

Stage Fright

We should have wondered why NASA wanted to send Mother and me into space. Too late now.

Mom poked at the rocket's intricate control panel to change my radio station, and whatever she hit sent us spinning out of control.

"Why must you always push my buttons," I wailed as we hurtled aimlessly into deep space.

Aliens found and brought us to their planet, Oglonia. Their tongues licked us onto a chute off their spaceship. To speed our descent down a slippery slide, Oglonians below spat gobbets of lubricant. (I hoped that those were their mouths, and the goop dripping from our skin was just spit.)

Mother and I bounce-landed on a nubby, old sofa.

I surveyed the room. The kind of Sixties furniture I'd finally convinced Mom to dump in 1998 had been conjured up again, here. The kitchen boasted orange counters and matching avocado green appliances. I tried to open the fridge. Nothing lay behind the façades.

A tune piped in overhead.

Here's the story of a lovely lady
Who was bringing up three very lovely girls.
All of them had hair of gold, like their mother,
The youngest one in curls . . .

Oglonians had reconstructed the set of *The Brady Bunch*. So the Sixties television waves had reached this far out through the cosmos.

"Thirty years of progress wiped out overnight," Mom said. "Swell."

"Did we make any real progress?" I asked about the years since I turned thirteen.

"We're in a diorama, like the cavemen in the Museum of Natural History," Mother said.

Our fourth wall was a window. From the other side, Oglonians stared into our enclosure. We were caught in a weird warp of Brady Bunch, Candid Camera and Twilight Zone.

One of the little creatures slipped through a small flap in our stage set. He was a spongy thing the size of The Addams Family's Cousin Itt. Like Alice, the housekeeper on the Brady Bunch show, he wore an apron.

"Bath time," he told my mother.

"Mind your own beeswax." She waved him off. "Goodness, he's like a three-toed sloth without the toes."

The creature slithered to my side of the exhibit.

"Sock it to me, Cindy," he said.

I looked down at my handler, who came up to my crotch.

"My name is Carol."

"OK, Cindy."

"No, Carol," I corrected.

"Not Carol Burnett! She's redhead. You have Cindy-rella hair."

"What are you called?" I asked.

"Throaght."

Was he embarrassed at the personal question, or was that his name?

Throaght hopped below my sofa until I grabbed and lifted him to my lap. Some of his juice stuck to my hand. I tentatively touched it with my tongue. Quite delicious, like cannoli cream with an aftertaste of licorice. He wrapped his soft tentacles around my thighs and brushed my hair with his teeth, cut bangs and curled two ponytails high on the side. Throaght held up a mirror.

“Right on?” His eleven long-stemmed violet eyes peered up expectantly.

“Far out,” I tried. We were stuck in the past, like a video with the sound track delayed three decades. Life in the Sixties seemed so carefree, in retrospect. Could we enjoy ourselves more, this second chance to get the past right?

He slipped hip-hugging bellbottoms up my reluctant thighs, then smoothed an orange macramé poncho over my breasts. He’d knitted it from the glittery filaments Oglonian creatures left behind, a cobweb crossed by a rainbow.

My keeper studied his results, glowed watermelon pink, then turned tangerine, which contrasted nicely with his lilac eyes.

Mother scratched notes on hotel memo pads with library pencils.

“What are you doing, Mom?”

“Working on a memoir.”

“We’re stranded on a strange planet. No one’s ever going to read it.”

“So I can write the truth.”

Outside the glass, a guide spoke to a tour group. The leader sported a naval cap modeled after the Captain’s from *Gilligan’s Island*.

“This is a really great show,” the guide said. “Two specimens of the rare, wild milkmaid. Oddly, they call themselves humans, though they don’t have a wide range of hues. They’re accident-prone and cannot survive without a fluffy milk dog to rescue them. These two milkmaids lack a noisy, nosy dog, which is why we found them drifting alone through space. The young one in black may be a flying nun who flew a little too far from the convent.”

“No, she’s not a nun, even though she lives like one.” Mom said. “She can marry.”

“Maybe I will marry God.” I turned on my heel, exited through the front door and slammed it, shutting myself in a dark closet. I returned sheepishly to the set.

