

**ROBERT APPLETON**



**CAFE AT THE EDGE  
OF  
OUTER SPACE**

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*Robert Appleton*

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Strangely, I find an air of nostalgia where there is no air. I'm looking out of a window that never needs cleaning from outside. It's pretty much impenetrable, too. Just the faint threat of things over which we've no control – you know, asteroids, solar flares, terrorism, things like that. "Facing space," they call it. Something to do with a rite of passage. Everyone leaves Earth at sixteen – that's the law – and we're not allowed to return until our twenty-sixth birthdays. Talk about a graduation.

There's a kind of window over the Earth as well. It isn't solid, it's translucent – a hazy helmet of cloud and pollution. Great Britain passed by a few minutes ago. I could just about make out where I lived, more or less dead centre on the island. Apparently, Britain used to be much bigger. And warmer. More sandy beaches,

less pack ice. I can't quite picture Blackpool without snow, though. Outdoor roller-coasters? They must've been insane.

It's been days since I saw anyone familiar. All my classmates are still hundreds of miles below, probably wondering what the café at the edge of outer space is really like. I wish I could tell them. I'm the oldest, but their turns will come soon enough. It's actually not too different from the school diner: everyone's in each other's way, no one wants to stay here long, and the food is bloody awful.

So, I'm out on my own. I left Earth a boy, and they're counting on me to find Frank Archer the man. There's something disconcerting about that whole idea. I don't want to change. Why should I? Where will travelling the universe take me, except away from here? What if I never find another place as peaceful as Lancashire. What if I change for the worse? We're the future of Earth; without proper guidance, who's to say we won't become a planet of cutthroats? So much for their claims of overpopulation – by the time you're old enough to understand the notion, they've already shipped you off into orbit. It's a bizarre way of treating children, if you ask me.

Another alarm sounds. Everyone cover up their dinner! . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . whew, that was chilly. The shadow passes over the café like a storm cloud, freezing four tall men in their tracks as they make a run for it. The authorities have caught them this time, but I wonder how long it'll be before someone figures out a way to cheat this security. I've no idea what this substance they've put in our blood is, except that it responds immediately to those shadow nets. Instant freeze. It's a good security measure. There's no escaping what runs through your veins.

Emma returns from the bathroom. Wow, she really is gorgeous. Short, not too skinny, dirty blonde hair, purple tank top. We met three days ago, just before our arrival. We were on the same shuttle, which meant our birthdates were identical. Of all the guys on board, I think I came off the luckiest – the powers-that-be had already paired us together, and aren't I thankful. We hit it off right away. She's

got the sense of humour, I've got the laugh; not a bad way to disguise the shiver I'm feeling.

I'm hopelessly and utterly terrified. A few hundred yards away is a meanly-accounted-for hotel room that smells of fresh soap and has red-orange walls and a green carpet with a fluffy, white rug, and a huge double bed like my parents have. Unless I can stall for another half a day, that is where . . . today is when . . . I'm supposed to do the honours. To make a man of me. To get closer to Emma than I've ever been with anyone in my life. To peel away her purple tank top, perfumed mystique, back bra and tight-fitting jeans and god-knows-what's-under-there underwear.

I rhyme when I'm nervous.

My coffee cup trembles as I pretend nonchalance, so it's back to holding it with two hands while I sip. Dad said I'd drink tea and coffee when I was older – just something all adults grow accustomed to, he assured me – but I can see the cheat in that wisdom now. I'm drinking coffee, but only because hot chocolate isn't macho enough when you have to seduce a gorgeous girl. It isn't because I like the taste, or even that I want to drink it. Painfully obvious now, it's a case of drinking *until* you become accustomed to it, just like other adult vices such as beer or cigarettes or tipples of whisky. Yep, coffee is a cruel necessity in the rites of passage to adulthood.

I wonder what other cruelties there are . . . black bra . . . not far . . . wish upon a star.

"Hi," I say. My stomach churns.

"Hey." She sits down sideways with such allure it's practically frame-advance slow motion.

During the past three days, I've become more and more light-headed whenever Emma's returned to close proximity after leaving the room. It's a terrifying-yet-compelling feeling of what she'll do next or, more specifically, what she'll make me do next. I can feel my control over the situation lessen each time. This girl whom I've only just met and know hardly anything about, has me

dancing like a boy puppet on girly strings. I swear I've never felt anything like it. Back in Lancashire, I was a fairly popular, sporty kinda guy who got nervous in exams but usually kept a cool head when others fell to bits. But this! This isn't me. It's a melting ice cream and jelly version of me.

The café at the edge of outer space? And we're barely at the aperitif.

"What was all that about?" she asks.

For one awful moment, I imagine I've been thinking out loud. My eyes blur together and my cheeks start to burn.

"I heard the alarm again, and there was some commotion outside the door," she continues. "Anything serious?"

I recover. "They caught someone this time."

"Oh? What did they look like?"

"Tall. I think there were four men. You said you'd heard something about a security clampdown?"

"Yeah, just something I overheard in the landing dock. Apparently it's back home, but they're taking no chances here either."

"Wonder if that's the end of it?" I ask.

Emma shrugs and sips her cappuccino, elbows on the table. Her arms and neck are milk white, contrasting auspiciously with her dark purple top. I sneak a glance at her breasts pushing the shiny fabric taut behind her elbows. She's stunning. I'm way out of my depth, and it's getting seriously warm in here.

My gulp has nothing to do with coffee.

"How weird is it staring out at space like this?" I say, breaking the tension – another adult knack I've been forced to acquire.

"I know – it's like looking up through your bedroom window, and then realising you're already up there. Crazy. Frank?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I ask you something?"

*Uh-oh.*



“Yeah, sure.”

