinker.

Brandye whispered, “I didn’t know it was going to be like this.” She looked down and noticed a shiny object at her feet.

As she picked it up, her mother asked through the suit’s intercom, “What did you find?”

Incensed, Brandye called over to her, “Can you imagine! Someone left trash here. I thought that was illegal.”

“It is, but maybe the people who camped here last didn’t realize that it had been dropped. Just put it in your thigh pocket, and we’ll dispose of it later.” Brandye unzipped the pocket, put the small metal tab into it, and promptly forgot it.

They all began to move around a little. Jack treated the dust like a snow bank he had played in on a skiing trip once. This was more fun, though. It wasn’t cold or wet and fell slowly back in place as soon as he disturbed it. “Be careful, son, a rock could cause some real problems,” warned his dad. “And remember the buddy system. No one goes over the horizon without someone with them. These radios don’t have unlimited range. The last thing we want is to lose someone.”

Brandye thought, “Well, at least, the old serious dad was still in there somewhere.”

For the first time Brandye was able to see the ship from the outside. It seemed strange to realize how much she knew about it without ever having really seen it. It was squat and flat on the bottom. It looked like someone had taken one of the tall, thin rockets she had seen in pictures and sat on it. The wide base made it possible to land with such ease, but it didn’t help the way it looked.

They spent nearly an hour exploring and getting acquainted with the terrain. It didn’t take long for everyone to become used to being out on the moon’s surface dressed in life support gear. The afternoon of practice back home paid off. Even though the landing site had been chosen for its comparative flatness, small craters were everywhere. It was fun to jump over the smallest ones and peer into the larger ones. But eventually they tired of the novelty and the exertion. Laughing and joking, one by one they climbed back into the familiarity of the Jeep.

Chapter 13

Brandye collapsed on her bunk. “Gosh, Mom, this is beginning to feel like home. If only we had a shower.”

“Listen to her. We give her the moon, and she wants a shower,” said her mother with a smile while she checked the Granny Smith to verify that all systems had remained stable in their absence.

They stripped off their suits and hung them on hooks at the end of each bunk. A little dust still clung to each of them. Jack went over to Herbert’s tube and tapped gently on it. “How are you doing in there little fellow? Miss us?” Brandye smiled at his interest

“How about lunch? How does spaghetti sound?” Her dad pulled out four sealed packages and began to heat them. Soon they had raised the table and were sitting around it laughing over the morning’s antics.

“I wish we had taken a picture when Jack sat in that crater hole with just his head sticking out of the dust.” Brandye grinned. “Wouldn’t that football coach be impressed?”

“I’d just explain to him that I was practicing an all-body lift - the latest in isometric exercises. Speaking of exercise, I’d better get on it. I haven’t done any since we got to Moon Base.”

“Jack, somehow I think you can be forgiven. After all, this is a vacation,” began his dad.

“Sorry, Dad, but I did promise Coach Nelson. Even though this is really more fun than I thought.” Everyone broke into a look of pretended surprise. “Now, just listen, I know I complained a little”

In unison, the rest of the family cried out, “A little!”

“Okay, so it was a little more than a little. The point is I still have to keep in training. At least with some gravity, it will be easier.”

“I agree, Son,” began his father again. “That’s what I was trying to say. Since we are on vacation and have no excuse for not having time, I think all of us,” he flashed a smile at his wife and Brandye, “should join in. It won’t hurt any of us to limber up our muscles. Right, Kay?”

Both Brandye and her mother looked a little dubious, but before more could be said, they had lowered the table into the floor and begun group calisthenics. Brandye had hated P.E. in school. She had always felt like a perfect klutz on display for the whole world. Surprising herself, she thought, “This isn’t too bad, though.”

Thirty minutes later everyone, except Jack, was huffing and puffing. Brandye’s mother called for a rest. “Mark, enough! enough! Even in partial gravity, sit ups are no fun. I haven’t worked this hard since we moved my office three years ago. Come on, Brandye. Let’s find something to drink in your father’s well stocked pantry.”

While Brandye sipped juice through a straw, she took Herbert from his tube. Her mother reached over and stroked the soft fur. “He’s such a pretty little thing,” commented her mother. Brandye set him on the table to explore now that he could crawl without floating. They all sat around watching to catch him if he went too far. Brandye found a box of oat cereal and put some of it on the table for him. Everyone laughed to see him fill up his pouches trying to carry it with him. “Now that’s the way to travel. Just stuff whatever you need into a pouch.” Brandye’s mother puffed up her cheeks and asked, “Do you think it would work?”

“Mom, I hate to say this, but it’s just not you,” Brandye teased back. She couldn’t believe her mother could act so silly. It was almost like having a sister to play with, and Brandye had always thought if Jack were a girl, things would have been better. But even Jack seemed okay on this trip.

Her father interrupted her thoughts. “Well, is it checkers or exploring on our afternoon agenda?”

