

AEROPHILIA
BY TOBIAS S. BUCKELL

“You know, the thing about zeppelins is that they got a bad rap,” Vince says. He’s actually twirling a virtual mustache. Nutjob. “I mean, in the famous ‘Oh, the humanity’ accident only thirty-five passengers died. Out of ninety seven!”

He steps forward and looks at me critically.

“Ever heard of a sixty-four percent survival rate in any crash? Space or air?” He doesn’t wait for an answer, but turns around. “No!” I can’t answer him anyway. My mouth is gagged with a rubber ball and strap, and my hands are cuffed. My lips are starting to dry out and stick to the black rubber ball.

The key to the handcuffs has been flushed out of the airship through the toilet. It’s probably still falling, and will fall for a few hours more until crushed into liquid metal by the deadly atmosphere far below us. It would continue falling, being crushed even smaller, until it joined the great diamond core of the gas giant that was Riley.

Or so some physicists I once saw quoted in a touristy introduction to Riley had said.

Four passengers sitting on the side of the gondola stare at me with wide eyes. They’re local colonists. Three guys in tuxedos on their way to a party and a lady in a hoop skirt and purple plastic corset. Probably lived all of their lives in any one of the aerostat cities on Riley’s upper atmospheres. They’ve certainly never seen a down on his luck spacer like me, likely because there has never been such a thing as a down on his luck spacer. It’s almost oxymoronic.

“On a planet like this,” Vince continues, “Zeppelins are too useful to ignore. But I think the colonists are missing something.”

The colonists: they look at me as if I am crazy. And from their perspective it can’t be too far off, right? What they’ve seen with their normal, unaugmented, fleshy eyeballs has been me, and only me, boarding their dirigible for a regular flight from one city to another. Routine for them, until I knocked out their pilot, took over the airship, and reprogrammed the ship’s destination to somewhere deep into the atmosphere of Riley.

“Nobody try to fly this ship, or call for help, or you’ll all regret it,” I’d announced. Then I’d stuffed a ball gag in my mouth, handcuffed myself, and slumped into the corner of the gondola.

The problem being, from my side, is that my Id is a total asshole. He hates my guts. We split up yesterday and he hijacks my skull today in retaliation.

So I’m not really me right now. And no one else can see Vince. He’s just a computer-induced hallucination inside my own skull. I work up some spit to try and moisten the ball gag a bit. Drool runs down my lips, and one of the men across from me shakes his head in disgust.

#

Even though Vince is using my own body-wide neural network against me to induce hallucinations and control my motor movement, I can still access some basic functions. I dial out of the airship and make a call. As a spacer I’m totally cyborged, constantly seeing and interacting with information laid over every thing I see.

I manage to contact my ex-girlfriend’s secretary persona. A virtual image pastes itself in the left corner of the inside of my artificial eyes.

The persona looks just like Suzie as I remember her sixty years ago: blond, brown eyes, but more digitized. It laughs when it sees me.

“You look exactly as we remember you,” it says.

My hopes lift.

ÒI need help,Ó I subvocalize. ÒCan I talk to Suzie?Ó The secretary mimics sitting back and folding her arms. Lifts an eyebrow.

ÒWhy in hell would we want to talk to you?Ó

ÒIÓm in trouble.Ó My subvocal throat grunts get another disgusted look from the colonists in the actual gondola. In the picture in my head the secretary leans forward.

Somewhere between the two I can see Vince flickering as he paces around the edge of the gondola, muttering to himself. He passes through one of the colonists, like a ghost.

ÒYouÓre always in trouble, Vincent,Ó the secretary says.

ÒYeah, but now IÓm in really deep. I need SuzieÓs help.Ó

A click.

Then itÓs Suzie. The real Suzie.

ÒHello?Ó

The secretary fades away. I try to clear my throat, gag, and close my eyes. The insides of the gondola disappear, but Suzie remains, still staring at me.

ÒSuzie,Ó I subvocalize. ÓMy god, you look . . . great.Ó She doesnÓt. She looks really old. Even with aging treatments, sheÓs been sitting in real time for sixty or so years while I skipped out a relativistic few months near the speed of light and tried and build up my financial empire.

Compound interest is every light huggerÓs friend. You leave a bank account behind for a couple months in your time reference and come back to your original departure planet rich.

IÓm hoping those decades softened the memory of my departure.

ÒSon of a bitch,Ó Suzie says, realizing who I am.

ÒI need help Suzie. Please. Do you still work for the Air Guard?Ó

She shakes her head.

