

## Stormy Weather

*Thirty days on, thirty days off, and almost all the problems routine for the job—but the blues may be an occupational hazard for a woman in space.* Startling Stories—Summer, 1954.

The time . . . For three days Cathy had watched and waited. Three days: measured in Earth-hours by creeping hands around the smug face of the chrono overhead; measured in mood and majesty by the slow progress of the dark ball of the Earth across the distant bright face of the sun.

Three days: twelve meals out of the chest freeze, duly warmed and eaten, but untasted; as many snatches at brief sleep that gave no rest; eighteen loggings of the instruments, checking new readings against prediction data 'from the analog. Three days: four thousand, three hundred and twenty minutes; how many seconds?

She could figure that out, but she couldn't, wouldn't, count the times she'd tried to call him. Or the endless stretches in between, waiting for him to call.

*Where are you now?* her need cried out within her. *Darling, I love you!*

How could he possibly not hear?

*Mike! How could you go away?*

She wouldn't call again. Not yet. Cathy moved restlessly under the magneblanket in her bunk, and wide awake in her renewed determination, sat bolt upright and peeled herself out of its comfortless clutches. She pushed off from the metal frame, barefoot, and floated in aimless circuit of her small domain: one round room, three full lengths of her body in diameter; a tiptoe stretch, with arms upraised, from the light magnetism that held her metal-seeded sandals on the "floor" to the "ceiling" bulkhead that separated the living quarters here from the storage compartment "above."

She *wouldn't* call again. She couldn't afford to.

On the ceiling, near the chrono, a green bulb glowed, had glowed for three full periods now, twelve hours, to remind her that the tiny universe was rapidly becoming a closed system. The bulb went on when the u-v's did, as soon as solar radiation on the algae-air tank fell below full-activity point. It would keep burning, tingeing the round room faintly green, as long as the lamps kept working on the tanks outside. Beside the bulb, green numerals glared from a pale, violet-hued panel, offering the current index activity in the tank:

89.593.

She couldn't afford to use up oxygen now for anything but real necessities. And even if you stretched a psychological point to call this need essential, it was insane to draw on her reserves of air and heat both, trying to send a message he wouldn't even answer.

Wouldn't answer . . . All right, then keep the small reserves until he wants to call. That would be funny, wouldn't it? *Hilarious!* If he tried to call later, and she'd run her air too low by calling him to be able to answer.

Cathy tried to laugh at such absurdity, and found the humor of it was beyond her.

*Serve him right!*

The thought shocked her; she hadn't realized how angry she was beneath the doubt and worry. Just the same, she told herself, still trying to be funny, she didn't have to use all her oxygen and power now just to make sure she *didn't* answer when he—if he—called.

Besides, it might be useful to be able to answer a call from Control Central—or even *make* one if she had to. That's what they were paying her for, after all.

Eat; that's the thing to do. Time, and past time for a meal. *One message equals two meals*, she told herself primly in training-school sing-song.

Only she wasn't hungry.

"Ping!" The chrono chime startled her. She hadn't realized it was so late. "Instrument check," it

reminded her softly. "1200 hours. Instrument check." Louder now: "Instrum—"

She switched it off in midword. They were paying her for this, too, she thought without interest, and reset the alarm for 1600 hours. She pushed off in the direction of the bunk, slid her feet into her sandals, began a slow, walking circuit of the room, logging the meter readings, resetting dials and controls.

Her mind was made up now. She would not—repeat, and underline, *would not*—make any effort to call Mike during the next period. After the 1600 check she could try again—once.

ALL quiet. All correct. Cathy fed her readings into the calcker, pulled a fresh tape out of the analog computer, and fed that data too into the softly whirring machine for swift comparison, knowing beforehand what the results would be. Everything checked well within the margin. She noted the minor variations meticulously on the analog corrector, reset the alarm systems, and checked her mental picture visually on the radar screen.

Everything in its place. A few tidy little asteroids, chasing their orbits around the vanishing sun, just as trim and true as the course of her own hollow cylinder of metal. Plenty of traffic to log, of course, but none to worry about. She was less than a million miles out from Earth now, and at that distance, Control Central still handled the live traffic.

All quiet . . . Bound to be quiet here, on the sunside swing of the Station's "rogue" orbit. A few more days, and she'd be inside Earth, slanting steadily "down" from the ecliptic, headed for perihelion just outside Venus. But by the time that happened, she wouldn't be aboard.

