

A Hearth for Ulysses

The sky was blue, and snow covered the tops of the mountains. Jack Burns hadn't realized until he saw it how much he'd missed snow--real, honest-to-goodness, earth-water snow. Even the cement under his boots felt good. Things had changed however. Houses were creeping up the sides of the Andes. The small launching area had turned into a huge spaceport, complete with enormous corporate buildings and a mammoth city to surround it. "Is this the house that Jack built?" Burns thought but couldn't bring himself to laugh at his own joke.

A rocket flamed and roared into the sky in front of him, drowning his thoughts in its boom.

"Hey spaceboy, nobody's allowed out there," a voice said as the rocket's peal faded.

Burns turned and strode back into the terminal, ignoring the security guard. The terminal was filled with people, thousands of them. Holy Jesus, Burns thought, who made all these people? Why? Their clothes were different; their shapes were different; but they were all the same. Their walks were the same; their expressions were the same. Someone had run them all off on a copy machine, and these thousands were the last of the lot, pale imitations of the originals.

Burns found his way to the offices of General Rocket and punched the elevator's button for the top floor. He found himself in a large room with many doors and a desk that stood clearly in the path of anyone exiting the elevator.

"May I help you?" the young man behind the desk demanded politely. As the man looked Burns over carefully from the fitted collar of Burns' jumper to the metal-free stays of his boots, the pleasant expression became a little strained.

Damn male secretaries, Burns thought, at least in the old days there was something to look at. Are they all fags down here now? Well, that would slow down the copy machine.

"I'm looking for the Board of Directors," Burns said.

"I'm sorry sir, but the board is meeting right now," the secretary replied, letting condescension creep into his voice, "What is it you would like to see them about?"

"Tell them Jack Burns wants to talk to them." Burns put his right hand on the secretary's identification scanner. The secretary glanced at the screen on his desk.

"Well Mr. Burns, if you'll--"

"Get a bio on me," Burns interrupted. As if programmed to respond immediately to all commands given in a peremptory tone, the secretary danced his fingers over the sensors without objecting. He stiffened as he read. He looked down at his desk for a second, then at a door across the room, then quickly back down.

Burns had seen enough.

"Uh...wait," the secretary almost whimpered very unconvincingly as Burns walked to the door the secretary had looked at.

Burns pulled open the door and saw a long table with 3 men and 2 women on either side. Herb Cross sat at the head of the table, staring out the far wall that served as the room's only window.

The conversation halted abruptly at the break of procedure, and 10 faces turned to Burns. Only Cross didn't bother to look.

Burns walked to the far end of the table and stood blocking Cross' view of the rockets taking flight.

"Good morning Mr. Cross," he said.

"Mr. Burns?" Cross asked, his eyes widening a little.

"Jack Burns? Are you really Jack Burns?" the woman nearest Burns asked.

"Ask the man at the head of the table."

Cross dropped his head the slightest bit in a nod. Cross was nearing 80 and looked as if he couldn't bend his head any further even if he'd needed to.

"But where have you been?" said another board member. "Why--"

"Where and why are none of your business, but it's been 20 years since I've collected any of my royalties for the lapse drive, and I imagine it's built up to quite a tidy sum."

Burns let that sink in before continuing. "But I didn't come here because I want money. All I want is a favor."

"You'll have to excuse our skepticism Mr. Burns." The man's mouth was nearly hidden by his mustache and goatee, and although the cigarette in his hand was unlit, his sentences were punctuated by a smoker's distinctly non-thespian pauses. He wore wide, frameless glasses that seemed designed to hide his eyebrows. "You see, we had no idea what happened to you when you disappeared 20 years ago. The fear at the time was that you had been killed or kidnapped. Rewards were offered. Rumors surfaced that you were still alive and on the frontiers, but we found them hard to believe. It takes an unusual man indeed to walk away from a fortune in patent rights. We decided to have your profits accumulate in the company's stock, voted with the board of directors of course."

Cross decided you mean, Burns thought. Herb Cross was scrupulously honest, a trait Burns was sure the speaker didn't share. Well, you've demonstrated your annoyance at my failure to send you PR releases, Burns thought, now let's get down to business.

"How much stock, Mr. ...?"

"Greene," the man replied, "Bartholomew Greene. You own approximately 8 percent of the company's stock.