ÒSixty freaking years, Vincent. Sixty.Ó

ÒIÓm so sorry, I can explain, but right now IÓm handcuffed in the gondola of an airship and I need your help.Ó

ÒDo you realize IÓve had a whole life since then? A marriage? Kids? Grandkids?Ó

I pause.

ÒWe could talk about this over coffee, or something. After you help me?Ó

ÒIf you can call me you should have called the Guard yourself,Ó Suzie says, and hangs up.

I mumble the ballgag for several seconds, then redial.

ItÓs the secretary.

ÒShe doesnÓt want to talk to you,Ó the younger image of Suzie says. ÓSheÓs really pretty ticked that you even dredged all those old memories back up for her. You left her after taking all her money, and even worse, you didnÓt even tell her you were leaving. You know she would have given you the money if you would have asked.Ó

ÒIÓm so sorry to be doing this.Ó I sigh around the edges the rubber ball. ÓI donÓt know what else to do. My Id became a persona inside of my own neural network, and now itÓs taken me over.Ó

ÒWell you really messed her up. She lied, you know, she never actually had a husband or grandkids, she just threw herself into work. For a while she became part of an anti-Spacer activist group,Ó the secretary leans forward. ÓLook, you could just turn off all your neural devices and go totally normal, just regular wetware.Ó

ÒThatÓs a bit drastic, isnÓt it?Ó IÓve been wired since, well, as long as I can remember. I wouldnÓt be able to make calls, check up on info, see floating data tips around me, if I shut it all down. IÓd be just like the colonists staring at me.

ÒPeople on Riley manage it all that time. Not everyone is a high rolling spacer.Ó

The secretary smiles. Funny tickly feelings are running up and down my chip-packed spine. I ignore them.

ÒAnd if you buy yourself some time, I imagine I could work the old lady over, if you

know what I mean. She winks. There are, after all, some very good memories we're dredging up as well.

She's gone.

It's a bit of a flimsy plan, but it beats calling the Air Guard directly and guaranteeing arrest. Susie might still fly out and rescue us.

Vince sits next to me.

I think that's a bad idea, he says. I've been trying to keep you occupied and distracted. Which is easy by the way, I didn't want you to think of doing that.

Hah.

I start getting the codes ready.

Just ponder this, Vince says, leaning closer to me. I'm always the one that comes up with the good plans. I always get us out of the bad scrapes on instinct. I always get the girl when you stop over thinking things. You have to trust me.

Good plans my ass. I'd been unaware of my Id until he'd started giving me anonymous messages, leaving links to stories about a lost aerostat city that had kept actual gold bars in its bank, now abandoned and waiting for someone to plunder it. My Id has gone insane. He splintered off into his own personality when I'd started resisting his plan to go down searching the lower atmosphere for this mythical lost city.

I'm taking good care of us right now. This is all part of a plan.

I initiate a shut down.

Vince finally flickers away.

#

It's different going a hundred percent wetware. When I look out the observation windows I can't see little weather tags telling me where the thermals around us are.

People's public ID info sheets don't hover over their heads.

But I can wiggle my fingers and move my hands.

I rip off the ball gag and take a deep breath, then stand up. The colonists flinch.

It's okay, I reassure them. I'm okay now.

They don't believe it.

I had a software problem, I explain, wiping my cracked lips with the sleeve of my dress shirt. My personality kinda got messed up and split, then the splinter tried to take me over. Bit of a glitch in the programming allows that.

One of them raises his hand.

So which one is in charge now?

I am, I say brightly. I'm Vincent.

They all chorus: Hi Vincent.

I nod.

Vince is gone now, so we're all okay. He was the one that knocked out the pilot and reprogrammed the airship. I'm more normal.

One of the colonists leans over to the purple corseted lady and stage whispers, Does this happen to off-worlders often?

She shakes her head.

So . . . I say. Can we wake the pilot up now?

They enthusiastically approve of this course of action.

We trudge over to the front of the gondola where the bank of displays and switches gleam. The pilot is an elderly man with brown hair, slumped in the well-padded pilot's seat. A heads up display flickers green figures over the roiling red clouds of Riley on the window screen in front of him. This is how the colonists access the layers of information around them.

I shake his shoulders, but his head lolls. Other than that, he looks okay. I don't have the ability anymore to ping his health icon, but the lady colonist leans over and pulls her hoop

skirt off. She's wearing an elaborate set of lacy knee-length pants underneath. She squeezes in between me and the captain to check his pulse.

He's dead, she says.

Everyone is looking at me.

I've become a murderer, though I doubt even my Id was crazy enough to kill the pilot.

Heart attack, probably, she says, pushing past me and pulling her hoop skirt back on.

How can you tell?