Together Brandye and Jack yelled, “Exploring!” Their dad pulled out a topographical map of the moon showing the area around their landing pad. They all craned their necks to see their location.

Laughing, their dad called out, “Whoa, next time I’ll tell the tourist bureau to issue enough copies for everyone.” He spread the map onto the table and began to point out their pad and the concentric circles nearby. “These circles tell us where the large craters and hills are.”

“Gosh, Dad, I can’t believe someone actually uses a map like this. I always figured in school that it was just another of those ‘keep the student busy activities’.”

“I know, Brandye, I used to feel the same way. But it’s funny how many of those useless parts of school I keep needing. I’m glad you can read one because we won’t go out of sight of the ship without one.”

“Uh, well, I wouldn’t go so far as to say I can read a topographical map. I think maybe that day I sort of was thinking about something else.”

“Then it’s time to play catch up. Pick a direction and a spot to aim for. We’ll let you be our guide today.” She spent a few minutes looking closely at the map. It wasn’t too hard to figure out, but she’d never looked at a map so carefully before.

“Right there. That’s where we’ll go.” She pointed to the middle of a large crater which seemed to be fairly close. Jack had looked a little left out, so she turned to him and said, “How about that one Jack?”

He was a little taken aback by this unexpected offer. “Yeah, that looks like a good one to see. But tomorrow let’s try over here.” He pointed to a tall range of hills. “I’d like to be able to climb to the top to see how far you can see.”

“That’s a great idea.” She looked up to her parents. “Is it okay if we go there tomorrow?”

Her mom began to stand up. “Sounds like a great plan. Let’s get started. Pull your suits back on and check to see that your communication equipment is working and air tanks are full. I’ll set the communication beacon, so we can find our way back.”

In a few minutes, Herbert was safely tucked away, and they were heading down the air hatch.

It took several hours and many stops to look at the map before they reached the edge of the crater. Somehow, what looked close on the map seemed much farther away when you had to walk there. Connected to each other with a safety line, they walked slowly checking for holes covered with dust.

“Brandye, do me a favor.” Brandye’s mother called to her over the intercom. “Next time, let’s aim a little closer.”

“A good idea. Who would have thought it was so far to a little crater? I thought the moon was supposed to be small.”

Her dad joined into the conversation. "I guess small depends on your point of view. At least we are taking the scenic view. Did you all see the meteor explosion?"

Brandye laughed. "Not me. I'm too busy worrying about where I put my feet to look up."

"Hey, look ahead, I think that may be it," yelled Jack into the intercom.

Reaching up as if to block the noise from his ears, his dad agreed. "I think you're right, but next time whisper it."

"Sorry about that. I guess I got a little excited."

Once again the family responded in unison, "A little!"

"Give a guy a chance. I've never explored the moon before."

They stood at the edge of the crater and looked down inside. No one said anything for a few moments until one by one a whispered "wow" came over the intercom.

"I would have hated being in the way whenever whatever caused that landed," commented Jack.

"That's for sure," agreed Brandye.

"Kids, I hate to say this, but we'll have to wait until another day to go down. It's getting late, and we have a long way back."

"That's okay Mom. After all, we are going to be here two whole weeks. We can wait. Right, Brandye?"

"Sure, Mom. Jack's right."

Even through her suit, it was apparent that her mother seemed relieved that her decision was so easily accepted. "Then lead on, Brandye, I think it's your turn. Just remember that not all of us are as young and spry as you."

The trip back went quickly with the aid of the beacon. Frequently, they could see the footprints from the trip out, so it was easier to miss the dangerous holes. Along the way their dad began to sing into the intercom a marching song he had obviously learned at an earlier age.

"Where did you learn that song?" inquired Brandye. She hadn't even known her dad could sing.

"Just an old scouting march."

Jack called out, "You were a scout?"

"Sure, made Eagle at 14. Being a patrol leader was the hardest work I ever had to do. The only way to keep a patrol of twelve year olds going is to keep them singing." Jack wondered what else his father had done that he didn't know about. Jack had always thought of his father as someone who ran a restaurant, as if he had never done anything else.

It wasn't long before they all picked up the tune and the tempo and marched back to the ship calling out "One-Two-Three-Four."

Once back at the Jeep, they stretched out on their bunks. It had taken most of the day to reach the crater and return. According to Houston time which was beginning to seem less and less important, they had missed dinner by several hours. "Without the sun going down and coming up, it's hard to know what day it is much less what hour it is," commented Brandye's dad as he considered what was available to eat.

"Mark, all I know is that my stomach has known for quite a while that we were missing dinner."

"Me, too," chimed in both children.

"I wish we could take a picnic lunch tomorrow," suggested Brandye.

"That would be an interesting trick. I didn't notice any picnic tables at the crater, but how would we eat without taking off our suits?" laughed her dad.