Just five more days to this tour. A week's time—one short week, if you looked at it that way—and she'd be back on Earth, while the station whirled on under the care of a pleasant-looking blonde girl named Eileen whose height and weight and basal metabolism rate were just the same as Cathy's, and who, fortunately, liked the same music and films. More than that they were unlikely to know about each other ever—or at least not while they were both in Service.

Thirty days on, thirty off. A great life if you could take it. The pay was good. The food was better than you might think. If you didn't mind no gravity or solitude. The living conditions were pleasant enough, once you had your own permanent Station, especially if your alternate had somewhat the same tastes you did. Bring out a few replacements each new trip for reading and amusement, and find the changes made in your absence as well.

Five years of it, and you were set for life. Not that you could save much in Service—too much temptation to spend when you were Earthside. But besides the retirement pay, which was good, there were always jobs waiting for the glamorous heroes and heroines of the Space Service; and the best jobs of all were for the expert psychosomanticists who womanned—or manned—the Stations.

Cathy had almost four years of it behind her now. Seven more tours to retirement—and they'd both agreed it was foolish of her to quit. They could spend almost half the time together anyhow; and with both of them p-s-trained, no more was necessary. They could always keep in message-touch.

That's what they told each other, sanely, sensibly, after twenty days of wonder and enchantment back on Earth. No, not twenty, she reminded herself: nineteen. There was one day when they quarreled . . .

That was even worse than now. That time she'd known his absence was angry and deliberate. Now she could find excuses, invent reasons . . . *Drunk? . . . doped? . . . dead? . . .* she asked herself brutally, marveling that she found these answers easier to contemplate than anger or indifference.

*Because I don't believe them,* she realized ruefully. But what other reasons could there be?

Pride. His foolish pride! Or just hard work? Something top secret so he couldn't even let *her* know? Or ...

Sure, lots of reasons she could find, but none—the last included—that could make him just *walk out* without warning as he'd done. Unless the dream had been a warning after all: the scream in the dream that woke her from a period's sleep three long days back, just as the Station entered the penumbra of eclipse. He'd been gone when she came frightened-wide-awake that time; and she hadn't been able to reach him since.

THE coincidence was tempting, but she knew better. It *couldn't* be because of the eclipse. If it took radiating energy to message with, no one would ever be able to contact Earth from the outer Stations. . .

Still, there might be something special about *this* eclipse. Some by-effect, some related phenomenon she didn't know about. It was also quite true that she hadn't heard from Control Central since she entered the shadow. Hadn't tried to call them, either. She could try now, of course, and then she'd *know*. But if she *didn't* try, she could keep the illusory comfort in her mind; a feeble sort of straw to cling to, but in the absence of anything more solid, she hesitated to let it go.

Besides, it was just as wasteful to make an unnecessary call to Control as to Mike. *One message equals two meals.*

Oxy at 88.974. One meal equals two cigarettes. And she still wasn't hungry.

Ought to sleep, then. She was afraid to sleep. . . . Read a good film, then. She didn't feel like reading. She wanted a cigarette.

Four cigarettes is one message. *A message is only a message, but a good cigarette is a smoke.* Where did that come from?

*And where are you now, my darling? Mike! Please, Mike. . . .*

Sharply, she shut off the thought, and beneath it ran the thread of lonely melody again.

*Gloom an' misery everywhere . . . Since my man an' I . . .*

Cathy reached over to the calcker and fingered the roll of tape that wound out of its answend, as if she could find with her fingers some piece of information that her eyes missed when she read it through before. Something, maybe, to tell her why Mike and the sun had gone away together.

But the calcker didn't know about Mike. If she asked it, *Where is he now? Why won't he answer me?* it would buzz and click unevenly, and in the end tap out one terse rebuking symbol on the tape: Insufficient data.

Well, that was her problem, too. A scream in a dream, and the shadow of the sun; that was all she had to work with. Plenty of data about everything else, though: a wall full of it all around her, and a roll of it, neatly digested, right in her hand.

And the warning on the ceiling: 88.899.

*You don't take chances on a Station!*

One cigarette, that's all, she promised herself. After all, she'd missed a meal. It was taking more of a chance, really, getting into this kind of state than using the extra little bit of air and heat.