“They invented this trick called lying, where they do not speak the truth,” the guide said.

“Wow,” the children cried.

“I want to go home.” Mom said.

“Lassie, come home,” the children chorused.

“You have a lovely planet, but I need to leave,” I said, glancing at my watch.

“Leave it to Beaver,” they cheered.

Throaght rubbed his chamois-soft body against mine. The honeysuckle-scented goop he secreted frothed under his rubdown. My keeper hummed, and his satiny flesh changed pastel shades in rippling waves.

With the fine comb of his teeth he brushed my hair down there. His eleven eyes scrunched together in concentration as his gold tips glistened in intricate patterns; they carried a cool electrical charge. (Electricity felt sweet on this planet.)

For the first time in my life, I was getting attention, which made me nervous. Relax, I thought. No one on earth will get wind of this, as long as Mom keeps her big mouth shut.

I glanced over at her—still scribbling.

“How can you let that sponge-boy touch you?” Mother said.

“What the heck—why not?” Smarmy sharks had remoras sucking their thick skin to remove parasites, and moronic, mud-caked oxen had delicate white herons perched on them to peck off lice, so why shouldn’t we have animals groom us? “If we return to earth, I’m taking him.”

“What the Dickens are you,” Mother asked.

He shuddered, lavender eyes fluttering, and gurgled, “Flook.” Not sure if that was a cry of fear, or if the creatures kept changing names.

He continued ministering to me. My skin glowed, buffed to a fine highlight and glistening from his excretions.

“You said sponges were dirty, Carol.”

“It feels kinda groovy.”

Mother stared in shock that I could succumb to temptations of the flesh.

“What a fine kettle of fish we’ve landed in.”

“It’s your fault,” I said. “If you hadn’t turned down the one man willing to marry me—”

“That Russian didn’t speak one word of English,” Mom said. “How could I talk to him?”

“Perhaps that was the point. You’d scare off anyone stupid enough to fall for me.”

“He lived so far away.”

“Not as far as you’ve gotten us.” I hunched over and muttered at losing my catch. “He was a ballet star.”

“You should be the star.”

I looked down at Throagcht, who gazed devotedly, soaking me up like the sponge that he was. Mother had gotten her way, again.

I nudged him toward the pet door.

Mother narrowed her eyes as he left.

“I think your Fluke of nature filched stuff from my suitcase,” she whispered.

“Like what?”

“The hotel soaps, salt and pepper packages.”

“They’re sponges. They’ve found your little sample soaps their soul mates. And we are the aliens on this planet, Mom.”

I rummaged through her suitcase to check and found ketchup, hotel sewing kits, restaurant mints, perfume vials and tiny bottles of rum from the abandoned spaceship’s mini bar. Beneath this clutter lay last year’s *Far Side* calendar. Typically useless junk Mother kept—no, wait, on the last page was a miniature calendar for this year, 1999. I squirreled it away.

“And another thing,” I yelled. “I’m not wearing white at my wedding.”

“Good,” she said. “I’m glad you’ve given the matter some thought.”

We retired like exhausted boxers to our corners and slept.

I woke, savoring a dreamy taste. I noticed a wet spot on the wall and licked it. Mmmn, caramelized sassafras with undertones of vanilla and mint. So scrumptious I could not stop. I lapped a hole through to the outside—not to escape, but for the flavor. Sooner or later, my snacking would cause the whole candy set to collapse. For now, I covered the gap with my bed pillow.

By the end of March, the hole grew so wide that I could squeeze through. The last night of the month, I slipped out of our enclosure to scope out other captives. There were none. Mother and I were the only beings in the cosmos stupid enough to get into such deep space trouble.

Ahead, a golden dome gleamed like spun sugar. Through the dome glistened a green pool, the planet's central reading room. Desperate for words besides our own bickering, I reread my travel alarm's instructions every night, just to see letters again, though I couldn't fathom what they meant: "Press shift button two three ways then change time to desired place. For function one knob enter new mode."