"Dad," she returned his laugh. "I know that it's not possible. I just thought it would be fun if we could." Her father's teasing no longer bothered her. Even a week ago, she would have run to her room in tears. Brandye came over to help choose the "evening" meal. "Don't you think we have enough spaghetti?" she asked as she counted eight packages of the prepared dinners.

"You all said you like it," said Mr. Drinker with a sheepish laugh. "Okay, so I overplanned a little."

"Dad, I don't think Herbert will eat spaghetti, but we could try."

"You keep that hamster out of my spaghetti!"

"Just teasing, Dad. Let's have Chicken Kiev. That looks good."

The meal was quickly prepared and served to the waiting family. As they sat at the table enjoying the companionship of family, Jack suggested, "So who's going to beat me in checkers first?"

"I guess it's my turn." His mother began to clear away the dishes and set up the checker set. The others sat back and watched the friendly duel which resulted in Jack capturing his mother's last magnetic token. The rest of the evening passed quickly as they continued the tournament rotation.

Chapter 14

The next morning, knowing now how long it would take, the family left the Jeep right after breakfast. They had become much more agile at the process of traveling across the pitted landscape. They reached the mountain range and began to climb toward its peak. Even with less gravity than at home, it was a strenuous climb. Everyone was panting halfway up the ridge. They rested, drank from their water supply, and chewed on the fruit sticks in their suits. "Well, Brandye, it's not quite a picnic," commented her dad.

"Oh, I don't know. It's not too bad, but next time we need to bring a tablecloth," she teased back at her father.

"Touché," he replied to her jab at his standard complaint.

They continued to climb, finally reaching the top and dropping exhausted onto the rocky outcrop. "Quite a sight. Look you can even see our ship down there," pointed her mom. "We can almost see Moon Base from here."

"Just think, when I get home, I can tell everyone I climbed to the top of the moon. Do you think the coach would count this as a half hour of exercise?"

"Jack, if he doesn't, just tell him to call me. I'll testify on your behalf," puffed his dad.

"It's a great place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live here. Who's going to race me down?" challenged Brandy.

"Where are you getting your energy? Just go get the car and drive me back." It was amazing to Brandy that her mother, who seemed to always know what to do and how, was tired after a little hike up a hill.

After her parents' breathing lost its huffing and puffing quality, they began the descent. "This took more oxygen than I would have expected," commented her dad as he checked his gauge. "How's yours look Kay?"

"I figure about two hours. How long did it take to get here?"

"Almost three hours, but it should be faster going back." He checked Jack's and Brandy's air supply. "Jack has about the same, but Brandy for all her running around is in better shape. I guess we better move along. I'm rather fond of breathing." Brandy could tell he was worried. These past few days had taught her a lot about her family, and she knew that her dad liked to tease his way out of worrying. Her mother, instead, just got quiet and frowned.

They moved along down the ridge toward their ship. For an hour they marched single file avoiding the rocks and holes they had passed on their way up. Jack was leading and turned to check on those following him. As he shifted his gaze, his foot slipped between two rocks. "Ah," he groaned with gritted teeth as he pulled his foot loose.

"Are you okay?" everyone asked with real concern as they gathered around him.

"Yeah, I should have been watching my feet instead of the scenery." He began to move around a little treating his foot gingerly.

His dad bent down to look for signs of swelling. "Can you walk on it?"

"Sure, remember I'm a tough football player. No pain can stop me from completing my forward rush, or at least that's what the coaches keep telling me." Jack's joking didn't seem as light as usual. There was a certain desperation behind it. Brandy was surprised to discover that even Jack wasn't always able to laugh off everything. "We better keep going."

It became apparent that, while Jack could walk, he couldn't keep up the pace that was needed to reach the Jeep. His dad called a halt after only a short time. "We're going to have to stop here. If we are resting, we will use less oxygen. Brandy can go on without us and bring back the tanks we need. There are plenty of spares in the pantry."

“Me?!” she exclaimed with wide, scared eyes. “I don’t think I can find the way by myself.” Even she could hear the hollowness of her excuse.

“Yes, you can,” reassured her mother. “Just follow our prints in the dust. We’ll wait here for you. Be sure to change yours out before you return. We don’t need you running out of air.”

It took some convincing before Brandye agreed to attempt the trip alone. She started out at a slow walk toward the direction they had been traveling. It was the most scared moment she ever remembered. For most of her life she had felt invisible both at home and in school. Everyone else seemed to have a life to live which didn’t include her. Now out on this airless plain, with no one to see her, she no longer felt invisible. She felt capable, important, and scared. She wondered if her mother ever felt this way.

As she continued, her trust in herself grew. Each step toward the ship came faster and more confident. Within less than an hour, she reached the landing pad and walked toward the stairs going into the Jeep. She climbed up and continued toward the upper plate. She reached the switch to close the lower passage. The lower plate closed, but the darkness of the passage no longer worried her. She knew she could open the upper plate with ease.

