

Starship Day

a short story by **Ian R MacLeod**

The news was everywhere. It was in our dreams, it was on TV. Tonight, the travellers on the first starship from Earth would awaken.

That morning, Danous yawned with the expectant creak of shutters, the first stretch of shadow across narrow streets. The air shimmered with the scent of warming pine, it brushed through the shutters and touched our thoughts even as our dreams had faded. For this was Starship Day, and from tonight, nothing would ever be the same. Of course, there were parties organised. Yacht races across the bay. Holidays for the kids. The prospect of the starship's first transmission, an instantaneous tachyon burst across the light years, had sent the wine sellers and the bakers scurrying towards their stocks and chasing their suppliers. And the suppliers had chased *their* suppliers. And the bread, the fruit, the hats, the frocks, the meat, the marquees, the music had never been in such demand. Not even when... Not even when... Not even when. But there were no comparisons. There had never been a day such as this.

As if I needed reminding, the morning paper on the mat was full of it. I'd left my wife Hannah still asleep, weary from the celebrations that had already begun the night before, and there were wine glasses scattered in the parlour, the smell of booze and stale conversation. After starting with early drinks and chatter at the Point Hotel, Hannah's sister Bernice and her husband Rajii had stayed around with us until late. At least, they'd stayed beyond the time I finally left the three of them and went to bed, feeling righteous, feeling like a sour puss, wondering just what the hell I did feel. But some of us still had work to do on this starship morning. I opened the curtains and the shutters and let in the sound and the smell of the sea. I stacked a tray with the butts and bottles and glasses. I squeezed out an orange, filled a bowl with oats and yoghurt and honey. I sat down outside with the lizards in the growing warmth of the patio.

Weighted with a stone, my newspaper fluttered in the soft breeze off the sea. Page after page of gleeful speculation. Discovery. Life. Starship. Hope. Message. Already, I'd had enough. Why couldn't people just wait? All it took was for the tide to go in and out, for the sun to rise and fall, for stars and darkness to come, and we'd all know the truth anyway. So easy -- but after all this time, humanity is still a hurrying race. And I knew that my patients would be full of it at the surgery, exchanging their usual demons for the brief hope that something from outside might change their lives. And I'd have to sit and listen, I'd have to put on my usual caring-Owen act. The stars might be whispering from out of the black far beyond this blue morning, but some of us had to get on with the process of living.

Hannah was still half-asleep when I went in to say goodbye.

"Sorry about last night," she said.

"Why sorry?"

"You were obviously tired. Rajii does go on."

"What time did they leave?"

"I don't know." She yawned. "What time did you go to bed?"

I smiled as I watched her lying there still tangled in sleep. Now that I had to go, I wanted to climb back in.

"Will you be in for lunch?"

"I'm -- meeting someone."

Bad, that. The wrong kind of pause. But Hannah just closed her eyes, rolling back into the sheets and her own starship dreams. I left the room, pulled my cream jacket on over my shirt and shorts, and closed the front door.

I wheeled my bicycle from the lean-to beside the lavender patch and took the rough road down into town. For some reason, part of me was thinking, maybe we should get another dog; maybe that would be a change, a distraction.

Another perfect morning. Fishing boats in the harbour. Nets drying along the quay. Already the sun was high enough to set a deep sparkle on the water and lift the dew off the bougainvillea draped over the seafront houses. I propped my bike in the shadowed street outside the surgery and climbed the wooden steps to the door. I fed the goldfish tank in reception. I dumped the mail in the tray in my office. I opened a window, sat down at my desk and turned on the PC, hitting the keys to call up my morning's appointments. Mrs Edwards scrolled up, 9:00. Sal Mohammed, 10:00. Then John for lunch. Mrs Sweetney in the afternoon. On a whim, I typed in

About the starship.

PLEASE WAIT

What do you think will happen?

Again, PLEASE WAIT.

The computer was right of course. Wait. Just wait. Please wait. A seagull mewed. The PC's fan clicked faintly, ticking away the minutes as they piled into drifts of hours and days. Eventually, I heard the thump of shoes on the steps and I called, "Come right in," before Mrs Edwards had time to settle with the old magazines in reception.

"Are you sure, Owen? I mean, if you're busy..."

"The door's open."

Ah, Mrs Edwards. Red-faced, the smell of eau de cologne already fading into nervous sweat. One of my regulars, one of the ones who keep coming long after they'd forgotten why, and who spend their days agonizing new angles around some old neurosis so that they can lay it in front of me like a cat dropping a dead bird.

