

SONGS *of a* Befuddled Muse

THIRTEEN TALES OF
DIVERGENT INSPIRATION

A woman with dark hair tied back is shown in profile, looking down. She has a large, detailed tattoo on her right shoulder and upper arm depicting a creature with a human-like face and a long, segmented tail. The background is a warm, golden-yellow gradient with vertical lines and a bright light source on the left.

STORY 1:
CURVED
SPACE

by WILLIAM COHEN-KIRALY

Curved Space

Story One from
Songs of a Befuddled Muse



Thirteen tales of divergent
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Curved Space



I sat in my tiny office and pulled the mylar blanket closer around my body. My breath came out as steam in the cold air as I made my best calculations at where Earth might be. I pointed the antenna and opened the microphone.

“Earth Ship Neil Armstrong, Captain’s Log:
September 9, 2637: If the chronometers can be believed, it is now 2637 Earth time, 2524 in our ship time. That means we’ve been asleep for over 120 years our time while something like 250 years have passed on Earth. We’re lucky to be alive, if that word can be applied to us in our current predicament. The ship was designed for no more than 80 years of suspended animation life support, which should have been more

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than enough to get us through the wormhole and into the Tau Ceti system.

“The ship began waking us up about 24 hours ago when the SA systems started a cascading failure. Eighteen of us have survived. We’ve lost five of our friends and shipmates already. The dead are Master Chief Thomas Clay, Ensign Lara Hillary, Spaceman First Class Angus MacLarther, Spaceman First Class Barrow Liamyeska, and my first officer, Lieutenant Commander Agatha Leandro. These were good people and I am proud to have served with them. They will be missed greatly—if we ever have the leisure to do so.

“Our situation is stable for the moment, but desperate in the near term. Our air and water supplies are good for now. Heat is too low—we are all cold—but it is survivable for the moment. Unfortunately, most of our food supplies have become infested with bacteria, and much of it has rotted and turned poisonous. Even if we can disinfect what hasn’t rotted, I doubt we’ll be able to eat much of what is left.

“Since the SA chambers have failed, we can’t put ourselves back under to try to get home and, given our limited food supplies and poor condition, I’m not sure how we’ll survive more than three or four weeks. Maybe our five dead are the lucky ones...

“We’re trying to figure out what went wrong. Our best guess is that the boneheaded physicists miscalculated the far end of the wormhole. We’re not sure exactly where we are, but our best guess is we’re still somewhere in the vicinity of Tau Ceti, maybe within a quarter parsec. As we narrow down our calculations, I’ll send out further updates.

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“But at this point, I’m afraid the Armstrong’s mission to take humans to another star system is going to fail. We’ll keep broadcasting for as long as we’re able.

“For now, I’ve got to stop and see if the galley crew has found us anything more to eat. I’m torturing myself, I know, but all I can think about right now is Momma Carina’s pizza, where we went almost every Friday while training for this mission. Well, Earth, if you get this message sometime before we starve to death—or become the first Donner party in space—please send us a bunch of Momma’s Pepperoni Thick Crust specials... Captain Accardi out.”

A couple days later, I was in the galley with Doc, trying to find some way to rig the crippled recyclers to turn our ship’s rotted food into something edible. We were, all of us, already starting to feel lightheaded and sick from hunger. That, combined with the wooziness that normally accompanies you for a week after waking up from SA, I guess I was already starting to fade a bit when Doc nudged me and pointed at the intercom. It took me a second to register Maneesh’s voice saying, “Captain to the bridge, please. Captain to the bridge, can you hear me Captain?”

I clicked the responder button. “Captain here, Lieutenant. What’s up?”

“Captain, you have to come see this!” There was an edge of panic in his voice. I looked at Doc. I turned off the mike and still covered it with my hand by habit. “Can he be hallucinating already?” I asked.

She shrugged back at me. “Maybe. Everyone reacts differently.” We both floated to the galley hatch and moved fore to the bridge.

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We came through the bridge hatch and at first couldn't see much because Lieutenant Loke, Ensign Frischman and Spaceman Seth were all there blocking our view of the starboard viewports. Five people on the bridge of the Armstrong gets a bit crowded.

