

Into Space

Jennie was waiting at the door when Ruth, her neighbour arrived with her ironing.

'Well, you must be feeling better today!' Ruth was agreeably surprised. There were not many days this winter when Jennie moved from her chair. Damp days had played havoc with her rheumatism.

'Well, let's go in, then. We'll freeze out here on the doorstep.' Ruth waited while Jennie turned round in the hallway and slowly, painfully, led the way in to her warm living room.

'What's up this morning? You look a bit flustered.'

'I am.' Jennie waved the postcard she had been clutching in her hand and pressed against her walking frame. *'I've had a card from our Robert.'*

'Well, that does make it a special day!' Ruth knew all about Robert and his postcards. He had been barely out of his teens when he left home, and now thirty years on he still only made fleeting visits to see his mother. He knew his sisters were close at hand if she needed anything, though needless to say, they did not see it that way. Susan was not disappointed when her brother did not visit. In her opinion he would be more trouble living at home.

Robert would agree. He was a loner and had no desire to fit into family life. He had worked his way up from a stage hand to being quite an acceptable actor, and as a freelance was never sure where or how long he would be in any one place. Many times he would take different employment to raise enough funds to keep himself.

His contacts with his mother were few. He was never in one place long enough to keep up with address changes, and although Nellie had his mobile phone number, she was not really into ringing him. Even when she did his phone would be switched off. The one contact he maintained was his postcards. About once a fortnight he would send a card from wherever he was with a brief message on it. Just a sentence, but it was enough to tell his mother he had not forgotten her.

'What's he up to this time?' Ruth asked as she sorted the clean ironing. 'I'll just put this away and you can tell me.'

Nellie could not wait. She had been bursting to tell since the postman came this morning. Now, waving the card, she almost shouted, *'He says he's going into space!'*

Ruth came to a sudden stop in the doorway, her chin firmly holding the pile of ironing in place. *'What?'*

Nellie turned the card over. It had a psychedelic pattern on the side now facing Ruth. *'He says, "Going into SPACE! I'll send a card to tell you about it when I'm among the little stars". Love, Robert.'*

'How's he going to send a card?' Ruth laughed, quite sure the whole thing must be a joke. However, Jennie was treating it seriously.

'Why?' She asked. *'What for? How? Where? He's always loved flying, but don't you have to be specially chosen and trained to be a spaceman?'*

'Of course you do' Ruth laughed. *'Don't worry yourself. It's only Robert playing games. I expect he's out of work and has had to rent himself a cupboard space in an attic somewhere!'* She laughed again, but Jennie was not amused.

'Robert isn't like that. Joking, I mean. His cards are always serious. I thought I'd ring Susan but she'll only get cross and say he's being stupid again. Those two never have had much time for each other. Neither of them inherited my sense of humour.'

'Anything else you need?' Asked Ruth. *'I need to be going.'*

Jennie was not attentive. *'He could be having training now. I expect it has to be a bit secret, so he wouldn't say. I hope they've told him what to take – he never could pack his own*

suitcase properly when we went on holiday. And what about his meals? He's such a fussy eater!' *'Don't worry.'* Ruth moved closer to the door. Arguing would only delay. *'It can't possibly be for real. And if it's his diet you're bothered about they say it's all put into little pills. My boys think that's a great idea now – they'll be able to miss out the cabbage ones! Now, Nellie, you forget all about it. I'm sure your Robert will keep his feet on the ground. I'm going now. See you tomorrow. Just forget Robert and spacemen.'*

But Jennie could not forget. With too much time to herself she pictured Robert in the cramped cabin of a space-craft, travelling ever deeper into darkness. She had heard about asteroids and junk in space - there were accidents - didn't one space-ship blow up? The thoughts kept coming, even when she got to bed and tried to sleep. After a couple of restless hours she sat on the edge of the bed and drew back a curtain to be greeted by a beautiful star-lit sky. Was that a flash of light? Was that Robert speeding away? He wouldn't know where he was. He never had any sense of direction when he was a child ... What if he had to drive - he couldn't even pass his driving test on the road. Perhaps he was on one of those big space stations, like on the programmes the grandchildren watched. Perhaps he had a job as an actor - like when he went on that cruise ship and put on two stones in two months. He won't have to put on weight up there. It's a good thing they only have pills.

By morning, Jennie had convinced herself that Robert was in space somewhere, and the questions kept coming, going and coming again. How did he afford it. She had heard it costs millions of pound to go for a trip in space, but then if he was earning ... Perhaps they were using him for an experiment - like a guinea pig. How would he survive? What if she never saw him again? What if he gets lost in space, or takes a space walk and floats off?

She decided she had to keep all her anxious thoughts to herself. Ruth knew she was worrying, and Susan thought her mother was not looking so well this week. There was no way Jennie could tell Susan and she was sure Ruth and her family were laughing at her. But the questions still came into her mind. How long was a journey? Would he remember to take a book. For the rest of the week she lived with her fears, waiting, watching in vain for the postman every morning.

Ruth was waiting too. She knew it was all nonsense but only a card from Robert would persuade Jennie of that. When Jennie said she was waiting for the postman it was on the tip of Ruth's tongue to say, '*I don't think there's a postal service to Mars!*' But she held back. She could see Jennie was fretting and talking about it could make her more anxious.

At last the postman did come. Ruth watched from across the road, and waited impatiently for a full ten minutes before going to visit Jennie. Jennie was waiting for her, standing in the doorway, waving a postcard. Tears streamed down her face, to roll across her laughter lines. She gripped her walking frame with one hand, her whole body shaking. *'It's from Robert!'*

'It's a good postal service from Mars!' Ruth could say it now. The picture side of the card faced her. It was a photograph of Robert, dressed in the weirdest clothes like a wizard and surrounded by a crowd of children in animal costumes. *'Well!'* Ruth exclaimed. *'It must have been a big space-ship to take that lot!'* *'No,'* Jennie handed her the card. *'You read it!'*

Ruth took the card, and turned it over. As usual it was just one line. All it said was *'Here I am. Love from Robert'*. Then underneath, five words each beginning with a capital letter:

S .. P .. A .. C .. E!

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