As always, she looked longingly at the soft chair, then sat down on the hard one.

"Big day," she said.

"It certainly is."

"I'm terribly worried," she said.

"About the starship?"

"Of course. I mean, what are they going to *think* of us?"

I gazed at her, my face a friendly mask. Did she mean whatever star-creatures might be out there? Did she mean the travellers in the starship, waking from stasis after so many years? Now *there* was a thought. The travellers, awakening. I suppose they'll wonder about their descendants here on Earth, perhaps even expect those silver-spire cities we all sometimes still dream about, or maybe corpses under a ruined sky, dead rivers running into poisoned seas.

"Mrs Edwards, there probably won't *be* any aliens. Anyway, they might be benign."

"Benign?" She leaned forward over her handbag and gave me one of her looks. "But even if they are, how can we ever be sure?"

After Mrs Edwards, Sal Mohammed. Sal was an old friend, and thus broke one of the usual rules of my practice. But I'd noticed he was drinking too heavily, and heard that he'd been seen walking the town at night in his pyjamas -- not that either of these things was unusual *per se* -- I'd rung him and suggested a visit.

He sat down heavily in the comfortable chair and shook his head when I offered coffee. There were thickening grey bags under his eyes.

He asked, "You'll be going to Jay Dax's party tonight?"

"Probably. You?"

"Oh, yes," he said, tired and sad and eager. "I mean, this is the big day, isn't it? And Jay's parties..." He shook his head.

"And how do you really feel?"

"Me? I'm fine. Managing, anyway."

"How are you getting on with those tension exercises?"

His eyes flicked over towards the cork notice board where a solitary child's painting, once so bright, had

curled and faded. "I'm finding them hard."

I nodded, wondering for the millionth time what exactly it was that stopped people from helping themselves. Sal still wasn't able to even sit down in a chair for five minutes each day and do a few simple thought exercises. Most annoying of all was the way he still lumbered up to me at dos, his body stuffed into a too-small suit and his face shining with sweat, all thin and affable bonhomie although I knew that he'd only managed to get out now by tanking up with downers.

"But today's like New Year's Eve, isn't it?" he said. "Starship Day."

I nodded. "That's a way of seeing it."

"Everything could change -- but even if it doesn't, knowing it won't change will be something in itself too, won't it? It's a time to make new resolutions..."

But Sal got vague again when I asked him about his own resolutions, and by the end of our session we were grinding through the usual justifications for the gloom that filled his life.

"I feel as though I'm travelling down these grey and empty corridors," he said. "Even when things happen, nothing ever changes..."

He'd gone on for so long by then -- and was looking at me with such sincerity -- that I snapped softly back, "Then why don't you give up, Sal? If it's really that bad -- what *is* it that keeps you going?"

He looked shocked. Of course, shocking them can sometimes work, but part of me was wondering if I didn't simply want to get rid of Sal. And as he rambled on about the pointlessness of it all, I kept thinking of tonight, and all the other nights. The parties and the dances and the evenings in with Hannah and the quietly introspective walks along the cliffs and the picnics in the cool blue hills. I just kept thinking.

The lunches with John that I marked down on my PC were flexible. In fact, they'd got so flexible recently that one or the other of us often didn't turn up. This particular John was called Erica, and we'd been doing this kind of thing since Christmas, in firelight and the chill snowy breath from the mountains. I've learnt that these kind of relationships often don't transfer easily from one season to another -- there's something about the shift in light, the change in the air -- but this time it had all gone on for so long that I imagined we'd reached a kind of equilibrium. That was probably when it started to go wrong.

It was our usual place. The Arkoda Bar, up the steps beside the ruins. There was a group a few tables off that I vaguely recalled. Two couples, with a little girl. The girl was older now -- before, she'd been staggering like a drunk on toddler's splayed legs; now she was running everywhere -- but that was still why I remembered them.

I almost jumped when Erica came up behind me.

"You must be early -- or I must be late."

I shrugged. "I haven't been here long."

She sat down and poured what was left of the retsina into the second glass. "So you've been here a while..."

"I was just watching the kid. What time is it?"

"Who cares? Don't tell me you've been working this morning, Owen."

"I can't just cancel appointments because there's some message coming through from the stars."

"Why not?"

I blinked, puzzled for a moment, my head swimming in the flat white heat of the sun. "I do it because it's my job, Erica."

"Sorry. Shall we start again?"

I nodded, watching the golden fall of her hair, the sweat-damp strands clinging to her neck, really and truly wishing that we could start all over again. Wishing, too, that we'd be able to talk about something other than this goddamn starship.

