

SCIENCE FICTION WORLDS OF JEFFREY A. CARVER

Rocket Ride!

A Short Day's Journey into Space

by

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[I wrote this story on special commission from the Herald's travel section editor. With the Ansari X Prize deadline looming, the editor asked me to depict what a future tourist sub-orbital spaceflight might be like. This was my answer.]

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"Zeus One is rolling."

The pilot's voice rings in my headset as the rocket ignites, thrusting us down the runway like an enormous hand on our backs. No timeworn "*T-minus ten...nine...eight...*," the mantra that for my whole life has signified a liftoff. This is different. Through the porthole to my left, the edge of the runway blurs. Over the pilot's shoulder, I see the nose of the spaceplane point suddenly skyward.

The vibration of the wheels cuts off abruptly as we spring into a steep, steep climb. My heart pounding like a racehorse, I glance over at my fellow passenger and manage a grin and a quick thumbs-up. The clock is running.

The ground falls away astonishingly fast. As the g-forces build, it gets uncomfortable to turn my head, so I mostly look out of the corner of my eye. But the g-forces don't stop me from shouting my joy. *Yes! Thank you, everyone! Allie Jules, you are one lucky girl!*

I've done this with help from everyone from my grandmother to my friends to a grant from an arts foundation you've never heard of—not to mention my own hard work and savings. This flight is not just for me, it's for everyone who helped put me here.

Like Mercury astronauts Shepherd and Grissom in 1961, I'm making a suborbital flight. Except I'm not riding a Roman candle threatening to blow up beneath me. If you've seen the old videos, it's more like the old X-15 pilots, riding a rocket plane on wings to the edge of the atmosphere—people like Scott

Crossfield, and like Neil Armstrong before he went to the moon. I'm following in their contrails.

The pilot is talking to air-space control: *"Mach one point seven...passing through forty thousand feet, rate of climb now..."*

The rocket purrs like a kitten beneath us, pushing us higher, faster. I can see the curvature of the horizon. Is the sky darkening? Yes, it is. With effort, I raise my hands to the remote camera controls and snap some pictures. But mostly I'm fixing the images in my mind, to paint on canvas later. In three minutes, we'll be in space.

The craft begins vibrating, and the pilot's voice reassures us: *"Maximum dynamic region—we'll be through this in a few seconds."* And indeed, the buffeting is followed by a strange quiet, as the air outside grows thin and the drag fades away. I glance outside, and the ground is definitely curving away now. And outside our little pressurized cabin, the sky is darkening to a midnight blue.

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A few years ago, this trip would have been unthinkable. Only astronauts, cosmonauts, and taikonauts got to travel in space. Then a couple of millionaires broke the rules keeping private citizens out of space. And finally came the headlines: *"X-PRIZE WON! Today the private space race went to StarCorp Limited, beating two dozen other companies in the race to put a privately funded, 3-seater craft a hundred kilometers into the sky..."*

After that, it was just a matter of time until the first tickets were sold for a ride into space.

Pricey tickets, mind you. My seatmate, Charles L., a wealthy space consultant, took out his checkbook and asked, "How much?" But I—a twenty-five year old artist, struggling to make a living from space art and landscapes? Even with all that help, I didn't have the hundred thousand dollars I needed. (Which is where the internet came in. You thought you got a deal online for your *airfare*? Well, Orlando's not the only destination with an occasional unsold seat.)

The pilot's voice breaks into my thoughts. *"Passing through eighty kilometers, folks. We're nearing the end of our burn. We'll be reaching apogee in about two minutes. I hope you're enjoying that view."*

Outside, the sky has turned black.

*

The rocket thrust tapers quickly and cuts off, and now we're coasting upward toward apogee, the top of our arc. Suddenly we're weightless, floating against our seat harnesses. I draw a sharp breath, my gaze drawn back out the window. *Earth. Enormous, round, and magnificent.* The California coast sprawls, dark and beautiful against the glowing ocean. Curling wisps of cloud float over the Earth's surface like visions from an artist's airbrush. And up,

above the arc of the horizon, shine the glorious stars. My hand fumbles at the camera controls: click, click. I glance for an instant back inside the cabin and see only the back of Charles' head—he's got his face glued to his own porthole. But forward, I can see the pilot's face in the mirror over his head. He's watching us, grinning.

I grin back, then return quickly to the window. *Whoa!* Quick movement, bad idea. For a few seconds I'm snaking around in my harness like an out-of-control slinky, until the preflight training kicks in and I catch the handholds and steady myself. Another bit of training has my hand on the space-sickness bag, just in case—but the moment passes. I'm going to get through this without embarrassment.

"Folks, I'm rotating the craft to give you the full view. Ten seconds to apogee..."

*

Time stops at the crest of our flight—hanging, I imagine, like Wile E. Coyote, before he remembers gravity and starts to fall. It is a moment of almost surreal quiet and beauty. The Earth is now over my head, visible in round portraits through the overhead portholes: all reddish browns and greens and white-wisped sapphire, the Rocky Mountains a swath of chaos over the land.

Way too soon, with a murmur of regret, the pilot rotates the craft again to its upright reentry attitude. And now we're falling...

The reentry is almost a blur. Not because of the blazing fireball, because there isn't one. (If we were coming in from orbit, we'd have seventeen thousand miles an hour of velocity to kill. But we went up, coasted nearly to a stop, and started gliding back down.) No, the blur is in my mind. In almost no time, I hear the rush of wind on the skin of the spaceplane, and the sky is turning blue...and then we're making S-turns, descending toward the same runway from which we departed just minutes ago.

Our wheels touch in a flawless landing, but I'm hardly thinking about the landing. How can I be, when my mind is still up among the stars...caught in that timeless moment, when Earth and sky became as one?

For more on the X Prize, check out space.com or the [X Prize](http://XPrize.org) foundation.

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