Eight percent? Burns whistled to himself. He was in better shape than he thought.

"Of course we'll be very glad to do any favor we can for you," Greene continued. "What is it we can do for you?"

"I want a blockhouse built by tomorrow on the launching area. Make it large enough for a small stratocruiser. I'll need a large workshop in a building to myself, several lapse drive engines, and all the equipment and materials I request."

"Just like that?" one of the women asked, while most of the others tried to hide their surprise.

"Is it your intention to design a new invention?" Greene interrupted."

"Perhaps a solution to the lapse drive's time differential?" another added quickly.

Is it your intention? Burns mimicked to himself. Jesus, who taught these guys to talk?

"Do I get what I want or not?"

"You'll sign a waiver?" Greene asked.

"Don't push your luck Greene," Burns replied. "Suppose I were to agree to sell my stock at a penny a share to the person at this table who agrees to my terms?"

When the mouths reclosed, Burns could see the dollar signs rolling up in the eyes of the board members and knew the answer. It had been Greene's board before. Now it was every man for himself, and he'd made Greene his enemy for life. Well, a man should be known by the worthlessness of his enemies.

"I assume Mr. Burns," Greene said unctuously, "that you have no interest in bankrupting General Rocket, but you must realize we do have a responsibility to our stockholders. You also might be interested in the legal complications and delays that can arise in trying to claim a fortune after 20 years."

Greene tapped his unlit cigarette as if he were knocking the ashes from it.

"Take whatever I ask for out of my stock," Burns said.

"Mr. Burns, we would love to cooperate with you on whatever invention a man of your genius has in mind, but we would like to be partners. An invention does need distributors, after all, to bring its benefits to mankind."

How philanthropic of you, Burns thought, knowing he was in trouble now. He had shown his eagerness to avoid trouble too obviously, and Greene had caught it. He wondered what inconveniences Greene could dream up. Though he had tried, Burns could never find anything admirable about villains. Although unlike the timid they were at least willing to act, they always chose to do things so utterly despicable that they proved themselves lower than even the mass of uncaring idiots they tried to manipulate.

Surprisingly Cross came to the rescue.

"Mr. Burns, despite appearances here, I'm still president of this company." Cross looked awake and aware for the first time. He paused to let the ensuing silence assure everyone he was the man to deal with, then continued. "I've often speculated on why you chose to disappear 20 years ago. After years of pondering it and you, I think I know. Now however, will you indulge an old man's curiosity by answering one question? Why did you come back?"

Burns looked into Cross' eyes. A trace of the tycoon's old enthusiasm and energy still glowed dimly in those ancient eyes, but mostly Burns saw how tired they were. The glow was only the dying embers of Cross' old fire.

"Because there's nowhere left to go."

A smile tried to trace itself across the old man's face.

"You'll have your funding Mr. Burns."

###

Burns set the screwdriver down and rubbed his wrist. He wished he had some workers he could trust to do at least some of the most menial chores on the project. No, this would have to be his and his alone. He had gotten a crew to set up the two lapse drive generators opposite each other, but the rest of the work would have to be his. He wouldn't make anybody work on the project who couldn't share in its success.

Greene had complained loudly about the installation of two lapse drives in an abandoned hangar. Hayfield's space/time equations showed that you wouldn't go anywhere unless you were exposed to only minimal gravity fields, and earth-normal was hardly that. Even the tests on the original lapse drive had had to be run in space. What good were the engines if they were mounted in a building? But Greene was no scientist, and he was unwilling to risk giving away the idea by asking an expert even if one could have guessed the reason. Burns smiled to himself and threw the switch.

The machinery hummed to life, and the torus-shaped arms of the lapse drives began to rotate slowly. The hum intensified, and the toruses began to add the whine of rushing air to the noise. Burns was too tired for the thrill of expectation, but he looked hopefully at the green bar -- the spacer's clock -- far across the room.

Though he sensed instantly that it was another failure, he let the generators run for a full five minutes before turning them off.

He closed his eyes and rubbed them with the palms of his hands. It was late. Burns always worked at night, preferring the night's peace and privacy to the intrusions daytime always seemed to bring with it. Sunlight makes too many distractions visible, but night time increases the focus on the work at hand.

Morning was only a few hours away, however, and Burns needed some sleep before starting again.