But no, Erica was just like everybody else -- plotting the kind of day that she could witter on about in years to come. She wanted to rent a little boat so that we could go to some secret cove, swim and fish for shrimps and bask on the rocks and watch the night come in. She even had a little TV in her handbag all ready for the broadcast.

I said, "I'm sorry, Erica. I've got appointments. And I've got to go out this evening."

"So have I. You're not the only one with commitments."

"I just can't escape them like you can. I'm a married man."

"Yeah."

The people with the little girl paused in their chatter to look over at us. We smiled sweetly back.

"Let's have another bottle of wine," I suggested.

"I suppose," Erica said, "you just want to go back to that room of yours above the surgery so you can screw me and then fall asleep?"

"I was hoping-- "

" --isn't that right? Owen?"

I nodded: it was, after all, a reasonably accurate picture of what I'd had in mind. I mean, all this business with the boat, the secret cove, fishing for shrimps...

I held out my hand to pat some friendly portion of her anatomy, but she leaned back out of my reach. The people with the kid had stopped talking and were staring deeply into their drinks.

"I've been thinking," she said. "This isn't working, is it?"

I kept a professional silence. Whatever was going to be said now, it was better that Erica said it. I mean, I could have gone on about her selfish enthusiasm in bed, her habit (look! she's doing it now!) of biting

her nails and spitting them out like seed husks, and the puzzled expression that generally crossed her face when you used any word with more than three syllables. Erica was a sweet, pretty kid. Tanned and warm, forgiving and forgetful. At best, holding her was like holding a flame. But she was still just a rich Daddy's girl, good at tennis and tolerably fine at sex and swimming and happy on a pair of skis. And if you didn't say anything damaging to her kind when you split up, they might even come back to you years later. By then they'd be softer, sadder, sweeter -- ultimately more compromising, but sometimes worth the risk.

So I sat there as Erica poured out her long essay on How Things Had Gone Wrong and the sun beat down and the air filled with the smell of hot myrtle and the sea winked far below. And the little girl chased blue and red butterflies between the tables and her parents sat listening to the free show in vaguely awestruck silence. It even got to me after a while. I had to squint and half-cover my face. Selfish, calculating, shallow, moody. Nothing new -- Erica was hardly one for in-depth personal analysis -- but she warmed to her subject, searching the sky for the next stinging adjective. Some of them were surprisingly on target -- and for her, surprisingly long. I thought of that scarred and ancient starship tumbling over some strange new world, preparing to send us all a message. And I thought of me, sitting in the heat with the empty bottle of retsina, listening to this.

"You're right," I said eventually. "You deserve better than me. Find someone your own age, Erica. Someone with your own interests."

Erica gazed at me. Interests. Did she *have* any interests?

"But-- "

"-- No." I held up a hand, noticing with irritation that it was quivering like a leaf. "Everything you said is true."

"Just as long as you don't say we can still be friends."

"But I think we will," I said, pushing back the chair and standing up.

Quickly bending down to kiss her cheek before she could lean away, I felt a brief pang of loss. But I pushed it away. Onward, onward...

"You'll learn," I said, "that everything takes time. Think how long it's taken us to get to the stars."

I waved to her, and to the silent group with their sweet little kid. Then I jogged down the hot stone steps to my bike.

Back at the office there was a note stuffed through the letterbox and the phone was ringing. The phone sounded oddly sad and insistent, but by the time I'd read Odette Sweetney's message cancelling her afternoon appointment on account of what she called *This Starship Thing* it had clanged back into silence.

I decided to clear the flat upstairs. The doorway led off from reception with a heavy bolt to make it look unused -- to keep up the charade with Hannah. I'd sometimes go on to her about how difficult it was to find a trusty tenant, and she'd just nod. I'd really given up worrying about whether she believed me.

The gable room was intolerably hot. I opened the windows, then set about removing the signs of Erica's

habitation. I pulled off the sheets. I shook out the pillows. I picked up the old straw sunhat that lay beneath the wicker chair. For the life of me, I couldn't ever remember Erica ever wearing such a thing. Perhaps it had belonged to Chloe, who'd been the previous John; straw hats were more her kind of thing. But had it really sat there all these months, something for Erica to stare at as we made love? It was all so thoughtlessly uncharacteristic of me. Under the bed, I found several blonde hairs, and a few chewed-off bits of fingernail.