In a short time, she was standing in the pantry gathering up a new canister of air for herself. She had never done it alone before. Someone else had always attached it after she was dressed. To save time, she tried to attach the air tank by reaching behind her, but she just couldn’t get it to work. Finally she wiggled out of her suit, attached the tank, and squirmed back in again.

Next, she picked up three canisters of air for the others. They weren’t heavy, but she could carry only one at a time out of the pantry. Now all she had to do was get the tubes down the escape hatch and carry them back to her family. Suddenly, all her confidence disappeared. She couldn’t carry three air tanks! She couldn’t even get three tanks and herself down the hatch! She looked around frantically, hoping an idea would come to her. Nothing. There was nothing to use to carry anything.

She looked across at the sleeping hamster aware that time was slipping away. “Oh, Herbert, what am I going to do? You have such an easy life. I wish I were a hamster who only had to sleep all day and eat the night away. You even have pouches to carry food around in case of an emergency. Yes, pouches would be nice to have right now. But I need pouches big enough to carry oxygen tanks.” But she realized that she wasn’t a hamster, and she didn’t have pouches. It looked like her family’s trust in her was wasted. She was just Brandye invisible, incapable of doing anything, and useless to everyone.

Chapter 15

The feeling of helplessness passed; her confidence came flooding back. She did have pouches. That was how she carried Herbert. She ran to her bunk and picked up the jumps she had been wearing that morning. She knew the pockets wouldn’t be big enough, but the legs were. She closed the legs as much as possible using the

velcro strips at the ankles of the suit. She placed a bottle in each leg and the third in the body of the suit. She tightened the third tube in place with the velcro strips at the waist.

She opened up the hatch and lowered the suit down the passageway. Once it was safely at the bottom, she reached up and closed the upper plate. She flipped the switch in the darkness and was glad that she had tied one arm of the scarecrow-like jumps onto the ladder. She wasn't sure it would hurt the tanks to drop to the ground, but it didn't seem like a good idea.

She climbed down, released the jump suit and lowered it to the ground. Once it was down, she jumped to the moon's surface. She gathered the empty arms around her shoulders and began her return march. The tanks were heavy but manageable. She wondered how long she had been gone. It didn't seem like it had been very long. She thought to herself as she hurried on, "I'm not the one running out of air. My family needs me."

The sight of the three of them slumped on the ground made her heart hurt. She covered the distance as quickly as the awkward tubes would allow. They didn't hear her until she was nearly to them. The three waiting members of her family began to stand up. Her dad greeted her with a smile. "See, I told you she could do it, and with time to spare."

"Mark, ten minutes of oxygen doesn't seem much like time to spare. Brandye, what is that contraption you have rigged?" asked her mother.

"I couldn't carry three tanks, so I decided I needed a hamster pouch." She began to unwrap the arms from around her shoulders and to pull loose the velcro straps at the ankles and waist. She handed each person a spare tank and helped them change out the near empty ones.

They placed the empty tanks back in her jump suit. "Sis, I'll carry them home. You did enough just getting them here. I wondered how you were going to carry them, but I should have known you'd think of something. You always do." She couldn't imagine her brother saying such a thing.

"Of course, anyone who could figure a way to smuggle a hamster on board an international shuttle wouldn't let a little thing like three air tanks slow her down," agreed her dad.

"I can't believe I was so stupid." Her mother shook her head as if to shake off the memory of the near disaster.

Brandye jumped to her defense. "But, Mom, it wasn't your fault. You didn't know it would take so long." From the look of the others, obviously this had been discussed while she was gone. It bothered Brandye that her mother thought she had done something wrong. Her mother was never wrong. Only Brandye made mistakes, not her parents.

"Brandye, I appreciate your support, but I got so wrapped up in the climb that I wasn't paying attention as I should have. But we won't make the same mistake

again. I don't care how much trouble it is, we won't leave the ship without enough of everything and some to spare."

Her dad reached over to give his wife a hug, which was rather awkward with tanks and suits. "Don't blame yourself too much. We're fine, and that's all that matters. It's time to head back to our cozy little quarters and see about something to eat."

"Dad, all you think about is food," laughed Jack.

His dad tried to look crestfallen but didn't exactly succeed. Body language wasn't as easy to convey in tight fitting space suits. "I guess that means you aren't interested in tonight's beef stroganoff."

Jack began to pull Brandye's jump suit over his shoulders and tie it on. "I'll force myself, but only if you'll play a game of checkers when we get back to the ship."

Once again in single file, they moved back toward their ship. Jack's foot still slowed him down, but without the pressure of time, they were able to reach the ladder without difficulty. One by one they climbed into the tube leading upward.

Once they had shed their suits and begun to relax, the checkers were placed on the table. As Jack and his dad began the first game of the on-going tournament, Brandye's mother checked on their status with the computer. "Everything still looks fine here, but we need to decide when we will return to Moon Base to refill our oxygen tanks."