I pushed and pulled my way into the bridge enough so I could see—then stopped dead, holding on to a handhold near the viewport with a death-grip.

There was a creature in what looked like a spacesuit hanging on to our hull and holding a cardboard sign against the window. That was shocking enough until I read the sign. Then I nearly cried.

The sign read, “Did somebody here order pizza?”

“Holy mother of God,” I muttered to myself. “Jamie, hand me that clipboard and pen floating over there.” I gestured. The Ensign snatched them and floated them to me.

“Who are you?” I wrote and held up my sign to the viewport.

The creature looked like it was trying to peer through its helmet for a moment, then shook its head, threw away the cardboard sign and wrote another. As the old sign drifted away, I realized it was a pizza box. My mind was completely befuddled, but my poor, abused, hungry stomach rumbled loudly in anticipation.

The new sign said, “I can't read through the porthole and my helmet. Can you let me in?”

All the old vids ran through my mind at this point, *2001*, *Contact*, *Krasper's Escape*. In my mind, I saw the weird effects as the aliens ran the travelers through sequences of pretentious, psychedelic images and I

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thought our meeting with a space-pizza delivery guy was just about right. Real life never lives up to the movies.

I waved my hand, pointing to where the airlock was on the ship, hoping like hell it, too, wasn't failing with age. The creature gave a thumbs up and started pulling itself along the hull towards the airlock. We all pressed our heads against the glass of the several portholes in the bridge, and by God, the creature was trailing a big rectangular box on a lead.

Doc grabbed my arm. "Al, what about the protocols on first contact?"

I stared at her, dumbfounded. "Drea, we're all about to die of starvation and you want to turn down the pizza now?"

Maneesh Loke shook his head and grinned. "I don't know how we're going to get EASA to pay the delivery charges, though."

Ten minutes later, the entire crew, those of us who could still stand, were in the airlock portal room or in the two storage rooms which connected to it. We heard the hiss of re-pressurization and opened the hatch and out of the airlock stepped something that looked human holding a sealed box tethered to its spacesuit. It put the box in a wall clamp and released the seals and pulled off its helmet to reveal a very definitely human young man, maybe in his early thirties. He had a mop of unruly red hair, a face full of freckles, and a mischievous grin he kept trying to suppress.

He finally gave up and grinned broadly at us and said, "It's about time you guys showed up."

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We stared at him; I don't think anyone knew what to say at that moment. He laughed a bit at our staring faces and said "I'm Mikey, I do pizza runs for Thomas' (he said it 'Tō-Māz') Pizza and Subs." He pointed to the name clearly written on the tethered box, "I hear you guys are hungry." At this point, he flipped open the latches on his box, and the smell of garlic and pepperoni filled the portal room. I think I could hear all of our stomachs rumbling and I could see my crew surging at the hatches from the other rooms.

"Okay," Mikey said, "I know you guys are probably really, really hungry, but I only brought these three pizzas over for now. There are a bunch more on my ship and I'll bring those later. But I've heard that when you're really hungry, you're not supposed to gorge yourself, at least that's what I've seen on the vids, so I want everyone to take only one piece first and I can get you the rest later."

Doc snorted at his speech but didn't say anything. I tried to think of anything I was supposed to do to make sure this was all real and he wasn't going to poison my crew. That's when I started thinking maybe this was all a hallucination. But damn, the pizza smelled so real.

The Armstrong's crew obediently followed his instructions and took one piece each. Some shoved it into their mouths, but some of us ate it daintily, trying to savor the return of the touch of food on our tongues. I don't think I was the only one crying at that moment, which is always an annoying mess in zero grav.

"Okay Mikey," I said after we had all had our slice, "Thank you for this. You've given us all a little bit of

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heaven now and I don't know how we can ever repay you..."

"It's on the house, guys," he said, grinning. "Don't even expect a tip!"

I shook my head. "Okay, can you explain what you are doing delivering pizza to a spaceship some five or so light-years from Earth?"

"Ah, well, you see, I live on Garland, which is a planet in what you'd call the Tau Zeta system. It was probably about 50 years after you left Sol that someone developed the Star Bridges which are ways of creating temporary artificial super-curved and super-stable wormholes between star systems.