“Um, I don’t really know how to say this. Do you...did you um, have...a girlfriend? Cos I like you and . . . ”

Something bizarre happens. While I’m at my most vulnerable, eyes lighthousing, knuckles practically knocking hello on the underside of the table. I feel strangely empowered. Emma’s just as nervous as me! And, as difficult as it is for her, she’s making the first move. An odd sensation engulfs me. If it weren’t for my quagmire of insecurities, I might identify it as something like . . . protection?

Me...protective?

“Nah, I didn’t have a girlfriend when I left. You?”

I can’t believe that came out so composed. Her lips quiver as she smiles and shakes her head with wide eyes as if to say, “What the heck’s a boyfriend?”

“No, me neither,” she says, looking down.

“So . . . ” We both speak together.

“So,” she repeats.

“Macaroni,” I say. “So, shall I order for both of us?”

Our eyes meet and we burst out laughing. A nervous, desperate laugh. I haven’t a clue why I said that, and she hasn’t either. It just sounded so random it was perfect. The tension between us evaporates. We alternate between snatched glances at each other which occasionally meet, dew-eyed, and where-the-hell-am-I looks round the room – at the carpet, the beams between windows, the gridiron ceiling, the blank part of outer space. Anything but people. At a time like this, two people are quite enough.

I’m suddenly incredibly aroused. Emma’s shaking with laughter while giving off an alchemic vibe that’s making me dizzy. As she leans back in her seat, I can see her bare hips and tummy. Shaped just for me. White. Hinting at devastating secrets she wants me to be privy to in the immediate future. Who invented that purple? Who designed it to hug her breasts so that even when they move, the effect’s still a controlled, seismic shimmy.

Emma Whitaker. Mine . . . PLEASE!

But the moment passes and the laughter subsides and I once again take stock of all the observers in the B-deck observatory café. Adults. Where are all the others our age? Further along in the you-know-what department than us, I bet. How do they do it? I'm stuck at first base in a free home run . . . with a girl I'm gaga over. For Christ's sake, they don't make Barbie's Ken dolls this impotent!

"Hey, what do you say we go for a wander?" she asks.

"Sure," I reply, not even realising what she's said. From now on, when it comes to Emma, I'm strictly a 'the answer's yes, now what's the question' companion.

Getting up feels positively extra-terrestrial. I feel all eyes in the room on me; it makes me determined to walk tall and appear aloof, adult, yet at the same time magnetised to Emma. Over six inches taller than her, I want to hold her close, protect her.

I bend down to whisper, "Feels like we're on display."

"Yeah. Best zip your fly."

*Oh. My. Fucking. Hell!*

I turn away from the café's central hub first, then feel with pulsing fingertips. Thank God it's zipped!

*THANK . . . GOD!!!*

Sighing, a heavy storm cloud passing across my brow, I place one hand on my chest, the other out toward Emma, pointing with a single finger.

She clasps both hands over her mouth and laughs until her eyes water.

The moment sums up the way I feel about Emma Whitaker. Absolute terror hiding a new world of delirious, giddy excitement. I don't know the terminology past liking a girl – well, even if I did, I wouldn't say it – but as of this moment, I like her enough to forget all about Lancashire, about Earth, about not being allowed back home for a decade. I want what she has. And she wants me to have it.

Are all sixteen year-olds who reach the café at the edge of outer space this lucky, or has the coin landed on its side just for me? For us? Were Emma and I meant to be paired together? Where is she taking me? How exactly does one go about undoing a bra?

The lift up to F-deck sounds like a cheeky innuendo. So does the voice announcing “Doors opening” or the number of each deck we stop at – in slightly campy upper-crust English. It’s maroon inside, plush, like something from the Regent in London. Gold buttons illuminate when pressed. Everything about the lift is early twentieth century retro, but it’s clearly just a façade for the most hi-tech mechanical system money can buy. That’s the irony of life away from Earth – we try to remind ourselves of home at every opportunity, while spending increasingly extravagant amounts to escape it.

A bearded technician enters at E-deck, clanking something into his tool belt. I watch him from the corner of my eye as he stands between us, smiling down at Emma. Dirty old bastard. I know right away it’s jealousy I’m feeling, even though it’s the first time I’ve encountered that where a girl’s concerned. She’s so brittle and he’s so...

“F-deck,” says the elevator voice. Emma and I step out.

As the door closes behind us, I take a deep breath and reach for her hand. Her fingers are tiny, tingly. Her palm is warm and sponge-filled-with-Dove-soap soft. Electricity tickles right through me as her fingertips intermingle with mine. Somewhere in the vicinity there’s supposed to be an observation promenade. Now if only I could remember which planet we’re on.

“What a creep,” she says.

“Huh?”

“Not you, not you,” she reiterates. “That weirdo in the lift. I’ve been leered at before, but there’s leering and then there’s *leering*.”

If my heart wasn’t attempting a Japanese drum recital I might be inclined to think she’s baiting me, fishing for a compliment.

“I don’t blame him,” I say, instantly regretting it. “But there should be a law against...faces like his.”

Emma smiles.

“This place is huge,” I continue. “At school, we always thought the café at the edge of outer space would be like that coffee shop from *Friends* . . . only with floating sofas. What was it called?”

“Central Perk.”

“That’s one of my favourite shows.”

“Same here. We have them all in Tri-Core 3-D on our living room set, but I always sneak a few episodes in on my hand-held before I go to bed. They’re so good.”

“I’ll bet you liked Rachel best,” I say. “Girls always say Rachel.”

“Of the three girls, yeah, but I think Chandler’s cute.”

I laugh. Emma sets me at ease with as little effort as she has me going cuckoo.

“How about you? Who do you like?” she asks. “I’m going to guess at Chandler in the guys and...you think Monica’s the hottest.”

“Hey . . . how did you . . . ”

“I’m good,” she winks.

And she certainly is. So good, in fact, that I can’t even picture Courtney Cox or Jennifer Aniston, or any other woman – past or present – for that matter. I suddenly picture Emma Whitaker’s profile appearing in a screen montage accompanied by the *Friends* title song, *I’ll Be There For You*, before quickly yanking her off the air. I don’t want to share her with millions of smelly, lecherous technicians.