He went out to the blockhouse he'd had constructed on an unused runway and made his nightly check of the seals on the doors.

He nodded to a security guard as he left, but stopped when he realized the guard was following him.

"Does your route just happen to coincide with mine?" Burns asked, turning around.

"No Sir," the guard replied, "Mr. Greene himself told me to stay with you at all times. Said there might be some people out to get you."

Yeah, guess who? Burns thought.

"Well, come on over here where I can talk to you then. I have some bad habits when I'm being followed."

Burns didn't like the idea of being shepherded around.

"Do you have a key to the cafeteria?" he asked, "I'm starving."

The cafeteria was spacious but deserted at this hour, and its walls kept out prying eyes.

"Did Greene tell you anything about my work?" Burns asked.

"Just that you're a very important man to the company, Sir."

"Then you won't mind lending me your gun for a minute, will you?"

The guard hesitated and swallowed hard. He handed over the laser-sighted pistol. Burns pointed it at a light switch a hundred yards away and watched until the outline of the switch showed up in the sight. A marvelous toy.

"Ever kill anybody with one of these?" he asked.

"No sir."

"Neither have I. "With one of these, Burns added to himself, his face hardening with the memory.

###

The only dangers on Mars are the elements, so weapons aren't allowed there, not any conventional weapons anyway.

He stood armored, seemingly invulnerable, in his bulky parkasuit and oxygen mask.

He fingered the button to switch off the "lung" on his chest that added the Martian atmosphere to the pure oxygen from the tank on his back. He wouldn't need the eight hours the tank and lung could supply together, but he'd need all the oxygen he could get.

It's almost like we're not men at all, he thought, as he warily circled his opponent, swinging his grappling hook in a wide arc over his head. The thin Martian air and hood of his parka provided an eerie silence for the spectacle. This is stupid, he told himself, I don't even know this idiot, and the woman was just a whore anyway. A spacer doesn't just swallow an insult like that however, not on Mars.

The man lunged forward, swinging the rope towards Burns' feet. Burns jumped high in the light gravity, swinging his hook up behind him and down at an angle as it came forward. It caught the other man in the side of the head, knocking him over. Burns landed and rushed for the downed man. As he was about to drop onto him, the man landed a fist directly on Burns' face mask. Stunned, Burns fell over backwards, and the man was on him before he recovered.

He ripped Burns' hose off behind the regulator, and the oxygen exploded out of the tank, sending the man reeling backwards. Holding his breath, Burns lunged, inserting his gloved hands between the man's parka and oxygen mask, squeezing the spacer's jumper at the neck.

If Burns destroyed the other man's tank, they'd both die. His only hope was to strangle the man before he himself suffocated. The man tried to pull Burns' arms away but couldn't get a good hold around the heavy parka. Burns could feel the man's "lung" working -- he hadn't been breathing pure oxygen. That meant Burns had a chance, but it took all his strength to squeeze the man's neck tightly enough through his gloves and the other man's suit.

Burns concentrated on tightening his hands until he couldn't see anymore. He barely felt the man's arms fall from his, but he was sure the man was still alive. Burns' lungs were bursting. He had to breathe. His head, then his whole body was shaking, but he kept the pressure steady in his hands. Finally he could take it no more. He blew the air out of his lungs and gasped desperately at the thin Martian atmosphere coming through the one-way emergency valve. He doubled up immediately and lost his hold. His whole body collapsed around the emptiness inside him. He grabbed for the man's oxygen hose and pressed it over his valve. There was no move to stop him. Burns clung to the dead man in a lover's embrace, shaking and gasping for a long time before he had the strength to return to the oxygen pipeline and follow it back to the city.

###

"Oh mine eyes have seen the death mask
of the Trojan asteroids,
and the acid rains of Venus
where a spacer's brains are fried--"

Burns halted the spacer's version of The Battle Hymn of the Republic that he and the security guard had been singing as they entered Greene's office.

"Misssteh Greene," he began, hiccoughing. The guard clapped him on the back.

"I came in to apologize," he hiccoughed. There's a beer machine and a sandwich machine in the cafeteria all shot to hell."

Burns grinned sheepishly. "I didn't have any change. Anyway, Nate and I here decided to come in together to give you his report. Your turn Nate."

He poked the security guard in the gut.

