

Relativity

by Robert J. Sawyer

You can't have brothers without being familiar with *Planet of the Apes*. I'm not talking about the "re-imaging" done by Tim Burton, apparently much ballyhooed in its day, but the Franklin J. Schaffner original — the one that's stood the test of time, the one that, even a hundred years after it was made, boys still watch.

Of course, one of the reasons boys enjoy it is it's very much a guy film. Oh, there had been a female astronaut along for the ride with Chuck Heston, but she died during the long space voyage, leaving just three macho men to meet the simians. The woman ended up a hideous corpse when her suspended-animation chamber failed, and even her name — "Stewart" — served to desexualize her.

Me, I liked the old *Alien* films better. Ellen Ripley was a survivor, a fighter. But, in a way, those movies were a cheat, too. When you got right down to it, Sigourney Weaver was playing a man — and you couldn't even say, as one of my favorite (female) writers does, that she was playing "a man with tits and hips" — 'cause ole Sigourney, she really didn't have much of either. Me, I've got not enough of one and too much of the other.

I'd had time to watch all five *Apes* films, all four *Alien* films, and hundreds of other movies during my long voyage out to Athena, and during the year I'd spent exploring that rose-colored world. Never saw an ape, or anything that grabbed onto my face or burst out of my chest — but I did make lots of interesting discoveries that I'm sure I'll be spending the rest of my life telling the people of Earth about.

And now, I had just about finished the long voyage home. Despite what had happened to *Apes's* Stewart, I envied her her suspended-animation chamber. After all, the voyage back from Athena had taken three long years.

It was an odd thing, being a spacer. My grandfather used to talk about people "going postal" and killing everyone around them. At least the United States Postal Service had lasted long enough to see that term retired, in favor of "going Martian."

That had been an ugly event. The first manned — why isn't there a good non-sexist word for that? Why does "crewed" have to be a homonym for "crude"? Anyway, the first manned mission to Mars had ended up being a bloodbath; the ebook about it — *The Red Planet* — had been the most popular download for over a year.

That little experiment in human psychology finally taught NASA what the reality-television shows of a generation earlier had failed to: that you can't force a bunch of alpha males — or alpha females, for that matter — together, under high-pressure circumstances, and expect everything to go fine. Ever since then, manned — that damn word again — spaceflight had involved only individual astronauts, a single human to watch over the dumb robotic probes and react to unforeseen circumstances.

When I said "single human" a moment ago, maybe you thought I meant "unmarried." Sure, it would seem to make sense that they'd pick a loner for this kind of job, some asocial bookworm — hey, do you remember when books were paper and worms weren't computer viruses?

But that didn't work, either. Those sorts of people finally went stir-crazy in space, mostly because of overwhelming regret. They'd never been married, never had kids. While on Earth, they could always delude themselves into thinking that someday they might do those things, but, when there's not another

human being for light-years around, they had to face bitter reality.

And so NASA started sending out — well, color me surprised: more sexism! There's a term "family man" that everyone understands, but there's no corresponding "family woman," or a neutral "family person." But that's what I was: a family woman — a woman with a husband and children, a woman devoted to her family.

And yet...

And yet my children were grown. Sarah was nineteen when I'd left Earth, and Jacob almost eighteen.

And my husband, Greg? He'd been forty-two, like me. But we'd endured being apart before. Greg was a paleoanthropologist. Three, four months each year, he was in South Africa. I'd gone along once, early in our marriage, but that was before the kids.

Damn ramscoop caused enough radio noise that communication with Earth was impossible. I wondered what kind of greeting I'd get from my family when I finally returned.

"You're going *where*?" Greg always did have a flair for the dramatic.

"Athena," I said, watching him pace across our living room. "It's the fourth planet of — "

"I know what it is, for Pete's sake. How long will the trip take?"

"Total, including time on the planet? Seven years. Three out, one exploring, and three back."

"Seven years!"

"Yes," I said. Then, averting my eyes, I added, "From my point of view."

"What do you mean, 'From your point ... ?' Oh. Oh, crap. And how long will it be from *my* point of view?"

"Thirty years."

"*Thirty!* Thirty! Thirty..."

"Just think of it, honey," I said, getting up from the couch. "When I return, you'll have a trophy wife, twenty-three years your junior."

I'd hoped he would laugh at that. But he didn't. Nor did he waste any time getting to the heart of the matter. "You don't seriously expect me to wait for you, do you?"

I sighed. "I don't expect anything. All I know is that I can't turn this down."

"You've got a family. You've got kids."

"Lots of people go years without seeing their kids. Sarah and Jacob will be fine."

"And what about me?"

I draped my arms around his neck, but his back was as stiff as a rocket. "You'll be fine, too" I said.