I re-bolted the door and went back into the surgery. I turned on the PC and re-scheduled Odette Sweetney's appointment. Then I gazed at the phone, somehow knowing that it was going to ring again. The sound it made was grating, at odds with the dusty placidity of my surgery, the sleepy white town and the sea beyond the window. I lifted the receiver, then let it drop. Ah, silence. Today, everything could wait. For all I knew, we'd all be better tomorrow. Miraculously happy and healed.

I locked the door and climbed onto my bicycle. I was determined to make the most of my rare free afternoon -- no John, no patients -- but time already stretched ahead of me like this steep white road. It's a problem I've always had, what to do when I'm on my own. The one part of my work at the surgery that invariably piques my interest is when my patients talk about solitude. I'm still curious to know what other people do when they're alone, leaning forward in my chair to ask questions like a spectator trying to fathom the rules of some puzzling new game. But for the second half of my marriage with Hannah, I'd found it much easier to keep busy. In the days I work, or I screw and chase Johns. In the evenings we go to dinners and parties. The prospect of solitude -- of empty space with nothing to react to except your own thoughts -- always leaves me feeling scared. So much better to be good old Owen in company, so much easier to walk or talk or drink or sulk or screw with some kind of audience to respond to.

I cycled on. The kids were playing, the cats were lazing on the walls. People were getting drunk in the cafes and the yachts were gathering to race around the bay. Our house lies east of the town, nesting with the other white villas above the sea. I found Hannah sitting alone in the shadowed lounge, fresh mint and ice chattering in the glass she was holding, her cello propped unplayed beside the music stand in the far corner. When I come home unexpectedly, I like it best of all when she's actually playing. Sometimes, I'll just hang around quietly and unannounced in some other part of the house or sit down under the fig tree in the garden listening to that dark sound drifting out through the windows, knowing that she doesn't realise she has an audience -- that I'm home. She's a fine player, is Hannah, but she plays best unaccompanied, when she doesn't realise anyone is listening. Sometimes, on days when there's a rare fog over the island and the hills are lost in grey, the house will start to sing too, the wind-chimes to tinkle, the floorboards to creak in rhythm, the cold radiators to hum. The whole of her heart and the whole of our marriage is in that sound. I sit listening in the damp garden or in another room, wishing I could finally reach through it to the words and the feelings that must surely lie beyond.

"You should be outside," I said, briskly throwing off my jacket, lifting the phone off its hook. "A day like this. The yacht race is about to start."

"Sssh..." She was watching TV. Two experts, I saw, were talking. Behind them was an old picture of the fabled starship.

"You haven't been watching this crap all day?"

"It's *interesting*," she said.

The picture changed to a fuzzy video shot of old Earth. People everywhere, more cars in the streets than you'd have thought possible. Then other shots of starving people with flies crawling around their eyes. Most of them seemed to be black, young, female.

"I guess we've come a long way," I said, getting a long glass from the marble-topped corner cabinet and filling it with the stuff that Hannah had made up in a jug. It tasted suspiciously non-alcoholic, but I decided to stick with it for now, and to sit down on the sofa beside her and try, as the grey-haired expert on the screen might have put it, to make contact.

Hannah looked at me briefly when I laid my hand on her thigh, but then she re-crossed her legs and turned away. No chance of getting her into bed then, either. The TV presenter was explaining that many of the people on the starship had left relatives behind. And here, he said, smiling his presenter's smile, is one of them. The camera panned to an old lady. Her Dad, it seemed, was one of the travellers up there. Now, she was ancient. She nodded and trembled like a dry leaf. Some bloody father, I thought. I wonder what excuse he'll give tonight, leaving his daughter as a baby, then next saying hello across light years to a lipping hag.

Oh, Jesus...

"What's the matter?" Hannah asked.

"Nothing." I shook my head.

"Did you have an okay morning?"

"It was fine. I thought I'd come back early, today being today."

"That's nice. You've eaten?"

"I've had lunch."

I stood up and wandered back over to the cabinet, topping my drink up to the rim with vodka. Outside in the bay, the gun went off to signify the start of the yacht race. I stood on the patio and watched the white sails turn on a warm soft wind that bowed the heavy red blooms in our garden and set the swing down the steps by the empty sandpit creaking on its rusted hinges.

I went back inside.

Hannah said, "You're not planning on getting drunk, are you?"

I shrugged and sat down again. The fact was, I'd reached a reasonable equilibrium. The clear day outside and this shadowed room felt smooth and easy on my eyes and skin. I'd managed to put that ridiculous scene with Erica behind me, and the retsina, and now the vodka, were seeing to it that nothing much else took its place. Eventually, the TV experts ran out of things to say and the studio faded abruptly and gave way to an old film. I soon lost the plot and fell asleep. And I dreamed, thankfully and gratefully, about nothing. Of deep, endless, starless dark.