"Kay, how many days do we have left?"

"About ten, but I don't want to leave us without a reserve. A week here, and then I think we need to go on in. Besides, by then we should be tired of your cooking and want to see some strange faces."

Brandye hadn't realized that they would get to return to Moon Base. She hadn't given up on a souvenir, and this time she would make sure she found one. She released Herbert from his tube and put him on her bunk. It was funny to watch him scurry about at 1/6th gravity. He had so little room in his tube that it didn't bother him there, but on the bunk he kept floating up. It didn't take him long, though, to figure out a system. "Hey, Mom, look at Herbert. He's found something better than magnetic sandals."

Her mother moved away from the computer and laughed at his antics. The hamster had developed a walk which required him to use his claws to climb across the fabric of her sleeping bag. The same claws he used at home to climb up the side of the cage, he used to stay on the bag. "Keep an eye on him, honey. We don't need another missing hamster," she said as she went back to the console.

Brandye took out her book and began to read, keeping an eye on her exploring rodent. When he tired of his new adventure, she placed him back in his tube after giving him a fond hug. "Oh, Herbert, you're so wonderful."

"Hey, Junior Lunar Checkers Champ, it's your turn to take me on for the semi-final round of tonight's contest."

"Gosh, Dad, when did I win the junior championship?"

“Surely, that went along with the Female Rescuer of Stranded Families Award. Is your new title ‘Have pouch, will travel’?” The teasing stopped, but Brandye did feel like a champ. It was hard to believe everything that had happened that day. It was already becoming more like some kind of dream than something that had happened to her.

Chapter 16

The remaining days were uneventful. They slept, ate, read, played checkers, and just spent time talking to each other. Herbert got taken out so much that he developed a real talent for handling the reduced gravity. It seemed like every time Brandye turned around, someone had him. He wandered across the checkers board, spent time on her mother’s lap, and nibbled left over spaghetti. She was surprised, though, that she didn’t mind. Just a few weeks before, she would have minded a lot.

The family spent several hours each day exploring the surrounding area, always being careful to carry enough supplies. They returned to the crater twice and allowed enough time to climb down into it. However, no one seemed to want to try the mountain range again.

Several times, just Brandye and Jack went off together. They had learned how to use the homing beeper, but they never got too far from sight of the ship. It was fun, though, out exploring with Jack. He had already had an advanced astral studies course in school which Brandye wouldn’t take for two more years. Consequently, he knew some things about the moon strata that she didn’t. At first, she expected him to treat her like a kid sister who knew nothing, but he didn’t. Instead he was patient and interested in explaining everything he knew to her. In return, she realized that he was not just a football player, but pretty smart about other things, too.

“Jack, you sure know a lot about all this. I don’t know how you remember all this stuff.”

“Brandye, to tell you the truth, I like all this a lot. As a matter of fact, I think I’m going to major in Astral Geography in college.”

“What about football?”

“That’s just for right now. I know that I can’t do that forever. I think this will be my last year. I need to spend more time in my learning carrel if I’m going to get into Rice.”

“You never told me that.”

“I haven’t talked to anybody about it. Somehow, I always figured Mom wanted me to take the dealership. Do you think she will be disappointed?”

“No, I heard her tell Aunt Bess that she hoped neither of us were counting on working there. She said she didn’t believe in children trying to meet a parent’s expectation by working in the same field.”

“Really!! Oh Brandye, I’m so glad. That helps a lot. Now, all I have to worry about is explaining to Dad about football. I don’t suppose you heard **him** talking to Aunt Bess.”

“No, but have you noticed on this trip that he seems to think everything we do is pretty much O.K? I bet if you talked to him he wouldn’t be too upset.”

“I’ll give it a try, but I think we need to head back. Mom’s going to be ready for lift off soon.”

They returned to the interior of the ship which had already been prepared for take off. The table was in place, the pantry secure, and even Herbert’s tube had extra tape. They were all looking forward to the visit to Moon Base, but no one seemed anxious to leave.

The night before, Brandye’s dad had said as he was “kinging” one of his pieces, “I don’t know why we don’t play checkers at home. There’s no reason why we can’t do some of the things we do here.”

Brandye’s mother had smiled wistfully. “Somehow I have a hunch that once we’re home we’ll never even think of checkers.”

“I hope you’re wrong. But even if you’re right, I, for one, have enjoyed this more than I ever expected,” he said as he looked over at Jack.

Jack grinned. “Yeah, me too. The only thing is, Dad. I’m tired of spaghetti.”

“I’ll remember that the next time you’re complaining about the communal cafeteria.”

Brandye laughed to herself thinking about last night’s banter as she hooked the restraining web. As she watched her mother make sure that everyone and everything was properly strapped in, Brandye admired her mother’s confidence. But now she knew that sometimes even her mother wasn’t always in control. For a moment the thought gave her hope that someday she might be as capable as her mother appeared.