The office space reception area forks left and right. After perusing a Visi-Q screen, which I’m too busy daydreaming to read, Emma steers me left. A cigar tunnel walkway looms ahead. Like an access passage at an airport terminal, it’s narrow and completely enclosed. But this one is utterly black.

Circular, confined and black.

“You sure this is the right way?” I whisper.

“I think it’s supposed to be like this.”

“Ah.”

It suddenly makes sense – the observation promenade is bound to be as dark as possible, for the best view of the stars. Ever tried looking up at a night sky through a well-lit window? Not much point, really.

Our gentle footsteps seem invasive, illegal somehow. The dark tunnel effect is dizzyingly effective as we tiptoe out onto a three-hundred-and-sixty degree stellar walkway. I hold my breath. If Emma’s hand wasn’t squeezing mine, I’d be head over heels off balance instead of head over heels in . . . liking her a lot.

Hotshot.

It’s a deep-bone thrombosis of stars and gravitational attraction. Body to body, orbit to orbit, me to her. We’re cosmic trespassers, and I feel just as transparent as the window encasing us. She looks right into me, her warm breath reaching my cheek where it lingers. Utter silence. My heavy breathing now feels part of oblivion, hers a solar wind from light years away. We’re together now, though. So together. She roves her flat palm from my side across the front of my t-shirt. I take it. Her fingers pulse magic as we draw near, and her breasts press against my rib cage. Near. No fear. We’re...

Butterflies in my stomach rise warmly, fireflies to the roof of my chest. I bend, she rises. Our lips join atmospheres. Eyes closed, I’m not thinking, I’m tasting, and it’s café au lait with the most alchemic sweetener ever created. As I feel up and down her back, I want more. It’s levity and gravity vying in a rolling, tumbling moment. No way am I going to stop. She runs her hands through my hair, and it’s amazing.

She’s possessed. I’m possessed. Caressed.

When I find myself on the floor, I assume she’s responsible for my position. My knees have buckled, melted under the heat and Emma is just the creature to soften my impact. I place my hand over her breast, but she tugs it away. I go to kiss her again, but she recoils.

It's like emerging from a sauna to a sudden chill.

"What was that?" she asks.

"What was what?"

She stumbles to her feet and adjusts her shirt.

"You didn't feel that?" she continues. "It knocked us off our feet!"

"I . . . I didn't re . . ."

"There again."

Emma places her hand against the transparent, inches-thick plastic window.

"Feel that, Frank."

I'm a little worried, but I obey. It's a vibration – uneven, but slight. A few seconds later, a violent jolt rocks the tunnel. I end up in Emma's arms, and we run back for the reception area.

From helplessness to *helplessness!*

A flashing red alarm on the Visi-Q screen reads 'WARNING! HULL BREACH! Make your way to the emergency safe pods immediately!'

My heart thumps again. This time, there's no excitement. Just bare skin held against wintry cold steel.

"What are we doing?" she pleads, her voice trembling.

"Right . . . emergency pods," I reply. "There should be a diagram. Here we go... turn right, then it's at the far end of the corridor."

"What then?"

I take her by the arm and usher her along the schematic in my mind. The place seems deserted. Perhaps we're here after regular hours, and everyone else is in their escape pod by now. It feels like an empty museum – carpeted, evenly lit – but this is no fire alarm where stragglers have 'outside' to aim for.

This is the café at the edge of outer space.

Outer space.

It's shockingly cramped inside my emergency capsule. I realise now what it must've been like for those rocket jock pioneers of the twentieth century – Shepard, Glenn, Armstrong – who used to joke that they were 'spam in a can' every time they went up. There is literally no room to manoeuvre in here. If we hadn't all been vetted for claustrophobia and other panic conditions, these pods would be the final nightmares for many people. Seven feet high, three wide, a coffin has more breathing space.

Emma cried when I closed the door to seal her inside hers. Though we're only ten feet apart, being in separate pods when there's no one else in sight leaves me gasping for oxygen. Bile-acid regret swills in my chest. If only Emma and I hadn't wandered away from the crowd, we might be together on a shuttle right now, holding each other. Taking giant breaths in an emergency capsule is the *worst* possible thing you can do, but I can't help it. Something isn't right. I've followed all their safety protocols to a tee, apart from one.

I don't feel safe *at all*.

It can't be the air regulator or the self-adjusting seatbelt or the solidity of the pod itself; those have a nought-point-nought-nought-nought-one percent chance of malfunctioning, according to the paraphernalia they sent. It's something else. Something in *my* blueprints. Shuffling against the foam back-rest only makes me more uncomfortable.

Out...out...get out!

Like filthy bathwater down a plughole, I swallow the urge. The emptiness drags me back to eighty-seven Hamilton Terrace, my home for sixteen years, where I spent the last few hours before the launch...

Mum and dad were not allowed near me – quarantine law before all space flights – and so I had the entire house to myself, a sentimental gesture they thought I'd appreciate but which ended up being the most traumatic part of leaving Earth. Family photographs I hadn't looked at properly for years, perhaps ever, rang out with crystal clarity. I couldn't believe I'd been a part of these

people's lives. Every cheap ornament, crack in the plaster, glare of sunlight on a polished surface, creaking floorboard, ladder in the net curtain where the cats had tried to climb, seemed renewed, as though they had not been there the day before. Dust on the 3-D wall screen gathered on my fingertip as I traced a contour I'd never noticed before; dad had always forbidden it. That was the first and only time I ever got to touch that screen. Years of my life spent watching movies had centred there, but I couldn't remember a single instance. If I could have the time back, I'd relish each and every movie experience. Browsing our catalogue of titles, the horror suddenly hit me. I'd never get this back, never see another blockbuster on our big screen, never beat mum and dad to the comfy armchair. And what was worse, I hated myself for taking it all for granted.

