

The Real JC

By Nicholas Stillman

A free sample

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Joey plunged his hands into the plastic crate and flung an armload of baby toys into the air. They twirled in the weightlessness of Station 1. Joey's huge smile threatened to eat a corner of one soft block as it drifted too close. But at the last second, a spinning baby rattler collided with the cube. Both joined the chaos and bounced off the ceiling and floor in cycles, and tiny stuffed animals bounced around the cluttered walls. For once, the prospect of cleaning up the lunchroom sounded fun.

Jay thought it funny to see the mustached, square-jawed safety freak knelt and playing like a kid. Joey tossed another two handfuls of toys at his girlfriend, nurse Catherine. She swatted them away from her own radiant smile, still rapt in the moment. Her hands instinctively batted away the plastic playthings which spun toward that big pregnant belly of hers. Jay's little smirk went ignored for a minute. He'd have to suppress it further or they'd interrogate him over how he got this gift box into space.

When playtime cooled a notch Joey, still teary-eyed, turned to Jay.

“You see this super-lightweight box?” Joey asked. He pinched one side of the white, sterilized crate. The remaining baby supplies jumbled and rose a bit from the force. Jay thought of bubbles rising to foam in soda drinks back on Earth. “They send *us* only the stingiest, barest, smallest materials they can, while the patients get whatever they want. High luxury. Literally high, right into space. But this time...wow. I still can't believe they'd send us all this. Did everyone forget they made sex illegal up here?”

Jay felt too embarrassed at the word *sex* to answer. At his preteen age, he figured he'd have nothing to contribute to the conversation. Sweat already started to coat him under the metal-suit.

His eyes shied away to the crate which had metal-suit parts clanking around the bottom. On a dare from Joey, Jay had asked Ground Control for metal strips suitable for infant wear in Station 1. He left out the word *infant*, of course, but read off the precise measurements of each plate. Even the janitor down there could figure out what they'd use the materials for. Jay's request for baby toys made the situation up here even more obvious.

But Joey and Catherine had stopped caring about getting fired. They *wanted* their work contract to end early. They'd take new career training to escape this space tunnel through hell. But no one, not even Jay, expected the authorities below to play along.

The lunchroom jubilation ended as Joey carefully gathered the plates from the bottom of the crate. He stacked them gently in the big tool box strapped to his side. They tried to drift

out, but the box's magnetized interior pinned all the precious pieces inside. Everyone in space had to wear jumpsuits with the metal strips packeted all over like armor. Only the trio's faces and Catherine's belly showed through the metal-suits.

Joey had modified Catherine's for her pregnancy. Magnetic tiles formed the central walkway running through the entire station. The body plates pulled down, simulating gravity's pull. It permitted humane living in space, but for inhumane durations. Damn those contracts.

Jay looked at Catherine's exposed belly, wondering if the baby would turn out weird from the lack of gravity. He then remembered that amniotic fluid kept the child afloat anyway. Catherine never hid herself from Jay's curious stares. She smiled proudly whenever the two male workers on board gave her womb any attention. The 200 other people up here, all patients, had never said a syllable to the one woman who washed them. Nothing intelligible, anyway.

Catherine plucked toys from the air and tried to trap them all in the crate again. Jay helped by holding the lid in place. He slid it away just enough for her to slip each item in, to ensure the others didn't drift out.

“Our space janitor pulled another miracle,” Joey said as he waved majestically at Jay. A toy adrift in the lunchroom bopped off his arm and chain-collided with other rotating toys. “The last three times you asked for things, crazy things, the grouch of Ground Control sent them. They broke all those rules to deliver your requests. What the hell did you say, Jay? Or should I keep calling you Jesus?”

Jay stacked his shrugs upon more shrugs. He started to feel like a shoddy tower.

“I just...” Jay paused. He'd pour the truth out yet again, though the couple would never believe it. “I just ask Mr. Stanhope, and he grunts 'Ok.' He says 'Ok' for each item I request.”

“Does he ask about any of the goodies?” Catherine asked.

“No,” Jay said. “It sounds like cares, but in a good way. His tone changes. Like Santa Clause with a kid on his lap. It sounds like he works for me or something.”

“Well, JC,” Joey said, “I hope before your contract ends you'll let us perform some miracles too. The apostles got to. Whenever I radio Mr. Stanhope at Ground Control, he says 'Nooooo.' Just 'Nooooo,' like I work for him or something. The guy wouldn't send me a new razor. I've had to use a dull one for months now. He said a razor could get drawn to the magnets too awkwardly, and I'll cut myself. I told him I don't care and that I've already used a razor for months anyway. But he just says 'Nooooo.'”

Joey, though still smiling, smacked a plush bumblebee that wandered near his eyes.

“Ok, I'll ask for a big bag of razors,” Jay said.

“Please do, JC. Oh, and Catherine has a list, don't you honey?”

“Mmmm,” Catherine said.

She stargazed out the porthole. Toys drifted and wobbled about her head like embodied dreams.

“Aw, Catherine,” Joey said.

When Catherine's neck cranked sideways and her eyes got dreamy, she'd fall through that porthole forever. But she would never see more than the constant speck of those stars. The glimmers would taunt everyone's descendants as they had taunted ancestors who peered out of caves.

One time Joey explained why, a time just like this as they stood in here on break. He had left Catherine in her red-eyed reverie and told Jay of the compassion paradox. Mankind will never see those stars any closer than from here in Station 1. Those pinpoints will stay locked in the dark, and man locked in his native solar system. Man holds himself back, brother pinning brother. The labor-saving technology needed for space travel engenders sedentariness on Earth. Without exercise, disability rises. Most resources then support the ballooning percentage of patients instead of the starward climb. When man's energy mastery can finally lift him to the cosmos, all of humanity will need hospitalization.

But long before that, the compassion paradox takes effect. People see how easily advancing technology can care for the indolent. What monster would “waste” vast energy on a journey to the stars when so many invalids could get treated instead? When the sick cling, the healthy can't run.

So Catherine kept staring out the glass. The asterisms had lured her into the shallowest of outer space. She too would quit like the hundreds of stultified caregivers who watched things here.