The lift off went smoothly and the engines fired briefly. It would take them only a short while to reach the docking berth at Moon Base. A few moments after the lift off, however, the lights in the cabin flickered. The flicker was followed by a sharp buzz which came from the Granny Smith, and a message appeared on the screen “Major System Error. Restart.” Brandye’s mother tried to call up various commands, but without success. The cabin had become deadly quiet. Jack and Brandye knew enough to realize that a system error was a major calamity. The dreaded “bomb” had appeared often enough in systems they had worked on.

Suddenly, their mother turned to them. “I want each of you to put on your space suits. Mark will you bring mine to me? For the moment we are in a stable orbit around the moon, but I don’t know how much longer our air or lights will remain on without computer assistance. Kids, I appreciate your helpful quiet. We’re going to be all right, but I don’t know what’s causing this system error. If I tell it to restart, we may be fine, or we may not be.”

They moved to the pantry and retrieved their suits. Within a short time, they had squirmed into them but carried their helmets. Brandye realized that her nose felt like it did on a brisk January morning. “Mom, is it getting colder in here?”

“Could be. Temperature control is a major function of the life support system.” As they all returned to their chairs and strapped themselves in, Brandye’s mother took a deep breath and chose the reset command. The computer blanked out and began to reassemble the screen image. However, halfway through the process, the system error bomb once again reappeared. “So much for that idea,” sighed her mother as she unstrapped herself and began to dismantle the console cover. There was no friendly joking, only scared silence. Her mother pulled the cover away and began to check the power connections. It didn’t take her long to discover the overheated pin which was causing the computer such distress.

As Brandye’s mother thumbed through the instruction manual looking for schematic drawing of each pin location, she looked up to the frightened faces staring at her. “Hey, folks, it’s okay. No Granny Smith ever fails to get its passengers home. Um...” She had found the drawing she was looking for. “Not too bad. If we had to lose a system, that one we can manage for a short while.”

“What did you find?” asked Brandye’s dad.

“Well, Brandye’s right. It probably is getting colder. That pin connector is the heating and cooling system. We wouldn’t want to go for long without it, but we can manage until we reach Moon Base.” She carefully removed the pin from the connector and reseated the other pins. She replaced the computer console and once again chose the reset command. “Hopefully, without the burned pin, the system will function.”

They held their breaths as the screen began the rebuilding process. As it completed the command, a sigh of relief came from each person. With that concern no longer occupying their minds, they became aware of the intensity of the cold in the cabin. “We’d better let our suits take over,” suggested Brandye’s dad. Each pulled on a helmet and turned on the intercom.

“Woo. That’s better. My nose was thinking of frostbite,” commented Jack

“Let’s see how far our orbit has carried us.” Her mother began to choose commands and to enter information for Moon Base. “We may be able to land at the auxiliary base,” she told them hopefully. “Under the circumstances, I’d rather land there. In order to reach Moon Base, we would have to pass into the heat of the sun. There are systems within the ship that will not function without the cooling provided by the life support. Cold isn’t any fun, but it won’t create as many problems.” It was almost as if her mom were thinking out loud rather than talking to them.

Approval for an emergency landing came quickly. The ship began to fire the descent rockets, and they were soon landing on a pad not much larger than the one at their campsite. “This isn’t exactly all the comforts of home, so we’ll have to use the escape hatch rather than the loading door. There are no passenger tubes here. They’ll pull the ship into the repair bay after we leave.” Brandye’s mother released her straps and picked up her gear bag with a change of clothes. The others followed her example. Her dad began to raise the plate and to climb down.

While she was waiting her turn, she looked across at Herbert. “Mom, what can I do about him?”

“He’ll be fine. You left him last time. Besides, you can’t take him down the escape tube. There’s no way to maintain his oxygen.”

Brandye checked his water and food supplies, patted the tube with the sleeping hamster, and with a worried look climbed down into the escape tube.

Chapter 17

The hotel at the auxiliary base wasn’t quite the Lunar Hilton, but they were so used to the cramped quarters of the Jeep that no one minded. They spent the first day getting used to real beds and water to wash with. They ordered room service, watched television, much to Jack’s delight, and even ordered a checkers set from the service terminal.

Brandye’s mother and dad left them in the room the next morning while they went to check on the repairs on the Jeep. “Mom, check on Herbert while you’re there, if you can.”

“Sure, Brandy, but I’m sure he’s fine. You left him plenty of food and water.” Somehow Brandy knew that her mother would check anyway. She pulled up the covers to watch “Doodle Bee and the Dragoons” since even though she hadn’t complained like Jack, she had missed the cartoon.

By the time her parents returned even Jack and Brandy had begun to tire of the video entertainment. Brandy had pulled out a book, and Jack had offered to play checkers.

Jack looked up as they came through the door. “What’s the status? Can we go on to Moon Base today?”