Bright sunlight beamed in through the blinds, illuminating a thousand dust particles floating in the living room. Like my memories, those tiny bits were rooted in the house — they had a past — and I didn't realise they existed until the time came to say goodbye.

As I pressed the front door shut, the sickly, churning feeling in the pit of my stomach told me what I already knew. Frank Archer was too young to leave Earth.

But Frank Archer *had* to leave Earth.

*Click . . . hisssssssss . . . click!*

Emma has just broken every security rule in the book. She left her emergency capsule during a red alert, and opened the door to mine. The sudden gust of warm air is also perfumed. I want to kiss her for it — for a long, long time.

“You're crazy,” I say, between coughs.

“I'd be crazy to stay in there.”

“So what now?”

“Take a look at this.”



She takes me by the hand and leads me with a look that is equal parts fear and determination. I can see her bottom lip quivering. Hundreds of capsules hurtle out toward Earth from all across our station, their red and green lights blinking. The definition of courage is doing something you don't want to do. Emma is doing a brave thing. We should be part of that survival shower, each in our ironic coffin shooting back to the world. But she's had the same feeling I've had. Something isn't quite right. I can't explain it and neither can she outside of our mutual unwillingness to escape in those pods.

"What are you showing me?" I marvel at the speed of the capsules.

Emma leans in close to me and points diagonally down to the second level. "There," she whispers, "isn't that the café?"

It is. I can make out the red toadstool tables and green walls with brightly-lit adverts for space freight franchises. It's a singular, garish design of a café, but everyone goes there for lunch and dinner because, well, it's tradition. It closes at nine o'clock in the evening. So why have over a hundred people gathered to stare through the windows at twenty past?

"What do you suppose they're doing?" she asks.

"I don't know, but it's creeping me out. They must know something no one else does; look, everyone's rocketing back to Earth."

"Except us."

"Except us."

Another explosion shakes the corridor. The lights flicker out, and a tongue of fire jets out from a lower window to our left. Any hull breach sucks all air and pressure out into space; objects, too, are ripped from the guts of the lower level. But the light in the café is still on, and no one is making a move.

Emma starts to cough. It's more than saliva gone down the wrong way, because I feel a tingle in my throat as well. Like soot, it gathers, lining the phlegm deep inside. It's heavy and constricting. I take a gasping breath, but a cough erupts. And another, and another. Each one thumps the hell out of my chest – my rib-shell feels as though it'll crack.

I grab Emma's arm and run down the corridor in the direction of the café. Staggering through each cough, we help one another on. I feel her convulsions almost as much as I feel mine. It's like grinding tarmac in my chest every time. The formerly well-lit corridors are now as black as the observation tunnel. Rough 'n' tumble coughs give way to hammer 'n' tong blows to my gut. On the verge of nausea, delirium, I stumble through a door to a stairwell and only by sheer instinct negotiate three flights of clanking steps.

Emma's still with me . . . just.

Another floor down, another world. Breathing becomes easier. We still cough, but at least we're able to walk upright without crouching to brace ourselves for each and every convulsion.

"Jesus, what the hell was that?" I ask.

"Something in the air supply," she gasps. "I've never felt anything like it."

"Me either."

"So what now?"

I shake my head. "There's more going on in that café than we know. All these explosions and they just stand there waving everyone off – I don't like it. And that poisonous gas must've been gathering in the air for a while; no wonder we weren't comfortable in our pods."

She throws her arms around me, perhaps in desperation, perhaps to feel safe, maybe both. There's nothing romantic about it. My alchemic reactions to her in the observation tunnel have evaporated.

Priorities.

Embracing one floor above the café seems logical. From here on, anything could happen. I drink the subtle perfume from her shoulders and run my fingers through her curly blonde hair. Whatever I imagined the night having in store for us, this isn't the climax I had in mind.

"What will you do if they turn hostile?" she asks, matter-of-factly.

No clue.

“I’ll think of something,” I reply.

“We should try and get back to our room.”

“That’s not a bad idea.”

“But find out what they’re doing, first,” she adds.

Another good idea. Emma’s smart as well as pretty, tough as well as sexy. I’ve absolutely no idea what she sees in me, but I’m feeling that urge again. That muscular, newly-acquired urge . . . to protect. Will it be enough?

I accidentally walked in on a trade union meeting once. It was in the basement theatre of our school; I used to pass through on my way home after soccer practice. I was always on tenterhooks, as it was out of bounds, but nothing prepares you for the shock of seeing two dozen pairs of adult eyes target you, trained like hunting rifles on a helpless quarry. I ran back out and never told a soul. I’d broken the rules, but so, as I later found out, had they. Trade Unions were banned over seventy years ago. Unofficial assemblies of any kind are not permitted, which means pretty much anything more than a barbecue in the back garden requires a license.

As soon as we walk in on the café gathering, I know they don’t have a license. The white flowers they’re wearing like poppies on Armistice Day look political, but there’s no sign of a security presence. And their behaviour, too – one old woman, in tears, hugging a young couple as they sup coffee; a mother pointing her baby girl toward the Earth before kissing her forehead; one middle-aged man throwing a fist at another man in celebration – is unlike anything I’ve ever seen. For one thing, it’s the middle of a crisis – three explosions in fifteen minutes on board a space station is nothing less than catastrophic. And if you were going to hold a get-together after hours in a café, you’d hire staff to serve you. There aren’t any.

“Just do what they do,” I whisper in Emma’s ear.

She puts her arm over my shoulder. I do likewise. There’s no change in the volume of chat, and all eyes don’t follow us as we stroll in among the bizarre

crowd. Neither does my hand shake as I pick up two white, plastic flowers from a champagne bucket for us to wear.

“Where are you two from?” asks a black man wearing a tracksuit and a sports bandana. He looks like he’s ready for the hundred metres sprint.

“Manchester, England,” I reply, “and she’s from London.”

Emma forces a smile.