We dressed later and drove through Danous in the opentop towards Jay Dax's villa up in the hills. All the shops were open after the long siesta. Music and heat and light poured across the herringboned cobbles and the trinket stalls were full of replicas of the starship. You could take your pick of earrings, keyrings, lucky charms, models on marble stands with rubies for rockets, kiddies' toys. I added to the general mayhem by barping the horn and revving the engine to get through the crowds. And I found myself checking the lamplit faces, wondering if Erica was here, or where else she might be. But all I could

imagine were giggles and sweaty embraces. Erica was a bitch -- always was, always would be. Now, some other girl, some child who, these fifteen years on, would be almost her build, her age...

Then, suddenly -- as we finally made it out of town -- we saw the stars. They'd all come out tonight, a shimmering veil over the grey-dark mountains.

"I was thinking this afternoon," Hannah said, so suddenly that I knew she must have been playing the words over in her head. "That we need to find time for ourselves."

"Yes," I said. "Trouble is, when you do what I do for a living..."

"You get sick of hearing about problems? You don't want to know about your own?"

Her voice was clear and sweet over the sound of the engine and the whispering night air. I glanced across and saw from the glint of her eyes that she meant what she was saying. I accelerated over the brow of a hill into the trapped sweetness of the valley beyond, wishing that I hadn't drunk the retsina and the vodka, wishing I'd answered that phone in the surgery, fighting back a gathering sense of unease.

I said, "We haven't really got much to complain about have we? One tragedy in our whole lives, and at least that left a few happy memories. Anyone should be able to cope with that. And time -- do you really think we're short of time?"

She folded her arms. After all, *she'd* been the one who'd gone to pieces. *I'd* been the source of strength. Good old Owen who -- all things considered -- took it so well. And after everything, after all the Johns and the warm and pretty years in this warm and pretty location and with business at the surgery still going well, how could I reasonably complain?

Soon there were other cars ahead of us, other guests heading for parties in the big villas. And there was a campfire off to the right, people dancing and flickering like ghosts through the bars of the forest. We passed through the wrought iron gates and Jay Dax's white villa floated into view along the pines, surrounded tonight by a lake of polished coachwork. We climbed out. All the doors were open, all the windows were bright. A waltz was playing. People were milling everywhere.

I took Hannah's hand. We climbed the marble steps to the main doorway and wandered in beneath a cavernous pink ceiling. The Gillsons and the Albarets were there. Andre Prilui was there too, puffed up with champagne after a good showing in the starship day yacht race. Why, if only *Spindrifft* hadn't tacked across his bows on the way around the eastern buoy... And look, here comes Owen, Good Old Owen with his pretty cello-playing wife Hannah.

"Hey!"

It was Rajii, husband of Hannah's sister Bernice. He took us both by the arm, steering us along a gilded corridor.

"Come on, the garden's where everything's happening."

I asked, "Have you seen Sal?"

"Sal?" Rajii said, pushing back a lock of his black hair, "Sal Mohammed?" Already vague with drink and excitement. "No, now you mention it. Not a sign..."

This was a big party even by Jay Dax's standards. The lanterns strung along the huge redwoods that bordered the lawns enclosed marquees, an orchestra, swingboats, mountainous buffets. No matter what news came through on the tachyon burst from the starship, it already had the look of a great success.

Bernice came up to us. She kissed Hannah and then me, her breath smelling of wine as she put an arm round my waist, her lips seeking mine. We were standing on the second of the big terraces leading down from the house. "Well," Rajii said, "What's your guess then? About this thing from the stars."

Ah yes, this thing from the stars. But predictions this close to the signal were dangerous; I mean, who wanted to be remembered as the clown who got it outrageously wrong?

"I think," Hannah said, "That the planet they find will be green. I mean, the Earth's blue, Mars is red, Venus is white. It's about time we had a green planet."

"What about you, Owen?"

"What's the point in guessing?" I said.

I pushed my way off down the steps, touching shoulders at random, asking people if they'd seen Sal. At the far end of the main lawn, surrounded by scaffolding, a massive screen reached over the treetops, ready to receive the starship's transmission. Presently, it was black; the deepest colour of a night sky without stars, like the open mouth of God preparing to speak. But my face already felt numb from the drink and the smiling. I could feel a headache coming on.