*Algae's not at top efficiency, but neither am I.* Go ahead; pamper yourself a little. Better to have it now while the tank's still fairly high, still getting some solarays. If you're still wanting it tomorrow, you'll just be out of luck ...

CATHY kicked off her sandals and floated over to her personal storage cabinet. She got out a cigarette, hesitated, and, holding it, made a quick automatic check of radar screen and indicator dials. No change; with everything quiet outside, she could watch for a while. She threw a switch to open the sunward port, retrieved her shoes, and walked back across the room to a padded piece of bulkhead from which she could keep both screen and view-port comfortably within her angle of vision.

Curled up against the foampad on the 'floor," her metal soles and metal-seeded tunic were enough to keep her "sitting," even if she moved ' a bit from time to time. It took some conscious effort of the muscles to pull free from the light magnetism of floor, chair, and bunk. Settled into a reasonable facsimile of gravity-sitting, Cathy listened to the purring of the motor fade away as the heavy metal hatch slid off the port, filling the room with deep-empurpled light.

*If things go on this way, ole rockin' chair will get me. . . .* With one long, angry inhalation, she lit her cigarette. Then she relaxed and watched the solar spectacle outside. Watched with an added guilty pleasure in her own delinquency through a thin veil of smoke that fanned out from the tip of fire in her fingers to the wide slits of air ducts round the room. . . .

She had watched at least a little while each day since it began. First a wedge of darkness, nothing more, nudging into the edge of the sun. Then a round black mallet squeezed at the giant ball of butter

floating in fluid ice of space: shaped it into a fat crescent, then a thin and thinner one.

This time she found an almost total sphere of darkness cuddled inside the scant embrace of a lopsided new-moon sun: one arm, on top, much longer than the bottom one, because of the Station's relative position "under" the plane of the ecliptic.

But even as she watched, the long skinny arm on top grew visibly shorter; less than five hours from now the Station's orbit would intersect and enter the umbra of Earth's shadow. The "total" eclipse would last, then, for a full day and a little more. Twenty-six hours, seventeen minutes, thirty-nine seconds, the calcker said, and the figures stuck in her head like symbols of doom.

*No sun up in the sky! Stormy weather!*

There would be only a few more hours after that, two periods at most, before the Station raced inward under Earth's orbit, moving faster and faster into the full light of the sun again. Three days gone, and less than two to go—but all that time the green index figure on the ceiling would be falling.

At 50 percent, oxy production in the tank was just about equal to basic minimum requirements for one Cathy-sized individual doing a predetermined job in a known volume of space, with no waste motion, and no other unnecessary expenditure of air. According to the tape, the index wasn't likely to go below 57.000 this time—if she was careful. And that of course assumed continuous effective operation by the notoriously unreliable u-v's.

Cathy looked up at the green figure on the ceiling: 88.215.

It was falling faster now. Abruptly, she squashed out the not-quite-finished cigarette. The margin was just too narrow to fool around with. If the index did fall to fifty, it would mean accelerating the Station, using storage fuel from the great tank "overhead" to get back into the sunlight more quickly.

AT THE other end of the Station's long elliptical orbit, in the inner circle of the Asteroid Belt, such a maneuver was inevitably dangerous, and very possibly fatal. Getting even slightly off-course at any time made the analog predictions useless, and following an uncharted course out in the Belt, you were likely as not to find yourself disputing the right-of-way with a stubborn chunk of rock.

Cathy sat huddled against the cushioned bulkhead, alone and miserable, weary and wakeful, frustrated and fearful. The vast expanse outside the viewport seemed to have borrowed her mood for coloring.

*When he went away, the blues came in and met me. . . .*

Suddenly, she leaned over to the right, reached for a dial, and spun it fiercely, adjusting the polarization of the port plastic to compensate for the change in quality and intensity of the sunlight. Three days drifting into the shadow, and she hadn't thought to do that before! Now the crescent sun flared into sudden brilliance, and the small room acquired an almost cheerful glare.

She was surprised at the difference it made; the purplish light had seemed normal and inevitable. *Stormy weather . . . three days of it. No Mike. No light.*

"Three days, that's all," she said out loud, trying to make it sound like just a little while. She'd gone twenty-five years, after all, without even knowing him. Now it was just three days since they'd lost contact. At worst, it was only another week before she'd be back on Earth herself, and could *find out*. One week . . . seven days; just seven brief eternities, that's all!