“Hmm . . . I think the British Isles is clouded over, brother, but mine’ll be along in a second,” he says, pointing at the left hand curve of the earth – an ocean I recognise right away as the Atlantic. He’s obviously waiting for North or South America. “Check that out. Land o’ the brave, home o’ the used-to-be free, brother. Any time I’m havin’ second thoughts about what we’re doin’, I just think what Abe said, ‘Government by the people’ and all that. An’ Marge over there told me about something G.W. wrote all them years ago, y’know, when we first got our independence from you brothers. He said, ‘When the government ain’t working, it’s not just yo’ right to overthrow, it’s yo’ righteous duty.’ Amen to that, brother.”

“Amen to that,” I reply, not really knowing what the hell he’s on about.

He offers me his hand, and I take it. “Here’s to startin’ fresh, my British cousin.”

“To starting fresh.”

“Later,” he says, and walks away.

After a few more minutes spent staring out at the big blue planet, Emma and I go back to our seats at our usual table. Everything’s changed. As much of a shock as it’s been for me to leave England and brave the café at the edge of outer space, this is the first time I’ve felt cut loose from it all. From my house to the station, to Heathrow’s shuttle launch, to orbit rendezvous with the ISS, to the taxi shuttle, to the first gangway platform at the café station: every step has been on well-travelled lines, by well-rehearsed protocol. I hadn’t once stepped off the conveyer. Until the promenade.

Time to make a decision.

“Frank?” whispers Emma.

“Yeah.”

“What are we doing here?”

I shrug.

“That man didn’t really tell us anything,” she says. “Apart from this being some sort of conspiracy. A suicide cult or something.”

“We need to know what they’ve got planned.”

“Yes. And then we need to get to an escape shuttle – somewhere on this level, where the air supply hasn’t been tampered with.”

I have to hand it to her. Sometimes saying nothing is the best policy. Let others shoot their mouths off; in the meantime, you can take it all in, give nothing away, and plan in your mind what to do next. While I’ve been stuck in the moment, Emma’s been thinking ahead for us.

Fingering our electronic room card that’s stuck in the lining of my jeans pocket, I take a few deep breaths. No time to get a shy attack now.

“I’ll see what I can find out,” I say. “Wait here.”

“No way! We’re sticking together,” she insists, taking my arm.

A monotone alarm sounds to our right — the direction from which we came. Another starts to our left, overlapping with the first. I grip Emma’s forearm, and she plucks my fingers loose, one at a time, like rigor mortised digits. Just before the alarms stop, two metallic thuds shake the floor.

Emergency airlock shutters! Someone is sealing us in.

Silence grips the café. Half smiling, half on the verge of tears, the weird cultists mill about for a few seconds before a unanimous desire to hug takes over. Young, old, menopausal, senile, hormonal, just plain happy-as-Larry, the strangers embrace affectionately and democratically. Emma and I are not spared this kinship of the cult. It’s the most bizarre thing I’ve ever pretended, by a long way. My head swims. The mixture of perfumes, musty old people smells and alcohol leaves the café seeming equal parts fairground and piranha tank. Or some sort of demented church social.

“It’s for the best,” croaks one old lady, weeping.

“You brave young things...come here,” says a fat bloke, pulling us tight against him. “It won’t be long now.”

“My British brother,” says the black man, happier than I’ve ever seen anyone, “see you on the flip side.”

All the while, three words gain momentum in my mind. By the time another explosion blasts the security wing into blazing smithereens, I can’t think of anything else except *escape*, *shuttle* and *Emma*.

On paper, it’s an easy question to ask: *Hi, can you please tell me what’s happening?* When you’re relying on the ability to blend in during a terrorist attack, it suddenly isn’t so easy. *Hi, I’ve never seen any of you before in my life, I just stumbled into your little group therapy session. What’s the deal in this nuthouse?* No matter how close I get to them, the right words won’t form on my lips.

Emma braves a fake smile then turns away shyly. From whom? I hunt through the crowd with crosshair eyes. There! Well, well . . . hard to forget that fizzog. I knew I didn’t like the look of him in the lift. Even without his tool belt and grubby appearance, the man has no business eyeballing my Emma. The handyman better keep his hands away from her, or I’ll be forced to . . . yeah, time to leave.

“Just ignore him,” she whispers while tinkering with the lid of a coffee pot.

“Yeah, sure. It’s not like he’s on his way over or anything.”

“Oh, God.”

“Let’s go,” I insist, taking her hand to lead her out of the café.

We haven’t taken three steps when the large man accosts Emma from behind. “Hey, where y’all runnin’ to, sweet stuff? It’s all goin’ down in no time, an’ there ain’t no place bedder to watch ‘n raht here. Let me buy y’all a drink.”

“No thanks. We’re just going for some fresh air; it’s a little too crowded in here,” replies Emma.

The man strokes her arm and shoulder, saying softly, “Ah could take you some place quiet if you lahk, sweet stuff. Ain’t no one comes close to you in this ‘ere shindig.”

“No thank you. I’m with someone,” she replies coolly.

“Aw’right. But if y’all get bored with joonyer Jetson over here, gimme a holler. Maybe you an’ me can huck up layder.”

I’m boiling so much my face must look blood-smearred. “Listen, she already said no, now why don’t you fuck off!”

“It’s alright, we’re leaving,” interrupts Emma, pushing me away.

Smart girl.

Contrary to popular belief, survival is not the dominant human instinct. Sure, when the chips are down, a man will do pretty much anything to survive, but there’s also another, more consuming, less rational instinct which can override even that of self preservation.

Anger. An all-consuming moment of hatred. Red mist.

And I’m seeing it right now.

The technician is twice my size, and that’s saying something. But I’ve always had a temper, and red mist has a knack of evening the odds in any encounter, at least in the eyes of the bull.

“Easy, kid,” he says, looking right through me with narrow blue eyes. “Ah’s jus’ makin’ sure.”

I’m still fuming but Emma’s elbow in my ribs is persuasive. We turn to leave.