I passed through an archway into a walled garden and sat down on a bench. Overhead now, fireworks were crackling and banging like some battlefield of old. I reached beside me for the drink I'd forgotten to bring, and slumped back, breathing in the vibrant night scents of the flowers. These days, people were getting used to me disappearing, Owen walking out of rooms just when everyone was laughing, Owen vanishing at dances just as the music was starting up. Owen going off in a vague huff and sitting somewhere, never quite out of earshot, never quite feeling alone. People don't mind -- oh, that's Owen -- they assume I'm playing some amusing private game. But really, I hate silence, space, solitude, any sense of waiting. Hate and fear it as other people might fear thunder or some insect. Hate it, and therefore have to keep peeking. Even in those brief years when Hannah and I weren't alone and our lives seemed filled, I could still feel the empty dark waiting. The black beyond the blue of these warm summer skies.

Somewhere over the wall, a man and a woman were laughing. I imagined Bernice coming to find me, following when I walked off, as I was sure she was bound to do soon. The way she'd kissed me tonight had been a confirmation, and Rajii was a fool -- so who could blame her? Not that Bernice would be like Erica, but right now that was an advantage. A different kind of John was just what I needed. Bernice would be old and wise and knowing, and the fact that she was Hannah's sister -- that alone would spice things up for a while.

I thought again of the day I'd been through: scenes and faces clicking by. Hannah half asleep in bed this morning; Mrs Edwards in the surgery; hopeless Sal Mohammed; young and hopeful Erica; then Hannah again and the dullness of the drink and all the people here at this party, the pointless endless cascade; and the starship, the starship, the starship, and the phone ringing unanswered in the surgery and me taking it off the hook there and doing so again when I got home. And no sign of Sal this evening, although he'd told me he was going to come.

I walked back out of the rose garden just as the fog of the fireworks was fading and the big screen was coming on. I checked my watch. Not long now, but still I climbed the steps and went back though the

nearly empty house and found the car. I started it up and drove off down the drive, suddenly and genuinely worried about Sal, although mostly just thinking how tedious and typical of me this was becoming, bugging off at the most crucial moment on this most crucial of nights.

But it was actually good to be out on the clean night road with the air washing by me. No other cars about now, everybody had got somewhere and was doing something. Everybody was waiting. And I could feel the stars pressing down, all those constellations with names I could never remember. Sal Mohammed's house was on the cliffs to the west of the town, and so I didn't have to drive through Danous to get there. I cut the engine outside and sat for a moment listening to the beat of the sea, and faintly, off through the hedges and the gorse and the myrtle, the thump of music from some neighbour's party. I climbed out, remembering days in the past. Sal standing in a white suit on the front porch, beckoning us all in for those amazing meals he then used to cook. Sal with that slight sense of camp that he always held in check, Sal with his marvellous, marvellous way with a story. Tonight, all the front windows were dark and the paint, as it will in this coastal environment if you have don't have it seen to regularly, was peeling.

I tried the bell and banged the front door. I walked around the house, peering in at each of the windows. At the back, the porch doors were open and I went inside, turning on lights, finding the usual bachelor wreckage. I could hear a low murmur, a TV, coming from Sal's bedroom. Heavy with premonition, I pushed open the door, and saw the coloured light playing merely over glasses and bottles on a rucked and empty bed. I closed the door and leaned back, breathless with relief, then half-ducked as a shadow swept over me. Sal Mohammed was hanging from the ceiling.

I dialled the police from the phone by the bed. It took several beats for them to answer and I wondered as I waited who would be doing their job tonight. But the voice that answered was smooth, mechanical, unsurprised. Yes, they'd be along. Right away. I put down the phone and gazed at Sal hanging there in the shifting TV light, wondering if I should cut the flex he'd used, or pick up the chair. Wondering whether I'd be interfering with evidence. The way he was hanging and the smell in the room told me it didn't matter. He'd done a good job, had Sal; it even looked, from the broken tilt of his head, that he'd made sure it ended quickly. But Sal -- although he was incapable of admitting it to himself -- was bright and reliable and competent in almost everything he did. I opened a window, then sat back down on the bed, drawn despite myself towards the scene that the TV in the corner was now playing.

The announcer had finally finished spinning things out and the ancient photo of the starship in pre-launch orbit above the Moon had been pulled out to fill the screen. It fuzzed, and the screen darkened for a moment. Then there was another picture, in motion this time, and at least as clear as the last one, taken from one of the service pods that drifted like flies around the main body of the starship. In the harsh white light of a new sun, the starship looked old. Torn gantries, loose pipes, black flecks of meteorite craters. Still, the systems must be functioning, otherwise we wouldn't be seeing this at all. And of course it looked weary -- what else was there to expect?