"What this means is that when the Yuri Gagarin finally reached Alpha Centauri in 2476, humans had already been settled there for 35 years.

"When the Ibn Battuta reached Barnard's Star, humans had already been there, though nobody wants to live in that hellhole of a star system. But humans were able to meet the crew there and take them back to Earth.

"But nobody could figure out what the heck happened to the Armstrong. We've been watching Tau Ceti hoping to find you for more than a century. This end of the wormhole you went into had shifted erratically a number of times so we didn't know where or when you might come out and I think we'd all given up hope for you.

"So I nearly fell out of my skin when I picked up your broadcast log entry a few days ago. I'm a pilot on the Garland-Haven run. I was on my way to Haven and just happened to be in the right spot to pick up your

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transmission. Good thing too, your transmission was several degrees off from the right vector to hit Earth, so no one would have ever heard it if I hadn't been in the right location..."

Of all the things he was telling me, I don't know why I picked up on the least relevant point, maybe because I've been a pilot and astronaut all my life and this seemed so weird at that moment. More likely, I guess, I was probably in shock and not thinking. "So you use a spaceship to deliver pizza?"

Mikey threw his head back and laughed at that question. "Naw," he said when he could talk again, "not exactly. I run a freighter between Garland and Haven for the biggest pizza franchise on Garland. Thomas is very, very picky about the produce he uses for his pies and no one grows produce like the Amish. When I go to pick up new produce, though, I always bring a ton of pizzas with me. They may wear black and only drive cars that don't hover, but the Amish sure like our pizza. Everybody does. It's the best pizza in the known universe.

"When I heard your transmission, I figured the produce could wait. I could fulfill your pizza fantasy and my ship has the room to take you all back to Garland—or Haven if you are more Amish-ly inclined. It won't be luxurious — it's a freighter after all — but we have all the half-baked pies you could ever want. And the boys at home will be jealous as hell of me. You don't know this, but you guys are larger-than-life heroes."

"What?" Doc asked.

Mikey was grinning that lop-sided grin again. "You had one of the longest-running vid series ever. The great and sexy Capt. Accardi..." here he gave me a wink, "and

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his noble crew sent by a wormhole to the farthest reaches of the galaxy, trying to find their way home. I think the series went on for like thirty years in the last century and there were three different guys playing Capt. Accardi and this actress Lena Dunar Wai played his beautiful lover, Doc Cho.

“Us pilots, of course, have watched every vid and can recite lines from our favorite episodes. We are all fans of the great space explorers, just like Armstrong and Gagarin. But Capt. Accardi in his beautiful form-fitting suit is the favorite with all the boys on Garland.” Nodding at Doc, he continued. “You must be the real Doc. A lot of guys loved you too, even guys on Garland, but your character got killed off early saving the ship from the evil Draaks, a race whose homeworld was destroyed and who now live in spaceships, and survive by looting other worlds. Capt. Accardi always has your picture hanging in his cabin.” Doc didn’t seem to have anything to say about all this and just stared at him with an open mouth.

I think she was as nonplussed as me with all the things Mikey was telling us, as she, too, picked what seemed like the most irrelevant detail. “Haven is an Amish Planet?” she asked.

“Ah yes,” Mikey replied, “I guess that’s something else you guys probably don’t know. Ever since space travel became cost-effective, a lot of humans have moved off-planet. We’ve found a lot of planets that can support human life but no Draaks or other intelligent life, at least not that we can tell—certainly no technological life.

“There are ruins on Tau Ceti Six that show someone once lived there, but it’s pretty inhospitable now.

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Anyway, some of the new colonies are just extensions of general Earth society, but several of them are separatist colonies who feel like we can live a more authentic life away from human society in general.

“Some failed, like New Atlantis, which was supposed to be a progressive communal society where everyone lived like Marx prescribed, um, Karl, not Groucho. They kind of starved to death. Then there was the New Aryan Paradise which went to hell in a handbasket pretty damn fast.