I entered the library's rotunda. The creatures floated in a cool, crystalline pool of green glop. Some squirted the liquid into lines of text as others soaked the writing up. Oglonians read by licking three lines at a time with their three lithe tongues; their texts read like orchestral sheet music, with several tracks at once, each with a different series of flavors.

"Excuse me," I asked the Oglolibrarian. "Do you have any books on self help?"

"What is self?" The librarian squeezed her head until it oozed.

"Forget it, please," I said, resisting the urge to slurp up her spill to savor the taste.

The Oglolibrarian wiped her head across the drops on her desk to sop them back in.

Every reader in the pool bowed with rapt concentration over the identical text. I flipped one to the cover and saw my mother's face on the dust jacket. The title and quote read:

Bits and Pieces of My Life
by Ibis Ferrall

"Love is the only worthwhile way to waste time."

Throught must have read Mom's scribbled notepads and committed them to heart.

I waved my arms frantically, like a sailor on a foundering ship.

"Hello, my mother just dashed this off in a few days."

"Oglegoggle," the readers murmured.

"Your mother is a genius," the librarian cried.

I started to sob. The creatures rushed to wipe my tears.

"Don't overflow," the Oglolibrarian pleaded. "Though you and your mother have different names and are poles apart, you will always be connected, like two oceans."

"And if one of us went down, the other would go with?"

She nodded.

"Oglon means ocean, and happiness, too," the librarian said.

I walked outside into the black velvet night—Oglonia had no moon. The stars overhead burned so brightly, I felt they'd brush against my palm if I reached for them. Stars hurled themselves into the dark, despite the miniscule odds that any bit of their burning flesh would illuminate a life. Meanwhile, we clung to every little shred of our dusty grudges like they were family gems. The deep blue eye of our home, Earth, spun too far away to see. Could this distance give me perspective?

I slipped back through the hole I'd licked in our wall and crawled into bed. Then I feigned waking with a dramatic yawn that made the crowd cower. I joined mother at the breakfast table for coffee that tasted like charred steak.

"Um, Mom? I'm pregnant."

"From that Chore Boy? It will sponge off you forever."

"Don't worry, Oglonians reproduce by autogamy."

"Sounds worse than sex."

"Which I had to figure out on my own," I howled in a hurt tone. "When I asked how the little egg traveled from you to Daddy, you said it just happens when a man loves a woman, and for years I was scared stiff somebody might love me."

"You didn't love that dancer, did you?"

I shook my lowered head.

"How can you give birth here?" Mother panicked as she glanced out at the spectators.

"April Fools, Mom. I figured out today is April first." I pulled her calendar from under my cot. "It didn't fit in with the Brady Bunch Sixties stage set, so I hid it."

"Horsefeathers." Mother hunched over the coffee, dispirited.

"Want to hear something terribly funny? Your book is a bestseller here. The Oglonians are lapping up every word."

"Ha, ha, you can't fool me twice." She marked April 1st on the calendar with a big X.

Our keeper arrived with Tang-colored liquid that seemed to be melted cheddar.

"Throaght, fetch me writing supplies." I felt competitive.

He fled. I steeled myself to fight Mother for her library pencil stubs and hotel pads. Then our housesponge returned and set on the breakfast table sheets of gelatin and a glass of thick liquid. He brought no pen, as Oglonians used their tongues. I dipped a finger and began my story, "I." Boring. I changed the first word to "The." How cliché! I tried to rub the mess off; the gel stuck to my hand, so I licked it. The ink tasted addictively strange, a consommé of parsnip, crab cakes, and salty goat cheese.

I guzzled the jar, then cleaned the sheet.

"She's swallowing her words," one spectator noted.

"Yes," the guide replied. "The poor creatures are drowning in words. Like animals that release thousands of eggs, they gobble some of their young to cut down on the chaos. Humans eat their words and speak the truth mostly with their lower mouths, which they try to muffle."

The guide pointed to my crotch with a feathery stick.

"Notice how they have only four limbs and just two thumbs. Imagine how difficult it must be for them. And another disadvantage: only two eyes, not a circle of them all around."

The children's sensitive antennae drooped in sympathy.

"I think they're the poor ones," Mom said. "Especially those with eleven eyeglasses."