The screen flickered. Another view around the spaceship, and the white flaring of that alien sun, and then, clumsily edited, another. Then inside. Those long grey tunnels, dimly and spasmodically lit, floorless and windowless, that were filled by the long tubes of a thousand living coffins. The sleepers. Then outside again, back amid the circling drones, and those views, soon to become tedious, of the great starship drifting against a flaring sun.

As I watched, my hand rummaged amid the glasses and the bottles that Sal had left on the bed. But they were all empty. And I thought of Erica, how she was spending these moments, and of all the other people at the gatherings and parties. I, at least, would be able to give an original answer if I was asked, in all the following years -- Owen, what were you doing when we first heard from the stars?

The TV was now showing a long rock, a lump of clinker really, flipping over and over, catching light, then dark. Then another rock. Then back to the first rock again. Or it could have been a different one -- it was hard to tell. And this, the announcer suddenly intoned, breaking in on a silence I hadn't been aware of, is all the material that orbits this supposedly friendly cousin of our sun. No planets, no comets even. Despite all the studies of probability and orbital perturbation there was just dust and rubble here, and a few mile-long rocks.

There would be no point now in waking the sleepers in their tunnels and tubes. Better instead to unfurl the solar sails and use the energy from this sun to find another one. After all, the next high-probability starlay was a mere three light years away, and the sleepers could dream through the time of waiting. Those, anyway, who still survived...

I stood up and turned off the TV. Outside, I could hear a car coming. I opened the front door and stood watching as it pulled in from the road. Hardly a car at all really, or a van. Just a grey colourless block. But the doors opened, and the police emerged. I was expecting questions -- maybe even a chance to break the news about the starship -- but the police were faceless, hooded, dark. They pushed by me and into the house without speaking.

Outside, it was quite now. The noise of the neighbour's party had ceased and there was just the sound and the smell of the sea. People would be too surprised to be disappointed. At least, at first. Sal had obviously seen it coming -- or had known that there was nothing about this Starship Day that could change things for him. Death, after all, isn't an option that you can ever quite ignore. And it's never as random as people imagine, not even if it happens to a kid just out playing on a swing in their own back garden. Not even then. You always have to look for some kind of purpose and meaning and reason, even inside the dark heart of what seems like nothing other than a sick and pointless accident.

The police came out again, lightly carrying something that might or might not have been Sal's body. Before they climbed back into their grey van, one of them touched my shoulder with fingers as cool as the night air and gave me a scrap of paper. After they'd driven off, I got back into my car and took the road down into the now quiet streets of Danous, and parked by the dark harbour, and went up the steps to my surgery.

It all seemed odd and yet familiar, to be sitting at my desk late on Starship Day with the PC humming. The screen flashed PLEASE WAIT. For what? How many years? Just how much longer will the dreamers have to go on dreaming? I felt in my pocket for the piece of paper and carefully typed in the long string of machine code. Then I hit return.

PLEASE WAIT

I waited. The words dribbled down off the screen, then the screen itself melted, and me with it, and then the room. The lifting of veils, knowing where and what I truly was, never came as the surprise I expected. Each time it got less so. I wondered about what Sal Mohammed had said to me in the dream of this morning. All that stuff about grey endless corridors -- was he seeing where he really was? But I supposed that after this number of journeys and disappointments, after so many dead and lifeless suns, and no matter how well I did my job, it was bound to happen. How many starship days had there been now? How many years of silence and emptiness? And just how far were we, now, from Earth? Even here, I really didn't want to think about that.

Instead, and as always, I kept busy, moving along the cold airless tunnels on little drifts of gas, my consciousness focused inside one of the starship's few inner drones that was still truly functioning and

reliable, even if it didn't go quite straight now and I had to keep the sensors pointing to one side. Outside through the occasional porthole, I could see others like me who were helping to prepare the starship for another journey. A spindly thing like a spider with rivet guns on each of its legs went by, and I wondered about Erica, whether that really *was* her. I wondered whether it was actually possible, with your consciousness inside ancient plastic and metal, to laugh.