I'm a doctor. She sits back down, smooths the skirt out over her legs.

It's a small relief.

Does anyone here know how to fly this thing? I ask. They all shake their heads.

I slump to the floor.

I could fly it. But I'd have to reboot my neural network to get that kind of information.

And then Vince would return.

The airship shakes, and several motors whirr.

What's that? I ask.

The doctor looks out the observation windows.

The bag is venting, she says. We're dropping.

Do you know how to use these manual controls to call the Air Guard? I ask, pointing at the scary rows of controls in front of the dead pilot. If the alternative is plummeting down into the depths of a gas giant, arrest is starting to look good.

The doctor looks at me as if I'm stupid. Yes.

Then do it!

#

The doctor sits up front speaking into the arm of the seat near the dead pilot. She's talking to the Air Guard.

How far do you think this ship can fall? I ask the men around me, trying to keep myself from focusing on the sinking feeling in my stomach that tells me we are still descending.

This particular ship, she says the doctor from up front, comes from a line of what used to be tourist ships. They would follow the generator cables of the cities way down into the clouds. She throws a paper brochure at us. It lands on the floor. Didn't any of you read the booklets on each of your seats?

I feel around in my pockets to find a crumpled up ball of paper.

Spacers. She stares at me with menace. They loved riding these things down into the clouds. Until the depression hit. Now they're used for more practical things. We don't get many spacers on vacation here on Riley anymore.

How long before the Air Guard gets to us? I ask, trying to deflect the cloud of animosity in the air. My stomach begins to settle.

They said an hour.

And how long before we would get crushed?

The doctor shrugs. Your programmed autopilot seems to be leveling us off, she says.

Ah. So maybe we would live. Relieving. I walk forward, peering out of the windows. We're in what looks like a red fog now, the light inside tinted with the color. Everyone looks angry in this kind of lighting, or at least out of breath. Nothing to do but wait for the Air Guard.

The prospect of being arrested doesn't do much for me. I sit down in a funk and continue staring at the shifting hues outside.

What are you even doing down here? The doctor asks. Spacers don't even

come down to the cities anymore.Ó

I turn back to look at her.

ÒIÓm bankrupt.Ó

ÒI thought all spacers were rich,Ó one of the men says.

ÒWell IÓm not,Ó I snap. ÒThere are costs, right? You have to fuel the ship. Make repairs. Hire crew. Find cargo. And most importantly, invest intelligently.Ó I look around at them. ÒI left here sixty years ago with a couple thousand in a bank account and some various investments. It was everything I had left after paying for my shipÓs needs.Ó I had taken the money from Suzy, planning to pay her back in spades when I returned. ÒThe depression wiped it all out by the time I came back.Ó Though if I had come back twenty years earlier I would have been a multi-billionaire.

ÒYouÓre not a very lucky spacer,Ó the doctor observes.

I shake my head.

ÒNo, IÓm not.Ó But at least the doctor sounds sympathetic, unlike Vince, who ridiculed me for days straight about it. ÒI left people behind when I skipped out because I was close to broke sixty of your years ago as well. Now I donÓt even have them.Ó Vince led me down to the floating cities of Riley as last-ditch effort to save ourselves.

Floating ghost cities. HeÓd been nuts in the end.

ÒIÓm really sorry for doing this to you guys,Ó I say. The men all nod. ÒItÓs okay.Ó

The doctor stands up. ÒDonÓt you dare sympathize with him like that. When the Air Guard rescues us weÓre booking charges. All of us.Ó

ÒI . . .Ó

ÒLook, does he even know any of our names? Did he even bother to check our names before he took us all hostage on his crazy last spacer joyride?Ó

I try to recall if I checked their names. I donÓt think I did.

ÒThatÓs right,Ó she says. ÒDidnÓt even bother, did you?Ó

I have nothing to say to that.

The man closest to me speaks up. ÒWell, my name is . . .Ó

ÒDonÓt do that,Ó she yells. ÒDonÓt give him your name. You donÓt want him showing up on your doorstep one day, do you? DonÓt forget, heÓs probably unstable. HeÓs got some sort of implant problem. Just wait until the Air Guard gets here. DonÓt talk to him anymore.Ó

She sweeps past us all, hoop skirt bouncing, to go use the bathroom. The men look anywhere in the gondola but at me or at the door to the head.

I distract myself similarly by wondering if her waste will suffer the same fate as the keys to my handcuffs? I imagine the carbon-based remains will be compressed into the form of diamonds by the time they reach the core of Riley.