Time is a subjective phenomenon, she told herself. Time is a trick of the mind. "A purely personal psychological defense against dimensions beyond understanding. . . ." *Who was it who said that?* It seemed very profound. An instructor somewhere, maybe. . .

Time is where you hang your hopes. At least nobody had said *that*; that was Cathy, herself, original. Time-past is flat and gone, no more than a set of impressions in the cells of a brain. *My brain*. Time-future is tomorrow. But tomorrow never comes. It's always today, the time is now, a composite of memory and hope and longing focused on the pinpoint of perception that is now. . . .

Now is the time for all good Cathys to go to sleep. Got to sleep sometime. Close the hatch. Get in the bunk. Pull up the magneblanket . . . wonderful . . . good, good, *good* to be sleepy, relaxed . . .

"Alert for action. *Alert for action!* ALERT FOR ACTION."

The chrono speaker was louder and more incisive each time.

Cathy dived across the room to where two red bulbs glowed their warnings over agitated meter-needles. Quickly, reflectively, she fed new data into the calcker, ignoring the chrono speaker's increasingly urgent warnings till she could take time to switch it off. Then she hovered nervously over the whirring machine, waiting for the fresh tape to emerge, watching the radar screen beyond it for some sign of what the trouble might be.

Nothing there she didn't know about. Nothing but a little almost invisible interference fuzz in the far corner. Like windo tracks, or. . . .

She pulled at the tape as it began rolling out, and started it through the microfilm magnifier almost before there was enough length to let it ride the reel. Eagerly, she absorbed the steady stream of figures and symbols until, abruptly, everything fitted together, and the pattern was clear.

Just a little interference fuzz in one corner—a particloud! A mass of fragmentary rocks and pebbles, the debris of some unidentified catastrophe in space: perhaps a minor everyday collision in the Belt; perhaps some greater mishap farther out in the System; possibly, though unlikely, a grand smashup between two extra-solar bodies light-years away.

IT DIDN'T matter now where the cloud of grit and gravel came from; it mattered very much where it was going. And it was headed straight *in*, irresistibly drawn by the gravitational pull of the giant incinerator at the heart of the System. A tidy way to clean up solar trash—except that at its present velocity, the drift- was due to cross the busiest space-lanes in the System, just outside Earth's orbit, and perhaps—if it diffused at all under the pull of planetary gravity—brush through the very edges of the atmosphere.

Once more, Cathy checked the coordinates and velocity of the cloud, and then the Stations Catalogue. No doubt about it: it was her baby. No other Station anywhere in range, and she was almost directly in line between the oncoming drift and Control Central's satellite around Earth.

There was nothing very complex about the operation. Standard procedure was to release a fizz-jet from the storage bay; position it inside the cloud and set it off; the whole job done at the remote control board, using coordinates and timing set forth with near-impossible precision on the calcker tape.

If it were done just so, the tiny particles of matter that composed the cloud would be reduced to powder fine enough to be *pushed* back, clear out of the System, by photon-power alone. And any specks or pieces that remained big enough to continue to respond to the sun's gravity would be impelled by the bomb burst to drift out sideways, perpendicularly away from the plane of the ecliptic; when they came floating back eventually, they'd be far out of the traveled space-lanes.

The operator's job was not so much difficult as delicate: a matter of steering the fizzer to its optimum placement, and then exploding it at the' split second laid down by the calcker's figuring. It took practiced skill and close coordination—but Cathy had done it before, and as she got the data from the tape, found nothing out of the ordinary in this story beyond the edge of excitement provided by its imminent closeness to Earth.

She moved energetically now, logging data, setting up equations for the coordinates on the calcker, checking the analog, the screen, the dials and meters that belted her little world. When the call came through from Control Central twenty minutes after the first Alert, she registered it and replied without so much as a moment's delusion that it was Mike calling instead.

"Cath? Just checking. We got a particloud pattern on our screen in your sector."

"Yeah, I noticed."

"Everything under control?"

"I'm calcking the bomb-set now."

"How's it look from out there?"

*What's the matter with them?* Cathy wondered irritably, but kept her reactions out of her reply, or hoped she did. "S.O.P.," she answered tersely.

"Right. Check in when you get your set?"