I kicked her under the table.

"Ma, watch your manners. We are guests."

"We are prisoners."

"But we're imprisoned for our own mistakes."

At lunch, a crowd pressed their hundreds of tendrilled eyes against the glass. Clearly they valued seeing over being seen. Throagcht-Flook served us gelatin dyed and formed into burgers that tasted of beets, a cinnamon bun and fries with a lemony essence. On the tray lay ketchup, salt and pepper packets. The powders inside were flavored coconut and cream, while the ketchup tasted cherry, which paired well with the tangy, sweet fries.

“What I wouldn’t give for one cup of clear, pure, cool tap water in the middle of the night.” Mother sighed. “The freedom we had on earth! The privilege we took for granted.”

“As for me, I’d trade all this fame if I could escape from the Sixties and live for one moment in the now. And get back the Russian dancer’s photograph,” I said. The photo showed him mid-leap in a wispy leotard. “I can’t have him, apparently, but is a snapshot too much to ask?”

“Don’t settle for scraps.”

“You hoard every last free bar of soap and condiment packet,” I screeched, digging into her pocket for evidence.

I extracted a piece of watermelon candy and scraped some plastic from the melted sap. I tried to suck the gob off my palate while I flicked my hair back from my face.

The guide tapped a pointer on the glass.

“Note this fine display of nails, hair and teeth. We’re lucky to have this fertile specimen. Such fully equipped milkmaids are prized by milkmen.”

“Oogg,” the crowd cooed.

“We need to procure for our lass a male to mate with, like Gomer Pyle or the Skipper.”

I was being scrupulously groomed for breeding—I, who couldn’t even get my cat to sleep with me, now, in my forties—and Chekhov would’ve called me a hopeless old spinster twenty years ago. If the human race died out on earth but one survivor happened upon Oglonia, we’d see if all those men lied when they said they wouldn’t touch me if I were the last woman alive.

“You may get your Russian yet,” Mother said.

“He’ll probably be a dog,” I replied.

“We have prepared their honeymoon room.” The guide waved his wand toward our right wall.

Mom and I climbed onto the table and peered over the partition. Next door, they’d reproduced a Poconos hotel suite with a heart-shaped bed covered in crushed red velvet, and a large champagne glass bath. On the towels lay Mom’s hotel soaps and salt packages.

I wanted to mate, now, just for the salt. I twirled the pompoms of my poncho and gazed at the plush suite.

Mother’s face paled as she turned to address the crowd.

“You know my daughter is a child, sexually. A child.”

The little Oglonians gawked at us with their gold-lashed eyes as we stood on the tabletop.

“We know,” they said.

Mom turned to me.

“Promise not to leave me alone here while you fly off on the honeymoon.”

“No matter how far I go, I never get away from you,” I wailed.

“When we find a man who’s better for you than I am,” she said, leaning into a hug, “then I’ll let go.”

“There’s never going to be any man that good.” I flung up my arms.

Mom and I grappled, clutching each other so we didn’t fall off the table. Our frantic clawing ripped the gossamer costumes.

“Note the close mother-child bond. For a long time, humans are roped to their mamas. Though they’re finally cut off, they never get over the attachment.”

“Where are the mother and child tied up?” one little sponge asked.

“Nobody knows,” the guide said. The Sixties TV waves that reached them hadn’t bared such anatomical details, yet.

“Want a really good show?” I jumped down and sauntered to the window. The FCC had no control over this spectacle. I lifted my ripped shirt to bare my belly button—that scar I got from Mother—and stuck out my stomach like a balloon, pressing the innie against the glass.

“Eek, geek,” the little sponges screamed as they scattered like skittles on a slick floor.

Holly Woodward

NASA launched clams into outer space to see if the mollusks would still open and close on the earth’s tidal schedule. They did. In this piece, NASA sends a mother and daughter off in a spaceship. We’ll see if they can escape their habitual bad behavior. This novel chapter owes a debt to Kurt Vonnegut, who said he prefers laughter to tears, as it leaves less mess afterward. Holly wishes to thank Rafi Zabor, a great writer and generous mentor.