Brandye’s dad didn’t look particularly happy. “It looks like they will have temporary repairs made by this afternoon. We may need to replace the entire power connection when we get there, but they have checked and that should not take long.”

Seeing the look on their faces, Jack tried to offer some consolation. “That doesn’t seem too bad.”

Her mother bit her lip as she looked toward Brandy. “Oh, it’s not. We were pretty lucky considering everything.”

“Mom, what caused the burn out? Can they tell?” Brandy couldn’t understand why her parents seemed so upset. The damage didn’t seem that bad. She wondered what weren’t her parents weren’t telling her?

Her parents glanced at each other somewhat guiltily. Her mother’s answer seemed hesitant. “No. These things just happen, even to a Granny Smith.”

Jack was just as confused by their actions as Brandy was. He tried to break the tension with a joke. “Then what’s the matter? You two look like you lost your best friend. Mom, the Jeep dealer won’t disown you.”

“What’s wrong, Mom Dad?” Brandy knew that she didn’t want to hear the answer. “Is it Herbert? Did he get out again?”

Her mother sat down beside her and reached over with a hug. “No, Brandye, he didn’t get out. I thought I’d check on him just to reassure you, so I borrowed a life support suit. When I got in, he was curled up asleep. I took him out of the tube. But he didn’t wake up.”

Brandye cried out in a whisper, “Is he dead?”

“No, at least I don’t think so. He appears to be asleep. He’s still warm, but he doesn’t wake up. I think he’s cold.”

“Mom, that doesn’t make any sense. What do you mean, ‘he’s cold’?”

Her father walked over and gave her a sad smile. “Honey, Herbert is a rodent. They are prepared to hibernate if conditions become too difficult for them. The Jeep is very cold. We can’t get him out of it, and even if we could, I don’t think it would help. We just don’t know enough to help him.”

“You mean he won’t ever wake up?”

“We requested an encyclopedic scan for hamsters on the computer. There was a paragraph which spoke of rodent hibernation. It indicated that frequently pets such as white mice and hamsters succumbed to heart failure as they awake from hibernation.”

“What are we going to do?” Brandye couldn’t imagine that there wasn’t some way to wake him up. She thought of Herbert as her best friend. She didn’t know what she would do without him? She wanted to cry out and scream at them all, but she could tell they were nearly as upset as she. It wasn’t their fault, but she wanted to blame someone.

“It’s all my fault. I should have left him at home. This would never have happened if I had done what you said. You were right.” She hated herself more than she ever believed possible.

Her mother spoke quietly and calmly to her. “Brandye, I know that we said not to bring him, but you are not responsible for this. Herbert has been as important a part of this trip as any of us. He has brought all of us hours of pleasure. Between filling his pouches, eating your father’s spaghetti, and helping Jack win at checkers, he has made this trip extremely special. I’m glad you brought him.”

Still with that sad smile, her dad added, “I agree completely with your mother. You are not responsible for this. It could have happened at home when the electronic thermostat allowed the house to drop in temperature while we were gone. We’ll be back on the ship this afternoon. We’ll just have to wait to see what happens. I’m sorry Brandye, but we all love him too.”

The rest of the day was spent quietly. No one seemed interested in doing much. Any suggestions to go out were met with silence. Eventually it came time to pick up the ship. They put on their life support suits and took the robotic ferry to the pick up point. They slowly climbed up the air lock tube and into the cabin. The heat had been restored when they repaired the burned circuit, so they pulled off their suits.

Brandye walked over to Herbert's tube. "Mom, he just looks like he's sleeping. Are you sure he's hibernating?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

Brandye untaped the hamster's tube, pulled the cork plug out, and gathered the little furry body into her hands. He didn't wake up. She pulled the little body close to her. "Oh, Herbert, you have to wake up. We can't be friends unless you do." Tears were dripping down her face.

Her dad put one arm around her and with the other stroked the silky creature. "Let's put him back into the tube. All we can do is wait to see if he'll wake in the warmth of the cabin. Meanwhile, we need to get on to Moon Base. We have a scheduled lift off tomorrow."

The ship performed well with no problems such as they had experienced the day before. However, everyone was a little jumpy waiting for the computer to signal another system error. Between worry over the computer and worry over the hamster, it was a quiet trip.

Chapter 18

The landing was uneventful. They returned to the hotel they had stayed in only a few days before. Brandye didn't even care that she could wash her hair two days in a row. All she could think of was Herbert and how much he meant to her.

As they sat in the small room letting the television wash over them, Jack reached over and hugged Brandye. "Sis, I've been thinking that what we need is a hamster farm. That little tube system and wheel really aren't enough. I intend to build a whole complex."

"Jack, that's mean." Brandye couldn't believe he was being such a tease.

"I'm not. I mean it. I think hamsters are really more fun than I knew. I think we ought to start our own farm. How many do you think we should begin with?"

"But don't you even care about Herbert?"