"Better not. I'm eclipsed." She glanced at the ceiling. "Oxy's under 85 now, and a long way to go."

"Sorry."

Cathy recognized the personal pattern of the girl on the other end now: a kid named Luellen, just a few months out of school. No wonder she was nervous; this would seem like a Big Thing to her.

"Nobody told me," Luellen explained. "I guess I should have figured it out—"

"Forget it!" Cathy sent back briskly.

"Okay. We won't call again then unless it's urgent."

"Good. Anything goes wrong, I can still signal."

"Right. Signing out. . ." But before the contact was broken, another, more familiar, pattern cut in. ". . . Hey, Cath—you okay?" That was Bea Landau; she and Cathy had been in training together, and there was no excuse for anyone who'd spent four years behind a desk at Control Center kibitzing a message at a time like this.

"Sure I'm okay. Why?" This time Cathy didn't bother to conceal her annoyance.

"I dunno. Got some funny stuff around the edges there—I'm supervising the new girls today, and I was listening in on you—Listen, Cath, if anything's wrong, this is the time to—"

"*Nothing's* wrong. I just don't feel sociable. Get out, will you? I already said my oxy's low."

"Okay. But listen, Cath, if you want a hand, yell out."

"Sure. G'bye now."

DELIBERATELY, Cathy cut out of contact and went back to work. But as the data piled up, she began to realize more fully that Control had some reason to be worried. This cloud wasn't just the usual nuisance that might clutter up the spaceways and perhaps make a mess of repair bills for somebody's Mars-ship. A whole lot of money, and probably plenty of Service brass would be sitting around holding its breath right now, she thought with a certain relish.

Not that the job was actually a tough one. The cloud was coming in from outside and on top. Made it a simple matter to hit—the bomb would set practically smack in front of the middle of it.

Not a tough job, but a crucial one. Just what the doctor ordered, she thought grimly, for a girl who wanted to forget her own troubles.

It was almost too simple, though. Fifteen minutes more or less had all the figuring finished, and everything checked and rechecked. Nothing else to do about it now till the cloud came into range, and by the tape it would be close to five hours yet before any action began.

Meanwhile, the space around her was clear and quiet. She opened the viewport again, and settled back into the foam-padded spot on the floor, consciously seeking a renewal of the pleasant apathy that had come last time, after she adjusted the plastic to let the sun come in.

But the mood was hard to find again. Part of her mind was busily retabulating the calcker's figures, and reevaluating the total problem, making certain of what needed to be done. For the rest, she was aware of an increasing sense of dullness and irritability as the good adrenal feeling of the first emergency wore off.

Well, dull is what I got to be right now, she told herself. Adrenalin equals oxygen, and don't forget it. She forced herself to relax, muscle by muscle, until she was little more than a collapsed heap on the floor: two great eyes drinking in the drama being staged outside her window; two ears alert for the first summons from the complex personality of the machine around her.

For more than an hour, she stayed that way; then the chime *pinged* again for the routine 1600-hour check. Cathy performed her chores mechanically, paying close attention only to what part of the data related to the cloud.

It was still holding shape and direction. Something better than three hours yet to wait before it was time for action.

She sat down again and remembered she had promised herself to call Mike again after this checkup.

But that was before the Alert. She couldn't do it now. Certainly not after snapping at Luellen just for keeping a contact open.

No, she wasn't even going to *think about* him any more; not till this business was done with, anyhow. Too easy to drift from memory and wistfulness into wanting to call; and such a swift slip from wanting to trying

The bomb-set was absurdly simple. Usually, there was a certain amount of complicated geometry involved in the placement. But this one was straightforward. No tricky angle shots this time—

THE open viewport was a black-felt billiard table and the dark ball of Earth rested in the golden pocket of the sun. Off to one side, an unknown player held an invisible cue-stick; nothing of it showed but the blue-chalked tip, where Venus ought to be

*And me behind the eight ball. No, he is. One of us is.*

Behind the eight ball. Maybe he wasn't on Earth at all. If he was on the other side of the sun for some reason

She tried to remember whether she had ever messaged cross-sol, and couldn't recall. But if it made any difference, she'd have learned about it long before this. Sun . . . thermal energy . . . she wanted a cigarette.

83.323.

She was hungry now, she guessed. It was food she really wanted, not a smoke.

Messaging would make her hungry. It always did.