Back when Riley was colonized, scientists tried to study what the pressure did to things dropped in RileyÓs lower atmospheres, but apparently the depression killed the more speculative kinds of exploration like that. And any diamond prospectors formed up during the first years of colonizing Riley had quickly turned to finding other ways to make a living.

Like making airships to trade between the great floating cities.

#

ItÓs a long, quiet hour before the Air Guard ship snares us. The gondola shakes a bit, and then a long snaking tube attaches itself to the airlock. My cuffs are still on, so IÓm sure that will just make their job easier.

Someone knocks on the door to the airlock. The doctor opens it, and Suzie walks in. SheÓs frail, but wearing her old blue and red Air Guard uniform and projecting authority.

ÒGet up the chute,Ó she orders the colonists.

The men grab the pilotÓs body and scramble up awkwardly through the tube with it. I watch as the doctor pulls off her hoopskirt.

She looks back at me.

I start to ask her name, but Suzie steps between us and the doctor starts scrambling away.

“Hi, Suzie.”

“You wouldn’t believe the strings I had to pull to get here this quick. I had to get back aboard one of my old ships just to come after you.” She shakes her head.

“But thank you so much,” I say. I reach out to hug her. She pulls out a stun gun, fires it at my chest, and I drop to the floor of the gondola, convulsing.

“You self-involved asshole.” She grabs the ball gag from the corner of the room and ties it back on me.

“Mfff?”

“I’ve had sixty years to despise you. My secretary program, on the other hand, based on a younger version of me, is quite infatuated with you. Well, at least my memories of you.” Suzie is quite strong for a ninety year old. She’s hogtied me with a piece of rope around my ankles and the handcuffs, and dragged me to the back of the gondola. “But she came up with quite a compromise. We come get your Id, which is the real you that we always loved anyway. I always sensed he was in charge when we were together back then. And then I get to kill you.” She points the stun gun right at my temple. “I’ll turn you into a vegetable right now unless you boot your neural network up and give us Vince.”

I need little convincing. She can have him. I hold up my cuffed hands. Suzie grabs it them. A data link opens, using the very conductivity of our skin to transmit all the necessary information, and I reboot my entire neural net. All those chips in my spine warm up.

Vince appears, looks around, and swears as I allow the data transmit. He dissolves, fading away in the air in front of my eyes. Suzie’s body network has him now.

He’s gone, and Suzie has a big grin on her face as she lets go of my hands. She headbutts the wall, giving herself a bad bruise on the cheek. “I’m going to tell them you resisted my attempt to save you,” she says, walking over to the airship controls. She kills all the communications, then takes out her stun gun and fires it into the control panel. Sparks fly. I check. I’m unable to piggyback a signal out of the gondola. “That you were crazy right there at the end. They’ll believe me too. You’re suicidal, and dangerous, and there is no reason for anyone to attempt to come back in here.”

A trickle of blood runs down the side of her nose as she walks over to the airlock door.

“You should have told me you were going to leave, sixty years ago, Vincent. Or at least invited me aboard your damn ship.”

“Uhmfff mffffmfff,” I say, and meaning it.

“It’s too late for sorry,” Suzie says. “I’ve let some of your gas out on the airbag. You won’t be able to rise, but you might be able to float around on the level you’re until you starve or die of dehydration. Good bye, Vincent, it was so nice to see you again.” She gets in the airlock. The tube pulls away and she’s gone. The Air Guard is gone. They’re not coming back.

#

It takes the better part of an hour to free myself and stand up. Again I ripped off the gag.

I have my advanced senses though. I can see thermals outside. I can find out how to fly this airship. Each instrument has a tiny instruction manual icon floating over it.

As I sit in the pilot’s chair, trying not to freak myself out because he’d only been in it just an hour earlier, Vince appears next to me.

“Shit!” I scream.

“Relax, I’m not going to hijack you again,” he says.

“You didn’t get . . .”

ÒI really didn't want to end up with those two psychos. Gave them a copy of myself that will self-destruct in a few hours. Wouldn't want to miss out on all the fun here.Ó

ÒMe dying?Ó

ÒWell,Ó Vince says, Òthe airbag thing is a problem of course. But remember when I said you should trust me?Ó

ÒYou always say that,Ó I sigh.

ÒWho decided to make a run for it sixty years ago when we realized we were almost bankrupt?Ó

ÒMe.Ó

ÒRight. Now what you should have done was listen to me then.Ó Vince walks around behind me. ÒI told you it was a bad idea. It felt wrong, didn't it?Ó

ÒYou wanted to buy an airship,Ó I say. ÒBut wouldn't tell me why.Ó

ÒI told you to research what happens at the heart of a gas giant,Ó Vince admonishes me from the other side of the chair.