So am I a bad mother? I certainly wasn't a bad one when I'd been on Earth. I'd been there for every school play, every soccer game. I'd read to Sarah and Jacob, and taught Sarah to cook. Not that she

needed to know how: instant food was all most people ever ate. But she *liked* to cook, and I did, too, and to hell with the fact that it was a traditional female thing to do.

The mission planners thought they were good psychologists. They'd taken holograms of Jacob and Sarah just before I'd left, and had computer-aged them three decades, in hopes of preparing me for how they'd look when we were reunited. But I'd only ever seen such things in association with missing children and their abductors, and looking at them — looking at a Sarah who was older now than I myself was, with a lined face and gray in her hair and angle brackets at the corners of her eyes — made me worry about all the things that could have happened to my kids in my absence.

Jacob might have had to go and fight in some goddamned war. Sarah might have, too — they drafted women for all positions, of course, but she was older than Jacob, and the president always sent the youngest children off to die first.

Sarah could have had any number of kids by now. She'd been going to school in Canada when I left, and the ZPG laws — the *zed-pee-gee* laws, as they called them up there — didn't apply in that country. And *those* kids —

Those kids, my grandkids, could be older now than my own kids had been when I'd left them behind. I'd wanted to have it all: husband, kids, career, the stars. And I'd come darn close — but I'd almost certainly missed out on one of the great pleasures of life, playing with and spoiling grandchildren.

Of course, Sarah and Jacob's kids might have had kids of their own by now, which would make me their...

Oh, my.

Their *great-grandmother*. At a biological age of 49 when I return to Earth, maybe that would qualify me for a listing in *Guinness eBook of Solar System Records*.

Just what I need.

There's no actual border to the solar system — it just sort of peters out, maybe a light year from the sun, when you find the last cometary nucleus that's gravitationally bound to Sol. So the official border — the point at which you were considered to be within solar space, for the purpose of Earth's laws — was a distance of 49.7 AU from the sun, the maximal radius of Pluto's orbit. Pluto's orbit was inclined more than 17 degrees to the ecliptic, but I was coming in at an even sharper angle. Still, when the ship's computer informed me that I'd passed that magic figure — that I was now less than 49.7 times the radius of Earth's orbit from the sun — I knew I was in the home stretch.

I'd be a hero, no doubt about that (and, no, not a heroine, thank you very much). I'd be a celebrity. I'd be on TV — or whatever had replaced TV in my absence.

But would I still be a wife? A mother?

I looked at the computer-generated map. Getting closer all the time...

You might think the idea of being an old-fashioned astronaut was an oxymoron. But consider history. John Glenn, he was right out of Norman Rockwell's U. S. of A., and he'd gone into space not once but twice, with a sojourn in Washington in between. As an astronaut, he'd been on the cutting edge. As a man, he was conservative and family-centered; if he'd run for the presidency, he'd probably have won.

Well, I guess I'm an old-fashioned astronaut, too. I mean, sure, Greg had spent months each year away

from home, while I raised the kids in Cocoa Beach and worked at the Kennedy Space Center (my whole CV could be reduced to initials: part-time jobs at KFC while going to university, then full-time work at KSC: from finger-lickin' good to giant leaps for ... well, for you know who).

When Greg was in South Africa, he searched for *Australopithecus africanus* and *Homo sterckfonteinensis* fossils. Of course, a succession of comely young coeds (one of my favorite Scrabble words — nobody knew it anymore) had accompanied him there. And Greg would argue that it was just human nature, just his genes, that had led him to bed as many of them as possible. Not that he'd ever confessed. But a woman could tell.

Me, I'd never strayed. Even with all the beefcake at the Cape — my cape, not his — I'd always been faithful to him. And he had to know that I'd been alone these last seven — these last thirty — years.

God, I miss him. I miss everything about him: the smell of his sweat, the roughness of his cheek late in the day, the way his eyes had always watched me when I was undressing.

But did he miss me? Did he even remember me?

The ship was decelerating, of course. That meant that what had been my floor up until the journey's halfway point was now my ceiling — my world turned upside down.

Earth loomed.

I wasn't going to dock with any of the space stations orbiting Earth. After all, technology kept advancing, and there was no reason for them to keep thirty-year-old adapter technology around just for the benefit of those of us who'd gone on extrasolar missions. No, my ship, the *Astarte* — "Ah-star-tee," as I kept having to remind Greg, who found it funny to call it the *Ass Tart* — had its own planetary lander, the same one that had taken me down to Athena's surface, four years ago by my calendar.

I'd shut down the ramjet now and had entered radio communication with Houston, although no one was on hand that I knew; they'd all retired. Still, you would have thought someone might have come by especially for this. NASA put Phileas Fogg to shame when it came to keeping on schedule (yeah, I'd had time to read all the classics in addition to watching all those movies). I could have asked about my husband, about my daughter and son, but I didn't. Landing took all my piloting skills, and all my concentration. If they weren't going to be waiting for me at Edwards, I didn't want to know about it until I was safely back on mother Earth.