*One message equals two meals.* But that was only in terms of direct oxygen consumption. It didn't figure thermal energy used up at the time, or the air and heat both that went into extra eating afterwards. The heat didn't matter so much right now; the Station's thermal-erg reserve was a lot bigger than its oxy margin.

Sure, and it takes a lot more ergs to send than to receive a message, she reminded herself. Besides, she didn't want to call him. He could reach her if he wanted to, pride said, and common sense approved.

*Just can't pull my poor self together. Stormy weather. . . .*

IT HAD been raining on Earth, the first time she heard the crazy old song, on a tinny-sounding tape made from an antique disk-record. That was the one time they'd been separated before. Two weeks after they first met, when they had their first, last, only, quarrel. For a whole day she couldn't reach him. She didn't have any pride that time—and she had lots of air.

On Earth the air is free.

She kept trying to find him all day, and couldn't. Then she heard the song.

It had all the tearing, tearful nostalgia so typical of the early twentieth-century folksongs. It sounded close and loud, for all the cracked acoustics of it, but she couldn't figure out where the sound was coming from till she realized she'd found him at last. He was listening to it, playing it for her, too proud himself to say how he felt, but needing her back, and using this way to let her know, if she cared to hear.

A man can afford to be proud. Lucky for both of them that she knew *she* couldn't. He didn't try to find her at all; just sat listening to the tearful old tune, hoping she'd come and understand.

A woman couldn't afford to be proud. A Servicegirl couldn't take chances. Maybe that's why there were more women than men on the Stations, why women did better in psi-training than men. She'd heard something about new work with older people, where there was no sex differential in aptitude. A man, a young man, *had* to be proud. It made biologic sense. But it also meant somatic-semantic sets built-in . . . preconceptions that would naturally get in the way of free-associative interpretation of psi-somatic messages.

That meant it was up to her again, just like the last time. She was lucky to have found a guy who could psi at all. A guy worth having, that is.

But how could she do it? This time they hadn't quarrelled. She didn't know where or how to look for him.

No way of knowing even whether the scream in the dream had any meaning, or whether it was a product of her own subconscious fears.

Last month that wouldn't have occurred to her. But the psych tests didn't take into account the things that might happen when a girl met a guy.

Yes, they did, too. That's why you were supposed to report it when anything like this happened. She hadn't reported. She'd wanted to finish her term of Service. They never actually fired you, of course. But

somehow the girls who fell in love always decided to quit—after a few visits with the psychers.

Maybe they were right, if she'd got to the point now where she couldn't tell the difference between a dream of her own and a message from Mike!

She ought to try just once more. . . .

81.506.

And outside, only the slimmest rim of light around the Earth.

*You don't take chances on a Station!*

It's not your own life you're playing with, Cathy. The Solar System has its eye on you.

No, it doesn't, either. Just a tiny corner of one eye, a veritable lewd wink of an eye. The sun can't see me now; it's got a cataract.

But the System depends on you, kid. How will all those lil chunks of rock know where to go if you don't show 'em the way?

*"Traffic Control is the most vital agency in the Space Service. We are no stronger than the weakest link in. . . ."*

Keep the vermin out of the skies. *Catherine Andauer, girl exterminator.* Somebody has to tell all the nasty little rogue rocks where to get off.

*If things keep up this way, ole rockin' chair will get me...*

If things kept up this way, she'd have to report in for psych leave, that's all.

If she could, that is . . . if she could still send a message at all. . . .

Meanwhile, there was a job to do, and no one to do it but her.

81.487, and the chrono said 1735 hours. Seventy minutes to go. Too late to sleep now.

Exercise.

That was the next best thing. Or maybe the best. Use up more oxygen, of course, but she could afford a *little* bit. And right now it was more important to stay alert. Stimulation could do more than relaxation sometimes.

She strapped herself into the massager and felt better almost immediately as rubber arms began to manipulate her stiff muscles and blood started pounding faster through her veins. She gave it ten minutes—less than she wanted, but a compromise with the green index figure. Then, in lieu of the meal she still didn't really want, she opened a bar of vi-choc concentrate and ate it slowly and determinedly, piece by piece, till it was all gone. Saved oxygen, too, she told herself, not heating a freeze-meal.