“Before y’all go, who’ll done vouch for ya in here? I ain’t never seen yo’ two befo’ this evenin’ in the elevader.”

By now, a dozen others are listening. The big brute is onto us, and my anger quickly turns cold.

“No? Well we’ve never seen you before either,” replies Emma. “We only arrived here a few days ago, so our contact is back on Earth. He told us where to meet, though.”

Kudos to the sweet stuff. She's on the ball while I've been trying my damndest to throw the game. It's a heck of a gamble she's tried, though. We don't know anything about these nut-jobs and their organisation.

Another man, older, wearing thick-rimmed glasses, pipes up, "Um . . . you only arrived here a few days ago? And you don't have a contact up here? Well, you must be psychic then. The meeting time was only changed yesterday. How did you know?"

"We're here aren't we?" I insist.

"You could be an agent," says someone else.

Emma sighs. "We'd have to be pretty dumb not to realise what was happening when the bombs went off. I mean . . . who in their right mind would stay when the place started falling apart? Of course we figured out the time had been changed. How stupid do we look?"

The man in glasses steps forward. "What are your names?"

"Emma Whitaker and Frank Archer."

"Who is your contact on Earth?"

"Mr. Edwin Nakadai," I answer. If only they knew he was my chemistry teacher.

"And why are you here?"

"We had no choice," explains Emma. "It was our sixteenth a few days ago, so we had to make arrangements to meet up here. Frank and I have known each other for a long time."

"But why are you *here*?" the man snaps.

I don't like anyone raising their voice to Emma. "If you're finished grilling us," I say angrily, "we were about to get some fresh air. So get out of my face, dickhead!"

It's something I might have said in the school playground, but what do they expect? I'm not used to adult confrontations. This is what happens when you



force sixteen year olds out into the universe. And the same can be said for them, I suppose – outcasts lashing back at the world that exiled them years ago.

We turn to leave again, and are accosted from behind yet again! This time, it's the man with glasses. "Girl, what was the name of that contact he gave us?"

She pauses for a moment. "Edward Nakudu."

*Oh, shit!*

The man smiles. "Not Edwin Nakadai?"

We're out of time! I'm pulsing like crazy as the whole congregation now knows we're frauds. Think quick, act . . . quick. They start to close in. Emma clings tightly to my arm as we back away, moving by sheer instinct. I'm almost paralyzed with fear. They're *all* against us! I dash to the wall and yank the emergency fire extinguisher from its hook. It's the foam kind, not the gas. Flipping the safety cap, my half-an-afternoon fire hazard training comes crashing back, and I turn the dial to MAXIMUM, ONLY FOR USE BY TRAINED FIRE PERSONNEL.

I hold the hose at arm's length, waving the nozzle at the crowd. A few of them gasp. Some run away. I'm dying to unleash the contents on the lot of them, but there's only so much of that stuff in a canister.

"Get back! I'm warning you."

Emma's safely behind me as we retreat. The technician and the man with glasses don't follow us, and the rest don't seem too keen on being extinguished either. Out through the swing door, down the dark corridor past our room, through two more doors, past a long, glow-in-the-dark pipe conduit, we finally emerge in a small delivery hangar, where food produce and bed sheets are piled in metal crates. Two haulage capsules, for short range bulk transfer, are parked either side of the outer door. Between them are two personnel carriers, the smallest taxis used in space flight. About the size of a Volkswagen, they are silver, fitted with a highly-compressed fuel system which allows for increased flight time, and can support up to four people.

"Get in," I tell her. "I'll seal us in."

Opening the cargo doors is easy. First, I press a switch on the wall next to the inner door, which brings down an airtight shutter. The loading dock is now essentially separate from the café. Next, I jump into the taxi and lock us in. Powering up the vehicle is as simple as the press of a button. The lights come on, a gentle, prolonged hiss denotes the depressurization of the dock, and, finally, the outer doors draw open like the jaws of a giant, metal mouth.

“Where did you learn all this?” asks Emma, strapping herself in.

“Ever since I was little, I’ve always been into space flight. It’s nearly all automated anyway.”

“How about flying? You *can* fly this thing, can’t you?”

“Kinda.”

She shudders. “Just aim for the big white thing...over there.”

If I stop for a second to think about where I am, what I’m doing, or if we can do it, I might as well put Emma at the wheel. We can’t enter Earth’s atmosphere in a personnel carrier – they aren’t designed for that – but we can, if all goes well, reach the moon. It isn’t like there’s a choice to be made here. We’ve been cast away from Earth, and now we’re being forced out of the biggest manmade space station ever built.

Outcasts.

I wonder what it’s like to walk on the moon.

*CRUNCH!*

After edging forward into space, we suddenly find ourselves back in the cargo bay. I ease the accelerator again. We’re half way outside when, once more, we start to drift back. What the hell?

*CRUNCH!*

I press the lever to a quarter throttle. Emma stares at me, then at the control stick in my hand, then back at me. No words. We’re half way to the rear of the hangar. The right edge of the opening slowly draws toward us – the station is tilting!

*CRUNCH!*

“What *is* that?” asks Emma, gripping her plastic armrests.

“I’m not sure.”

*CRUNCH!*

“SHIT! HOLD ON!” The roof of the cargo bay drops like an iron avalanche. Barely in time, I manage to manoeuvre the taxi’s trajectory in sync with the station’s wild spin. That I’m still at a quarter throttle suggests two things: the café section has been uncoupled from the rest of the station, hence the crunching sounds, and the section is now hurtling through space at the same speed as us!

The manoeuvring is so delicate, it takes all my concentration. One slip up and we could be crippled. It’s like wheeling under the belly of a spinning rhinoceros; catch the belly or the ground, and you’re liable to be trampled.

I wait for the perfect moment. When the hull and our hull and the roof and our roof and my stars are aligned . . . nearly . . . a bit further over . . . almost there . . . AND . . .

Full throttle!