“But most of us separatists have survived and thrived. Haven was the destination of the Amish. Of course, they couldn’t navigate the Star Bridges themselves, but they paid others and Haven continues to be one of the most peaceful, prosperous, pastoral planets in the human realm.”

“And Garland,” I asked.

“Ah,” he said, “we’re the queer planet. A lot of us decided we could make our own lives better without feeling so out of place among the straights. Not all gays came, but pretty much anyone who comes to live on Garland is gay or bi. But we get a lot of straight tourists all the time — something Haven prohibits, of course — because we have the best food, the best entertainment, and the best shopping anywhere in the human sphere.”

One of my crew, I couldn’t identify the voice, said, “Too bad about Barrow, then. He would have loved your place.”

Spaceman Seth asked. “So if we go with you to your planet, does that mean we have to become gay?”

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Mikey laughed again. “Nooooo, like I say, we have a lot of straight visitors. And just like everyone else, we have a lot of kids of our own who don’t grow up gay and many of them choose to move off planet when they grow up.

“We’ll fix you up and get you ready to live in the twenty-seventh century. And you better believe we’ll throw you the biggest welcome-home bash you can imagine. But after that, you’ll be free to stay with us or go wherever you choose.”

Then he looked at me, his mischievous grin back. “Now, you, however, are just as sexy as all guys who played you in the vids. At least you will be once you put some weight back on.” He reached into his box and found one last slice of pizza and handed it to me.

“You can stay with me for however long you want. Just remember, on Garland, space is really curved, there are no straight lines here.” He laughed at my expression, but I have no idea what that expression was.

Read More...

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Curved Space is the first story in my book of short fiction, *Songs of a Befuddled Muse*.

If you liked *Curved Space*, buy the entire collection, *Songs of a Befuddled Muse*, in paperback, Kindle, Kindle Unlimited or as an Audible Audiobook. Purchase *Songs of a Befuddled Muse* [here](#)

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CURVED SPACE

The captain of a dying interstellar ship facetiously asks Earth to send pizzas and he is shocked when a delivery shows up at his airlock.



THE DAEMON MUSE

A man betrays his creativity and pays the price as she refuses to gracefully fade away.



TIMES OF LIFE AND DEATH

Canto One of the Lives and Times of Lady Jane

A field historian specializing in Tudor history goes back in time to witness history directly but becomes obsessed with the enchanting but doomed Lady Jane Grey.



HEART'S DESIRE

The newly elected president of the United States “wins” a bet with the devil, and she finds he can cause even more pain when he grants her wishes.



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A space explorer dooms himself by mischance, and tries to find comfort and sympathy from the ship's robot as he says goodbye to his sleeping crew mates.



THE SINGER of STARfish

A young dolphin sees herself in an ancient prophecy as the chosen one who can finally communicate with the strange creatures holding her captive.



THE OFFERING

A famous artist takes his friend to his beloved Algeria, only to watch the brutal French occupation destroy everything he loves there.



THE BIG GUMSHOES

A clown PI must investigate the murder of his friend and mentor. Along the way, he finds love, battles a corrupt side show, and solves the mystery of the dog left at his trailer door.



A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE GREAT SPACE EXPLORER

A renowned space hero wakes up in sick bay decades older than when he went to sleep. But his friends and enemies have so much more in store for him.



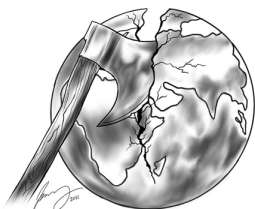
SOMETHING THAT WILL NOT LET GO

A woman whose life has been shattered, returns to her childhood home. She finds the imaginary friend who helped her survive abuse is still waiting for her and willing to help her exact revenge.



PEA Soup

A court reporter discovers he is no match for the wiles of a seductive Assistant District Attorney. His love of solving puzzles proves to be his downfall.



THE SEVERED World

Canto Two of the Lives and Times of Lady Jane

In 1553, Ian promised Jane that if she came back with him to his 2085, no one would try to cut her head off – he couldn't have been more wrong.



A THREAD ACROSS THE VEIL

What if death is not the end of spam emails. A man sends a love letter to his recently departed love into the Ether, and the Internet answers back.