THE ceiling panel said 80.879 when the chrono read 1835, and the speaker said importantly:

"Final check before action. Commence last logging now. Initiate action in fifteen minutes. Last logging now. Final instrument check. Commence last. . . ."

She worked swiftly, surely, enjoying the feeling of urgency, as well as her own sense of competence. Meters and dials and familiar precision mechanisms—all things your eyes could perceive and your fingers could direct. Not like the strange uncharted stretches in the dark interior of self.

Check the logging against the analog. Run the last equations through the calcker one more time. Everything should check. Everything would be exactly... .

But it wasn't.

The cloud was not behaving in an orderly fashion. It was diffusing, as she'd known it might . . . toward Earth.

A three-body problem, in a sense: the third body composed of millions of specks and bits and pieces, and behaving in gravitational terms exactly as if it were a composite mass—of fluid!

She had set up general equations to meet the possibility beforehand, but now she had to work quickly, filling in new data and getting corrected results. She finished the comping and was still rechecking when the chrono speaker pinged again to remind her:

"Space suit. Space suit. Prepare for open locks. Space suit. Space suit."

Cathy slid out of her sandals and kicked off to where the empty metal shell stood firm and tall inside its grapples against the wall. She floated into position "above" it, then pushed herself feet first "down" inside. When her toes slid into place into the fleece-lined shoe-pieces, the torso section encased her up to



her shoulders. She wriggled her arms into the flexible sleeves and each finger carefully into place in the glove-ends. Then she pulled the headpiece out of its clamps overhead, settled it into place on the shoulders, and gave it a quarter-turn, pushing hard against the gasket pressure till she heard the closure latch into place.

She snapped on the headphone, tested the battery of switches and levers on the controls belt, turned off the magnetism of the shoe soles, and floated clumsily over to the compactly designed remote-control keyboard.

Six minutes to zero. Cathy threw the permissive switch that would allow the twin bays in the bomb-storage compartment at the other end of the Station to open, as soon as the timing mechanism went into action. Nothing left to do now but close the "gills" of the space suit, and open the valve on the built-in oxygen tank.

But it was too soon still for that. Two minutes ahead of time was S.O.P., just long enough to make sure the system was operating effectively. Actually, the whole space-suit procedure was an almost-unnecessary precaution. There were two solid bulkheads between Cathy and the bomb-stores, and between them twenty feet of liquid fuel. But Service practice on this point was firmly set: if any port in a space vessel is to be opened out of atmosphere, all personnel must first don space gear. Overcautious, perhaps, but sensible in its way.

More important, actually, in this case was the always-present possibility that the Station attendant might actually have to leave the Station during the operation. It didn't happen often—but it could.

Five minutes to go, and time now for a final clearance check with Control Central if she were going to make one. Once the gills were closed, she had no further choice in the matter; any kind of long-distance messaging, even blank reception, would drain the suit's small oxy tank beyond the safety point.

Under normal circumstances, the final clearance was also S.O.P. But they wouldn't be expecting it now, with the complicating happenstance of the eclipse. And Cathy wasn't even thinking about Control Central at the moment.

*Suppose he tried to call now?*

Well, suppose he did! She'd been trying to get him for three solid days. If he tried once, and came up against a shut-out, he could damn well try again!

She *couldn't* call him now. If she *got* him, she wouldn't be able to stay in contact anyhow. There wasn't time.

It would be an hour, maybe more, after she closed the suit before she could open up again.

She stood there, struggling with the impossible, and suddenly his image was so sharply in her mind, his voice remembered in her ears, the imagined brush of his lips against her face so vividly real that, knowing the figure for the delusion it was, she was immersed in a salt wave of loneliness and misery beside which all that had gone before was insignificant.

FOR a moment she let herself be inundated by grief. But for a moment only. One sob escaped her; then her gloved fingers fumbled for the gill-valve switch.

*Better be lonely than dead*, she told herself, and wondered what the difference really was. But if he wouldn't answer anyhow, far better at least to be lonely alive than dead. Pride, this time, came to the aid of common sense; but with her finger on the switch, she still hesitated.

Three minutes still . . . In a swift compromise between desire and necessity, Cathy opened her mind to total blank reception; and even as she told herself once more on the thin top-conscious level that was still aware that she couldn't accept a call if it came—she felt him, and sent out a desperate searching hopeful answering cry:

*Mike!*

But there was nothing. Emptiness. Nobody there, until she felt the forming of a pattern that wasn't his at all. Luellen's? She couldn't wait to find out. The ringing in her ears was *not* emotion; it was the warning chime still sounding to announce the start of action!