We roar out in a dragon’s breath of jet fire and prayer. The taxi’s antenna snaps as it catches the roof, but we’ve done it! We’re free. Nothing now between us and the moon. In my rear view mirror I catch sight of the hurtling café – a pitching, yawing oblong on its way to . . . who cares?

“Frank, I’m scared,” says Emma. I reach out and take her hand. “There’s no sign of the rest of the station. Are we too far away to see it, do you think?” she asks.

“Maybe. It’s in total darkness. Or what if . . . ” Imagining the miles of corridors, levels and living quarters exploding all around us is too much for me to take in.

“What?”

“Nah, I was just thinking about all those crunching sounds,” I explain. “I assumed they were simply the café section uncoupling but . . . what if they were . .

. what if those nut-jobs wanted to explode the whole thing? What if that's what they were waiting for . . . to destroy the entire station!"

"Would it not have been louder than that?"

"I dunno. Noise isn't the same in space, and we were already depressurized. I just don't know."

A dark highway at night. My eye imagines an invisible lane to the moon, a dot-to-dot using stars to map our route. The cockpit smells vaguely of sick, its last occupants probably ill-suited to the artificial gravity and oxygen mix. It can happen. At least we have a fully-charged battery, and can therefore propel to maximum speed and still have enough juice left for any improvised manoeuvres.

The café at the edge of outer space is now a blank. I'm sure my mind is burying it under bandages and crypts and pyramids of denial, for it to be rediscovered at a later date when I'm digging for memories of me and Emma in the observation tunnel. The brain works like that – cowardly when it matters, spiteful when it doesn't. But if we could truly face things as they happen, I suspect we'd cry like babies half the time. Maybe that's what growing up really means – to grow a filter which says *up yours* to anything which might affect us.

But I've no filter against Emma. She's affected me from head to toe, inside out. Though hardly saying a word for the entire ride to the moon, she's in every thought, the focus of every scenario I predict, an intoxicating distraction.

The air of nostalgia where there is no air.

I see the odd super shuttle gliding by, its long, swan-necked midsection constantly couriered from the earth to the moon. At least the tug craft towing it back and forth can visit our home planet; Emma and I can't. And that that goes against every instinct I've had growing up – to run home when I'm in trouble – kills me whenever I think about it. Talk about the deep end.

Two thirds of the way there, our dashboard lights up. I manage a few long, pleasant breaths. We've reached the autopilot zone, where the taxi's onboard

navigation can set us down at any lunar airstrip we choose. I press the button for the nearest – Fra Mauro Four.

Huge lighthouses flash green at equidistant points on the surface of the moon, indicators that the lunar shield, an artificial safety net designed to repel wayward space debris and solar winds, is switched off. I think there's only ever been thirty-odd red alerts, but the shield has worked every time. As we drift down toward the pale desert pocked with craters and night-light cities, Emma wakes up. I like the way she stretches – bending backward showing her full curves, as if she's on the verge of bursting into full bloom.

“How long was I out?” she asks.

“About eight hours.”

Silence.

The different altitudes of peaks and plateaus are now discernible. We're heading for a raised landing strip adjacent to a mountain range. Fra Mauro Four, a medium-sized city, illuminates a valley a few miles from the airstrip. I can feel my excitement bubbling to the surface, but the past day's trauma won't quite let it out. More of a déjà vu than a dream come true. In ten years' time I'm sure I'll look back on this as the biggest anti-climax of my life.

I've always wanted to set foot on the moon.

“Stay with me,” she says, grabbing my hand as I unhook the survival suits.

“I will.”

“Whatever happens?”

“Whatever happens.”

Her worried look stings me inside. I've never taken an oath before. Please let me keep this one.

My first step on the surface of the moon takes me back to the playground sandpit I frequented as a toddler. Apart from the low gravity, it's eerily familiar. I dig my heel into the milky-grey powder and drag it back, drawing a brand new feature. The black sky and murky terrain render the moon a permanent dusk. I

see a flashing beacon a few hundred yards away, and a lunar rover's antenna bouncing toward us up the far side of a nearby slope.

What can we tell them when they arrive? They probably know all about the terrorist attack – the destruction of the space station. What will they say to us, the only survivors to reach the moon instead of the earth? Something's telling me it won't be a hero's welcome.

Walking takes some getting used to. You have to lean forward and propel yourself in little jerks, using a fraction of your leg power. Emma and I aren't weighted, so we have to be careful not to jump too high. We decide to link arms and leap forward together. The result is an inelegant tangle – I end up on my butt more often than not – but we persevere. I guess I just like being close to her.

“Wasn't there something approaching?”

Her sweet voice has a tinny echo inside my helmet.

“Yeah, I definitely saw an antenna,” I reply.

“Well, I think they've changed their minds.”

“Yeah?”

She stops suddenly. The sun's reflection on her visor masks her face, but I can tell something's wrong.

“What is it?”

She turns to one side, her head pointing across a distant caldera.

“What is it, Emma?”

“Wasn't . . . isn't that beacon . . . supposed to be green?”

I shiver. The nearest lighthouse is as tall as the Washington Monument...and she's right. It's flashing red. The lunar shield is switching on!

“Let's go!” I insist.

Bounding over the powder, tripping on rocks, I imagine a Tunguska comet hurtling down toward our taxi. Emma's better at spacewalking than me. By the time she's on top of a rise overlooking the igloo-like outpost station, I'm eight or nine bounds behind her. A gruelling desperation churns my stomach.

“Hey, wait!”

She stops again to look round. Emma has become my eyes and ears. This time, I can see her full face: red cheeks, sweat sticking her blonde hair to her forehead, gorgeous, and frightened.

She’s staring across into space. The lack of atmosphere above now envelops me as a tidal swell over a beachside road. The only footing I have is gravity’s. It isn’t just empty out there, it has no walls, no floor and no ceiling. If you fall, you’ll never land.

“Frank! There! Look!”