"Sure I care about him. This way he won't have a chance to get lonely. I think we could build a nice little business selling hamsters. I'll bet a lot of your friends would love to have one."

Now that Brandye thought about it, lots of the kids at school had asked about Herbert since she gave her required oral presentation for speech. At the time, she had hated the class so much she hadn't paid much attention. It was one of the few held outside the learning carrel. She'd picked Herbert for her topic, "My Best Friend." That now seemed like years ago.

The thought of more than one furry creature to take care of and feed made her feel a little better. If only Herbert would wake up.

The next morning they gathered up their possessions and returned to the Jeep. It was nice to be able to use the connecting tube instead of climbing up and down the

air lock passage. Herbert was still asleep when they checked on him, and Brandye was beginning to give up hope that he would ever awake.

The robotic ferry pulled them to their take off site, and Brandye's mother made all the last minute computer checks. The routine had become so much a part of them that everyone knew exactly what to do. They were functioning as a well-trained team. Even Jack took his place without complaining that he wanted the co-pilot spot.

Gradually, as the first day out passed, the family became less silent and small laughter was heard. Even Brandye found herself able to laugh as her Dad attempted once again to capture her king. "Dad, you should be ashamed of yourself. Haven't you heard that it's not nice to steal?"

"You can't blame a guy for trying. How am I going to explain to my friends that my daughter whipped me at my own game?"

Suddenly, Brandye felt a flutter in the upper pocket of her favorite jumps. Her eyes widened as she reached into the pocket where she had placed the sleeping hamster. She hadn't thought it would help, but it made her feel better knowing he was there. Now, she felt the stirring in her hand as she pulled him out. "Dad, look! He's waking up.

The family gathered to witness the small resurrection. Her mother's smile of delight spoke for everyone. The little black twitching nose seemed to be saying, "Hey, where am I?"

Brandye was crying with relief as she cradled him against her. "Herbert, I'll never let you get cold again, and I'll never smuggle you onto a space ship either. I think I've learned my lesson." She sheepishly looked up at her parents.

The remaining two days went quickly. There was much talk of next year's trip and suggestions that Mars might be fun. Jack still drove everyone crazy playing "Otto and the Green Grapes," but no one minded as much. The melody, such as it was, triggered memories of the events of the last two weeks.

The last night, Brandye's dad was gathering up their supplies and gear to stow in the cargo pantry. It would be shipped back to their apartment after they left the rented Jeep. He opened the small drawer in the galley to check for items he may have missed. "Oh, no!"

Everyone turned to his distress. "What's the matter, Mark?"

He turned to his wife holding the maroon box. "Nothing too earth shattering, but we forgot this."

Brandye's mother laughed and shook her head. "I guess we were too busy to remember. What terrible parents we are." She took the box and handed it to Brandye.

"What is it?" For a moment, Brandye couldn't imagine what they could have forgotten. Then she too laughed. "My birthday. I can't believe it. I forgot my own birthday! I'm ten now." She tore open the box and pulled out a carefully wrapped

object. She unwrapped the multi-layers of paper and squealed with pleasure. She reached over to give both her parents a hug. "I love it. How did you know?"

With a sly smile at Jack, her dad said, "Just a lucky guess. Jack helped a little."

She looked over at his grin. "Maybe brothers aren't all bad." She slipped the tape of "Calvin and the Great Goons" into an empty pocket of her jumps. It would wait until she got home.

The docking with the space station was smooth and uneventful. They left the Jeep with a backward look. Brandye's dad echoed their thoughts. "Quite an experience."

Brandye had once again stored Herbert in her thigh pocket. She thought that at least this time she wouldn't have to worry about her folks finding out. She thought, "It was rather irresponsible. I'll know better next time. After all, Herbert could have really caused some problems."

She took an outside seat in the shuttle rocket and looked around. This had been much more fun than she ever thought possible that night that her parents informed she and her brother about the trip. Her only real regret was not ever having a chance to get a souvenir. She reached down to pull out the ever present book. As her fingers began to pull it out, she realized there was something sharp in there also. She pulled out the metal tab she had found at the camp site. "Well, it's better than nothing. Who knows? Maybe it was left by Martians. Do they have Coke on Mars?" she wondered to herself.

Jack was on the other aisle. Her folks were a row behind her. She didn't hear their whispered conversation. "Mark, I hope we did the right thing."

"I'm sure, Kay. It would serve no purpose for her to know."

"I did have to laugh when the technician asked if we had seen any rodents on the ship. Besides, we don't know that it was the hamster's hair which created the short. Maybe we did have another rodent."

Brandye's mother looked up and smiled as she saw Brandye turn to the boy beside her. "Hi, I'm Brandye Whyne Drinker."

The strange boy laughed. "You've got to be kidding. **Brandye Whyne!**"

"Yep. My parents have a warped sense of humor. But you'll never forget my name," she smiled at him as she settled into the seat for the trip home.

THE END