"Yes sir. Jack . . . er Mr. Burns has done nothing but drink and tell spacer's stories all night, sir." The security guard tried to blink his wide-open eyes open a little wider.

"And sing!" Burns added, leaning towards the guard until their foreheads met.

"And sing, sir." the guard added, straightening temporarily.

With that Burns and the guard turned, put an arm around each other's shoulder and marched out singing. Somehow Burns had the feeling Greene wasn't pleased, but he'd see that Nate kept his job; a good drinking buddy is hard to find.

###

Burns stood up and stretched his back. He wasn't young anymore, and his back rebelled violently to the contortionist's feats that the job of a mechanic required him to perform. This had to be the final adjustment. It had to work this time.

Burns hesitated, hoping, wishing. He threw the switch and waited, feeling the tingle go up his spine. It was right this time. He knew it. The arms of the lapse drives began to rotate faster and faster. He felt everything in the room stiffen, then release. It worked. It worked! He looked at the spacer's clock on the other side of the room, and his face went rigid. The clock was still the same hue as before.

It didn't make any sense. He had felt it. he ought to know the feeling, but the clock still stared defiantly back at him. He sank to the floor where he squatted, elbows on knees and head on hands. What was wrong now? Was the whole idea wrong? No, he didn't believe that. He'd

have to go back and check the equations over again -- tomorrow. He was in no shape for it tonight.

Burns was stopped by Nate on the way out. The security guard handed him a sheet of paper.

"What's this?" Burns asked, squinting in the bright sunlight.

"A subpoena, sir. Mr. Greene wants to void your contract for uhh . . . mental incompetence, sir." Then very softly, "I'm sorry sir."

"Mental incompetence?" Burns asked, raising his eyebrows.

"It has, I believe sir, something to do with public drunkenness and vandalized machines in the cafeteria."

"I'll talk to Mr. Cross," Burns said.

"Uh sir, Mr. Cross is in a coma."

Burns stiffened. His time was gone. He could never best Greene at corporate maneuvering. And he had no--.

Burns stopped his thought in mid-sentence and looked around as if suddenly awakening. The high sun was gleaming off the runway, and the windows of General Rocket's buildings.

Goddammit, that was the mistake! He'd made the drives so big the clock had been included in the field. The new device had worked. The subpoena dropped thoughtlessly from his hand as he marched determinedly back into the building.

###

Burns made sure all his papers were in the pile underneath the hole he'd made in the ceiling with a fire ax. He arranged the boards from the roof in a cone on top of the papers, adjusted his chair, and dropped a match on the pile. It had taken only a week, too fast for Greene to stop him, and now the device was installed in a stratocruiser.

The flames spread like a devouring acid, consuming his successful equations along with his mistakes. They nibbled at the wood until they began to take firm bites out of it as the paper shrank and curled in instant old age. The fire danced and flickered before him until he started to sweat under his heavy jumper. Then the tears came, bringing the memory with them.

###

"You know what I wish we could have up here, right now?" he had asked, as they walked along the meticulously landscaped path.

"What?" Sabrina asked, putting her arm around his waist and nestling her head in his shoulder as they walked.

"A fireplace."

"A fireplace?" she repeated, giggling, "on an L-5?"

"I'm so tired of those stupid solar heaters that just hum and glow like a minister with a buzz on. I wish I had something alive and real to warm myself by."

"A fireplace, Sabrina said, "in a cave no doubt, where we could cook whatever we'd managed to club to death. You really are a caveman, Jack."

"At least cavemen didn't worry about being imprisoned for upsetting the ecological balance if they picked a flower. They treat this place like a glass unicorn. It's a lot tougher than they give it credit for.

"You know, in the whole solar system, earth's the only place you can have a fire. oxygen's too precious everywhere else. Hell, on Titan if you get an oxygen leak, you're liable to blow yourself sky-high.

"I've seen it done," he added softly, then he realized how quiet Sabrina had been. "Hey, I didn't mean to go on like that."

"Oh no. I was enjoying it," she said, looking up into his eyes. "You know how I like to hear you tell about the places you've been."

They came to the observation wall and stopped to look at the circling, unblinking stars.

"Hey Caveman," she said, grinning, "want to go to the concert tonight?"

Burns smiled back at her. She had first called him a caveman after telling him his taste in music was "primitive" because he liked simple music with repetitive themes, music that seemed to be going somewhere. He detested modern jazz and classical pieces that spun off in all directions in an effort to show off the virtuosity of the performer.