ÒYou moron,Ó I snap. ÒMost theories propose a giant diamond at the center of the giant, squashed into being by all those pressures at that depth. Which, if you're thinking of trying to get at it, means we get crushed too. You know what else, diamonds really aren't worth all that much these days.Ó

Vince pretends hurt. He claps a virtual hand over his chest.

ÒWhy are you focused on one big diamond?Ó

I frown.

ÒEvery day these aerostat cities are dumping carbon-based trash that falls downward,Ó Vince says. ÒWhere it gets crushed. But look around you,Ó he points at the roiling cloud we're in, and at the massive upwelling thermals.

Deep down at their hearts they're strong enough to throw almost anything up. And no tourist ship has gone this near. Civilized cities and easy tourist jaunts avoid that kind of turbulence.

ÒNo diamond prospector ever found anything when they first came to Riley, even in the upwells,Ó I say. ÒYes,Ó Vince says. ÒBut that was before almost seventy years of dumping trash into the atmosphere, right? It was virgin then. Humans hadn't been dumping shit into the lower atmospheres yet.Ó

I'm dumbfounded. He's got a point.

ÒDo you trust me?Ó he asks again.

This time it is from somewhere inside me. Looking down in the depths of Riley, I've managed to reclaim my Id.

ÒI want to see this,Ó I whisper, as we begin to slide downwards.

ÒBetter buckle in, then,Ó Vince says in a last fading whisper.

#

There are journeys, and then there are rides, and this was a ride to hell and back. Or at least Riley's version of hell. I slipped ever downward to the thermal my former Id had identified as the prime upwell spot, trusting my instincts to bring the airship as far down into the depths as had ever been done.

We floated through a sea of diamond specks before we smacked the heart of the upwell and rode the thermal. It was like straddling a rocket straight back up. It spit us out high enough that we coasted into the nearest aerostat city with several hundred feet of altitude to spare.

We landed covered in diamond dust.

#

Several weeks later I'm standing near the great foam pillars of the courthouse.

Suzie spots me waiting for her to come out, stops, then walks over. A green and red police droid follows two steps behind her.

“Hello, Vincent.”

She doesn’t seem too surprised to see me. We’ve faced each other in court for the past week. But all that’s over. The best psychiatrists, lawyers, journalists, and judges have all pored over our plights. I’m acquitted of murder, but my implants have been torn from me so that there is no danger of my Id getting free again.

And I had to cover court costs. My starship was confiscated and auctioned off. The Riley government took its share of the court costs, Air Guard rescue fee, taxes, and handed me the rest.

“I never felt like I got to finish things,” I say. “Or properly apologize.”

She shakes her head sadly.

“And even if you do, so what? You’re going to leave on your spaceship for any number of years while I wither away here again? You’re wasting your time if you think there’s anything to rescue with us.”

“I sold it,” I tell her. “I don’t have a ship anymore.” She starts walking away from the courthouse. The droid and I follow her.

“I would like to give you the money back, with interest.” It’s almost everything I have left.

“And then what are you going to do here, on Riley?”

“Buy an airship, offer some very hair-raising tours of this world. Famous tours that spacers will come to try from all over.” It feels like something I’ll be good at, the pit of my stomach agrees with this. Deep down, I’ve always liked airships.

We walk together a little further before she stops. “You don’t just get forgiveness like that,” she says. “It just doesn’t happen like that.”

Her sentence involved guided therapy and personality adjustment. That and a twenty-four hour police droid for a year until the therapy kicked in fully.

I reach over and grab her hand, softly, and place a diamond in it.

“A memento,” I explain. “It was lodged in one of the spars when I got back.”

She pockets it and suddenly laughs. It is a symbolic thing for me. Important. I want to try and undo some of the damage. I’m not sure how to take the laughter.

“Okay Vincent. I’m drugged up out of my mind right now, and it makes some sort of warped sense. At the very least,” she smiles, “I’m no longer interested in killing you.”

“Thank you,” I say. It’s a start.

We part.

I walk down a plastic city street, looking up at the great city guywires that lead to the superstructures of pressurized gas that hold us up.

I wonder how hard it would be to get an entire city down to the diamond sea far below my feet?

This piece of fiction is released under a Creative Commons license:

You are free:

- * to Share – to copy, distribute and transmit the work

Under the following conditions:

*Attribution. You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).

*Noncommercial. You may not use this work for commercial purposes.

*No Derivative Works. You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

* For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work. The best way to do this is with a link to this web page.

* Any of the above conditions can be waived if you get permission from the copyright holder.

* Nothing in this license impairs or restricts the author's moral rights.