Her finger on the switch exerted the small necessary pressure, and the suit was closed at last.

Through the clear plastic of the headpiece her eyes sought and found twin dials on the control board where slim red needles moved in unison from left to right . . . *one tenth around already!* The timing mechanism was already operating, swinging open the two hatches on opposite sides of the cylinder from which the bomb and its counterweight in mass would be released.

*How long?*

*How long ago did it start?*

A few seconds? Or a fraction of one? What should she be doing right now?

She could figure it out, of course, from the position of the moving needles, but there was no time for figuring now, and her mind, set for a routine pattern of familiar activity, refused to face the unexpected new demands.

She'd missed the opening note, and she couldn't pick up the beat. Like trying to remember the words to a song, starting in the middle of a line . . . *Jest can't pull my poor self together. . . .*

*You damn well better, kid!*

Then her mind focused on what her eyes were watching; the control comp tape glowing on the board in front of her acquired meaning as well as form and color. Still, for one further stretch of time, uncounted and unrecoverable, her fingers twitched and trembled uncontrollably inside the heavy gloves. One bead of sweat, tracking across her cheek, seemed irritant beyond endurance.

She cursed herself and Mike and the Traffic Control Service in general and its many officers, sections, and subsections in particular and in detail. Then she stopped cursing, or thinking about anything at all, and pressed down a button on the board, *knowing* it was right, without knowing which it was, or why.

The fingers of the gloves, activated by nerves and ganglia in the girl's hand, impressed her will effortlessly on keys and switches whose grooves and weights had been designed to suit their touch. Cathy herself, from that moment on, was a machine, a complex and delicate machine, within a jointed metal container. She was conscious of nothing, for the time, except the job at hand, and her capacity to perform it.

Girl, suit, and cylinder, bomb and dummy counterweight: they were one organism with one mind, one goal, one life in common; and between them they possessed every organ of perception or of motion that could conceivably be utilized to conquer the immediate objective.

THE bomb was underway now, curving through empty space outside, under the impetus of radio directives from the board. No way, no way at all for the girl at the board to know whether the time lost had upset her careful calculations. She followed the luminous pointer as it worked its way down the calcker tape; set her coordinates and velocities according to the predetermined course; but never for an instant was she unaware of the danger that the delay—how long, *how long?*—might have made the whole performance useless.

Useless or worse. When it was done, placement achieved as planned, and there remained just one more act to perform, Cathy depressed the button that would fire the bomb, not knowing as she did whether her act was one of dutiful efficiency, futile stupidity—or suicide.

Then the pinpoint of light on the screen that piped the bomb vanished from sight. And the irregular area of interference fuzz now centered on the screen began to spread out and retreat, dissolving as it went. Like that. Done. *Right!*

HE STROKED her head absently, the fear not quite gone from his eyes above his broad grin.

"You silly dame," he said tenderly. "Silly suspicious female. If you can't trust me when you can't see me, you better stick around after this."

Cathy smiled and stretched luxuriously, and woke from the wonderful dream to sweet reality.

"Hi, babe." *His* pattern this time. No mistake. "Awake now? Sure. Sure I'm here. I have been all along . . . almost all along. Except four hours maybe, till they got my leg fixed up."

"Your leg? What...?" But she didn't have to ask. She knew. He'd told her in the dream, while she was sleeping. The accident. The torn second's pain, and her own scream, feeling what he did as she

slept, and then he was gone, and she was terrified.

He'd shut her out briefly, to keep the pain from her. And when he tried to call her back again, he couldn't find her.

*His pride*, she thought with a smile now. *It was his pride.*

He wouldn't share the pain. And she *couldn't* share her fear. From the first moment that she thought he'd left her, from the beginning of her harried searching for him, from when she'd let herself mix motives and meanings with the memory of her own scream—from that time on, it was increasingly impossible for him to make contact with her. From that time, till she fell asleep in the total-exhaustion aftermath of the day's work. "Okay, babe?" he asked. "You all right now?"

"I'm fine," she answered. "I'm just fine now. But Mike—don't go away again."

"Never," he promised, and she thought: *I can walk in the sun again.*