I fired retros, deorbited, and watched through the lander's sheet-diamond windows as flames flew past. All of California was still there, I was pleased to see; I'd been worried that a big hunk of it might have slid into the Pacific in my absence.

Just like a big hunk of my life might have —

No! Concentrate, Cathy. Concentrate. You can worry about all that later.

And, at last, I touched down vertically, in the center of the long runway that stretched across Roger's Dry Lake.

I had landed.

But was I home?

Greg looked *old*.

I couldn't believe it. He'd studied ancient man, and now he'd become one.

Seventy-two.

Some men still looked good at that age: youthful, virile. Others — apparently despite all the medical treatments available in what I realized with a start was now the 22nd century — looked like they had one foot in the grave.

Greg was staring at me, and — God help me — I couldn't meet his eyes.

"Welcome back, Cath," he said.

Cath. He always called me that; the robot probes always referred to me as *Cathy*. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed the shorter version.

Greg was no idiot. He was aware that he hadn't aged well, and was looking for a sign from me. But he was still Greg, still putting things front and center, so that we could deal with them however we were going to. "You haven't changed a bit," he said.

That wasn't quite true, but, then again, everything is relative.

Einstein had been a man. I remember being a student, trying to wrap my head around his special theory of relativity, which said there was no privileged frame of reference, and so it was equally true to claim that a spaceship was at rest and Earth was moving away from it as it was to hold the more obvious interpretation, that the ship was moving and Earth was stationary.

But for some reason, time always passed slower on the ship, not on Earth.

Einstein had surely assumed it would be the men who would go out into space, and the women who would stay at home, that the men would return hale and youthful, while the women had stooped over and wrinkled up.

Had that been the case, the women would have been tossed aside, just as Einstein had divorced his own first wife, Mileva. She'd been vacationing with their kids — an older girl and a younger boy, just like Greg and I had — in Switzerland when World War I broke out, and had been unable to return to Albert in Berlin. After a few months — only months! — of this forced separation, he divorced her.

But now Greg and my separation was over. And my husband — if indeed he still *was* my husband; he could have gotten a unilateral divorce while I was away — was an old man.

"How are Sarah and Jacob?" I asked.

"They're fine," said Greg. His voice had lost much of its strength. "Sarah — God, there's so much to tell you. She stayed in Canada, and is running a big hypertronics company up there. She's been married, and divorced, and married again. She's got four daughters and two grandsons."

So I *was* a great-grandmother. I swallowed. "And Jacob?"

"Married. Two kids. One granddaughter, another due in April. A professor at Harvard — astronautics, if you can believe that. He used to say he could either follow his dad, looking down, or his mom, looking up." Greg shrugged his bony shoulders. "He chose the latter."

"I wish they were here," I said.

"I asked them to stay away. I wanted to see you first, alone. They'll be here tomorrow." He reached out,

as if to take my hand the way he used to, but I didn't respond at once, and his hand, liver-spotted, with translucent skin, fell by his side again. "Let's go somewhere and talk," he said.

"You wanted it all," Greg said, sitting opposite me in a little cafe near Edwards Air Force Base. "The whole shebang." He paused, the first syllable of the word perhaps catching his attention as it had mine. "The whole nine yards."

"So did you," I said. "You wanted your hominids, and you wanted your family." I stopped myself before adding, "And more, besides."

"What do we do now?" Greg asked.

"What did you do while I was gone?" I replied.

Greg looked down, presumably picturing the archeological remains of his own life. "I married again — no one you knew. We were together for fifteen years, and then..." He shrugged. "And then she died. Another one taken away from me."

It wasn't just in looks that Greg was older; back before I'd gone away, his self-censorship mechanism had been much better. He would have kept that last comment to himself.

"I'm sorry," I said, and then, just so there was no possibility of him misconstruing the comment, I added, "About your other wife dying, I mean."

He nodded a bit, accepting my words. Or maybe he was just old and his head moved of its own accord. "I'm alone now," he said.

I wanted to ask him about his second wife — about whether she'd been younger than him. If she'd been one of those grad students that went over to South Africa with him, the age difference could have been as great as that which now stretched between us. But I refrained. "We'll need time," I said. "Time to figure out what we want to do."

"Time," repeated Greg, as if I'd asked for the impossible, asked for something he could no longer give.

So here I am, back on Earth. My ex-husband — he *did* divorce me, after all — is old enough to be my father. But we're taking it one day at a time — equal-length days, days that are synchronized, days in lockstep.

My children are older than I am. And I've got grandchildren. And great-grandchildren, and all of them are wonderful.

And I've been to another world ... although I think I prefer this one.

Yes, it seems you *can* have it all.

Just not all at once.

But, then again, as Einstein would have said, there's no such thing as "all at once."

Everything is relative. Old Albert knew that cold. But I know something better.

Relatives are everything.

And I was back home with mine.