"What's playing?"

"Oh you'll love it. It's Grieg, barely disguised Norwegian folk music. Real caveman stuff."

"I hear cavemen used to drag women by the hair into the bushes and rape them," he said, wrapping his hand around the long black hair that hung around Sabrina's shoulders.

"Is that why you've come out here every day this week? My what a lot of planning you do Caveman."

Look at the eagerness in those green eyes, Burns thought. He pulled her tightly against him

and kissed her, then pulled away.

"Let's be civilized tonight," he said.

The disappointment was quickly replaced by a searching look. Then she wrapped her arms around him and rubbed her head on his chest while he looked out at the stars. Soon she moved to his side to look with him, then at him.

She turned his head back with her hands when he looked at her and walked a few steps away. He'd gotten used to her wanting to stare at him when he was thinking. She frequently drew sketches of him in that pose.

He lost himself again in the stars. Mars was out tonight, and Saturn. He'd stood alone and far from the oxygen pipeline gazing down at Tithonius Chasma, the Grand Canyon of Mars, where millennia ago the volcanoes had almost split the planet in two. He'd sat on Titan with Saturn swirling overhead like a rainbow buzz saw about to cut the moon in half. He'd seen Jupiter blotting out half the sky on Io. But he'd never seen Uranus' rings up close or Pluto at all. Were there planets around Barnard's star? Alpha Centauri?

His self-absorption stopped as he realized Sabrina was saying something, no, reciting it softly:

"Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note may yet be done
Not unbecoming men that strove with gods.
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:
The long day wanes; the slow moon climbs:
The deep moans round with many voices.
Come my friends, t'is not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite the sounding furrows;
For my purpose holds to sail beyond the sunset,
And the baths of all the western stars,
Until I die."

He looked at her.

"It's Ulysses," she said. Then, very quietly, she added, "You're going, aren't you Jack?"

Her eyes were beginning to glisten at the corners.

"Yes," he said softly, "and you're not coming, are you?"

"It's your life, Jack, not mine. This place is my home."

###

The last wisps of smoke spiraled out of the dying fire, leaving the ashes to collapse into each other of their own weight without the flames' convection. It was time to see Mr. Cross.

"No one's allowed in, sir, except the doctors. Mr. Greene's orders," said the security guard.

"Do they have a factory around her producing you guys?" Burns thumped a knuckle on the guard's chest. "Doesn't sound like plastic. What do you feel like?"

Burns lifted the man's wrist then tightened his fingers around it and pulled towards himself, launching a right at the guard's onrushing face. The crunch died abruptly in the sound absorbent hallways, and the guard crumpled in a heap on the floor.

Burns didn't turn on the lights. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness before approaching the bed. Cross lay there, peacefully alone. There were no respirators, no electrocardiographs, no roomful of freshly scrubbed machines. At least somewhere on earth the virtue of mercy still existed.

A rocket launched outside, and the light in the window bathed Cross' face in a dim red glow.

"Home, Mr. Cross," Burns said softly, "I'm going home."

###

Burns had to stop the tractor he was using to tow the stratocruiser as he reached the line of armed men around the blockhouse. At least the seals on the doors were still intact.

"Mr. Burns! I have a warrant here for your arrest."

Greene was shouting to be heard over the roar of the tractor's engine.

"On what charge?" Burns asked.

"Contempt of court, assault on a security guard and the murder of Herbert Cross."

Burns shut off the tractor.

"Is Cross dead?"

Greene nodded. Burns looked back at Cross' distant window. Good-bye old friend, he thought. Burns got down from the tractor and walked slowly over to Greene until he was close enough for a private conversation.

"We both know I didn't murder Mr. Cross," Burns began, "In fact he wasn't murdered at all, was he? That charge is just icing on the cake to stop me."

Greene said nothing, and his expression remained unchanged. Burns was aware of the dozens of guards behind Greene all watching him intently for a signal. So close. Just a hundred feet to the blockhouse, but it might as well have been here to Andromeda. He needed to get the cruiser into the blockhouse, or it was all worthless.

"It's finished," Burns said. "I need to put it in the blockhouse to demonstrate it."

"Why? There's nothing in the blockhouse; we sealed it up empty just as you asked."