Details scrolled up of how many sleepers we'd lost this time. A good dozen. It mostly happened like Sal; not from soft or hard-systems failure, but simply because the dream of Danous ceased to work. That, anyway, was the only reason I could find. I paused now beside Sal's coffin. Ice had frosted over the faceplate entirely. I reached out a claw to activate the screen beside him and saw that he was actually an even bigger loss than I'd imagined -- a specialist in solar power. Just the kind of man we'd need out there on some mythical friendly planet. Then I found my own coffin, and paused my hovering drone to look down through the face plate at the grey and placid version of the features I saw each day in the mirror. In the coffin just above me -- or below -- was Hannah. Ah, Hannah, a few strands of brittle hair still nestled against her cheek, and that gold chain around her bare neck that she'd insisted on wearing back on Earth when we set out together on this great adventure. Just looking at her, part of me longed to touch, to escape these lenses and claws and get back into the dream. Next time, I promised myself, tomorrow, I'll change, I'll do things differently. No, I won't screw John -- Bernice. I might even admit to being unfaithful. After all, Hannah knows. She must know. It's one of the things that's keeping this sense of separateness between us.

I tilted the gas jets and drifted to the coffin that lay beside mine and Hannah's. Like Sal's, like so many others I'd passed, the faceplate was iced over, the contents desiccated by slow cold years of interstellar space. There was really no sign, now, of the small body that had once lived and laughed and dreamed with us inside it. Our child, gone, and with every year, with every starfall, with the hard cold rain that seeps through this starship, with every John, the chances of Hannah and I ever having another are lessened. But first, of course, we need that green or blue or red world. We need to awake and stretch our still limbs and breathe the stale ancient air that will flood these passages and move, pushing and clumsy, to one of the portholes, and peer out, and see the clouds swirling and the oceans and the forests and the deserts, and believe. Until then...

I snapped back out from the drone, passing down the wires into the main databank where Danous awaited. And yes, of course, the morning would be warm again, and perfect, with just a few white clouds that the sun will soon burn away. Nothing could be done, really, to make it better than it already is. There's nothing I can change. And as I turned off my PC and left the surgery and climbed back into my car for the drive home, I could already feel the sense of expectation and disappointment fading. Tomorrow, after all, will always be tomorrow. And today is just today.

Rajii'scar was sitting in the drive, and he was inside in the lounge with Bernice and Hannah. I could hear them laughing as I banged the door, and the clink of their glasses.

"Where were you?" Rajii asked, lounging on the rug. Bernice pulled on a joint, and looked at me, and giggled. Hannah, too, seemed as happy and relaxed -- as she generally gets by this time in the evening, although I haven't quite worked out what it is that she's taking.

I shrugged and sat down on the edge of a chair. "I was just out."

"Here..." Hannah got up, her voice and movements a little slurred. "Have a drink, Owen."

I ignored the glass she offered me. "Look," I said, "I'm tired. Some of us have to work in the morning. I really must go to bed..."

So I went out of the room on the wake of their smoke and their booze and their laughter, feeling righteous, feeling like a sourpuss, wondering just what the hell I did feel. And I stripped and I showered and I stood in the darkness staring out of the window across our garden where the swing still hung beside the overgrown sandpit, rusting and motionless in the light of a brilliant rising Moon. And I could still hear the sound of Hannah and Bernice and Rajii's laughter from down the hall and even sense, somehow, the brightness of their anticipation. I mean...What if... Who knows...Not even when... Not even when... Not even when... Not even...

Shaking my head, I climbed into bed and pulled over the sheets. And I lay there listening to their voices in the spinning darkness as I was slowly overtaken by sleep. In my dreams, I found that I was smiling. For tomorrow would be Starship Day, and anything could happen.

Afterword

'Starship Day' was published in Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine in July 1995, and republished in The Year's Best Science Fiction, Thirteenth Annual Collection (St Martin's Press, USA) edited by Gardner Dozois . It also appears in my short story collection VoyagesBy Starlight (ArkhamHouse,USA).

Like many of my stories, 'Starship Day' took me a year or two to write. Not that I was working on it all of that time -- far from it -- but, as I often do, I started the thing in a rush, then got somewhat stuck and lost in too many options and wandered off to get on with something else instead. Although I had an idea of how the thing should end, I, like Owen, was waiting to find out exactly what the message from the stars would contain. The answer, of course, is a version of the kind of it-was-all-a-dream-and-we're-not-really-here-at-all trick that crops up often enough in the more rudimentary forms of fiction, particularly the kind of thing I remember writing at school when I needed to finish my writing homework and get out to play football with my mates in the park! Still, the way it turned out, it seems to me that 'Starship Day' possesses a little of the sadness and loneliness that I've always associated with long space journeys - or at least since I saw 2001 at an impressionable age. What was probably missing until the story finally clicked in that out-of-the-blue way that occasionally happens was the sense of futility that seems to me most of the characters in the story are expressing about their lives. As I recall, *that* came from this letter I got from a publisher about a treasured project of mine...

I guess we're all out there, hoping for our own Starship Day.