She points me to the biggest shape in the sky – Earth. It’s faintly blue and is the size of a button. My brow curls as I notice an orange spot just to the right of its terminator. It reminds me of Jupiter’s giant red spot, except Earth shouldn’t have one. Not ever. Not unless . . .

The café. Hairs tingle on my neck, while a chilly cloud flushes right through me. I wring memories of the bizarre suicide cult in my mind. What were they really up to? Staring out at the earth as the station disintegrated around them...was that more significant than I realised? They told us the conspiracy stretched to Earth as well. So how big a conspiracy was it . . . is it?

I think back to the security measures taken aboard the café. Everyone’s blood was injected. Those cold shadows scanned every floor searching for illegal personnel, and froze them in their tracks. I’d wondered how long it might be before someone found a way to cheat the scan. But what if they didn’t have to? What if everyone on the station had a right to be there, and the authorities simply didn’t know their true allegiances? You can’t disguise what’s in your blood, but you can hide what’s in your mind. Perhaps the same thing has happened on Earth – terrorists gaining legitimate access to a nuclear facility?

Home is so far away. I can’t picture my front street or mum’s flower garden or the tool shed where dad practiced his carpentry. Somewhere in the faint blue, about the size of a pinprick, is Britain. My eyes blur. The orange spot is as big as Europe. The explosion has just wiped out a continent!

I can't imagine it. Mum, dad, grandma, my friends at school: there's no way it's affected *them*.

Springing across to Emma, I'm feeling lucky to be alive. If I'd been born a few days later, I'd be on Earth right now, perhaps in the eye of the storm.

"Come on, let's get inside," I say, ushering her down the slope.

No sooner have we reached the bottom when a bright flash blazes onto her visor. It isn't the sun, and it's far brighter than any star or the lights from Fra Mauro Four. More like a landing craft closing overhead.

An itch that I can't scratch grows in my gut. But the sensation quickly fades. I feel empty, and then. . . something explodes inside.

As I look up, Earth blasts apart!

It's some time on the fifth day since we left. On my knees, I can't help but stare in shock. Fiery smithereens hurtle from a vaporous cloud of flash-boiled oceans. Rock chunks spin out across the constellations. In a matter of seconds, I've no home. Fragments head this way in a meteoric shower, as if it's raining Earth. Somewhere in there is Britain – mum, dad, grandma, my friends from school. How can they be there one second and not there the next?

I can't imagine it. But it's happening all the same.

Emma and I share a look that I will never forget.

Over the next few hours, the moon repels the Earth until the sky is awash with dust. Countries and sea beds and mountains and deserts disintegrate as they touch the lunar shield. Inside the igloo outpost, Emma and I can only watch the firestorm. The odd scorched chunk spins past the shield, just out of range. If I look hard enough, will I be able to see the remains of a skyscraper, a forest, people? That's as far as my thinking takes me.

I don't suppose the realisation will ever sink in. Somewhere out there, my home is still waiting for my twenty-sixth birthday. But I can never return. The Earth might have exiled Emma and I, but it's paid a high price. We touch gloves,



close our eyes, and press our helmets together. Refugees at the edge of outer space.

Fra Mauro Four is a quiet Christmas town in a white valley. Despite the enormity of what's just happened, we walk on, because that is all we can do. The ground is still soft, the oxygen keeping us alive is from Earth, and we're heading for our new home.

The shock will never leave me, and neither will the feelings I have for Emma. Like is not enough. I love Emma. Does that make me Frank Archer, the man? We're well and truly on our own, and it's going to be a hard life for two teenagers in the lunar cities, perhaps even the deep space colonies.

I'm just glad I'm not alone.

As for the shock to the solar system, who knows what greater damage had been done? Gravity, orbit, parental guidance: what will happen to the moon without its Earth?



## *About the Author*

Robert Appleton is a multi-published poet, recently turned fiction writer. His work tends toward science-fiction and exciting adventure. His first four novellas and two short stories are under contract for release in 2008, including, for Eternal Press, *The Eleven-Hour Fall* and its sequel, *The Elemental Crossing*.

Readers of his work will often find themselves in atmospheric settings - past or future - where human survival plays an instrumental role.

A native of Bolton, England, he is proud to present his second story at Eternal Press, the science-fiction romance *Café at the Edge of Outer Space*.

*Coming soon from Eternal Press*

# *The Elemental Crossing*

*Robert Appleton*

She screamed, but no sound escaped.

*Oh, Christ, this is it!*

The veil of no return. A film of cool moisture covered her hair, face and neck. Visibility was now that of a white, backward balaclava. She felt the boat move quicker and quicker through the water, and dread welled like hot oil in her gut. Her eardrums rang. She fought giant, panicked breaths with all of her pride.

The *Elemental* now hurtled faster than it had ever surfed as a sand yacht. Kate's hair flapped wildly, and the spray forced her eyes shut. Still louder, still faster, then suddenly...

*Ugh!*

Her stomach vaulted. The boat took flight for a second, and a raking wind lifted her bodily from the deck. On landing it spun and skidded at a sixty degree angle, sending a shock right through Kate. She spread-eagled her legs and lay back as the current swept her down the steep gradient. All she could do was grip the ropes and hang on. Saltwater flooded over the raw, peeling skin on her palms and fingers.

*Hang on, damn it! Just hang on!*

*Now available*

# *The Eleven-Hour Fall*

*Robert Appleton*

Kate didn't need time to think. With a tremendous effort, she dragged him to the very edge of the cliff and pushed him over. It was a sheer drop. Without even gathering breath, she flung herself after him. It all occurred so matter-of-factly in her mind that the transition from climber to free-faller didn't register at first.

Jolts of wind torqued her this way and that. A few huge rocks flew by, missing her by inches. Kate knew her chances of survival had just increased, but from zero to what? Her gaze remained fixed on Remington as he drew closer through the barrage of icy pellets. Her suit shielded her from the impact of this onslaught. But something wasn't right. She'd skydived before, but here it felt...different somehow. *Is there some kind of updraft at work here.*