Burns didn't reply.

"What is it?" Greene asked.

"A new drive that solves Hayfield's equations in a different way, much more efficiently."

"How?"

"Would you understand if I told you? Could you even understand if I explained how the lapse drive really works other than just saying it allows you to hang in space while time and the physical universe flow around you?"

Greene said nothing, but Burns could see the wheels begin to turn in his mind.

"Look," he said, "this solar system's been pretty well exploited already in less than a generation since the lapse drive. Progress moves fast these days. This thing might even open up other star systems."

Greene was wavering.

"You know I don't care about money," Burns said. "I just wanted to get this done. I've done it now, and I'll even sign it over to you for no royalties, just a lump sum."

"How much?" Greene asked, so fast that it startled Burns.

"How much have you got?"

Greene named a figure.

"I'll take half."

"Done," Greene said and stuck out his hand. "I'll have the amount filled in and the papers brought down. They're already drawn up."

Burns looked at Greene's proffered hand, then remounted the tractor. "I'll sign the papers," he said. "You might as well get the rest of the board of directors here for the unveiling. Now will you clear this whole area, so I can move this in in peace?"

Even Greene's euphoria couldn't dampen Burns' good spirits as he waited to sign the agreement. He knew it was already done, and nothing could stop him now. Greene had raised hell about everybody having to leave while Burns had moved the stratocruiser into the blockhouse, but was mollified when Burns reemerged moments later, a wide grin on his face.

"What do you call it?" Greene asked, flourishing the contract.

Burns hesitated, then said with a smile, "The Ithaca drive."

Greene filled in the name and handed Burns the contract. Burns signed it.

"Gentlemen," he said, addressing the whole board of directors, which had by now gathered, "give me a moment, and I'll show you the device in operation."

Burns closed the small blockhouse door quickly after him and positioned himself as carefully as possible in the stratocruiser. He pushed the switch to open the wall through which he had moved the cruiser.

The directors walked up, looking alternately bored or annoyed. Then, one by one, they began to squint and blink as if their eyes weren't focusing properly. Best to be short and simple, Burns thought.

"Good-bye," he said and moved his arm back from its own image on a lever to another lever which he pushed forward to merge with the first.

The gaping mouths closed. The directors marched backwards, the door closed, then Burns' own image backed out, and the lights went out. The wall opened again, and the image of the stratocruiser backed out under the guidance of Burns' tractor.

Soon the blockhouse dissolved around him, and Burns lifted the stratocruiser off. The blockhouse had served its purpose. He was going back in time too fast for people to see him now, but then he couldn't see people either, so he headed for New York. Cities last a little longer than people.

He was going home. The word hit him like a coin rolling down the slot of a jukebox. Homeward bound. On the way home. Be it ever so humble, there's no place like the green, green grass of home. Oh, how I want to go home. Please, won't they let me go home.

Pluto was where it had hit him first. The sun was just a bright star and Pluto an ugly snowball. Even Charon was barely visible with so little light to reflect. No Jupiter, or Saturn, even Neptune was just another star. It was a gnawing feeling inside you that came periodically like hunger, a good if uncomfortable feeling at first that degenerated into a nearly audible gurgling in your heart.

First it made you hungry, then angry, and finally tired. Terribly tired. The gnawing left, the anger left, your whole being left, leaving a lifeless, motiveless body behind, stumbling forward and looking for the nearest gutter to lay down in.

Burns' cruiser floated in lowering spirals over New York as he watched the landscape change. He was getting far back in time now and gaining speed with every retreating second as he aimed his craft for a building which disappeared in front of him. He looked down at years of

cars clogging the streets, a solid black carpet to him because of the compression of time. All those cars had people in them, all going home, like him.

Home. To some people a little room where they lived or the place where they were born, or where they last lived or where their family lived or the whole country they were born in or even the planet they were born on or anywhere you hang your hat. But hats don't hang in space -- they drift. Just as you drift, drift without a hold on anything solid, drift alone or with whatever you can grab, but drift just the same; and he was, above all, a spacer, drifting.

Burns shot the cruiser forward towards the old country, London, Paris, Europe.

By the time he got there, London and Paris were gone, but he was in time to watch the forests creep back over Europe like a moss.

He headed for Italy, looking for Rome but arrived only in time to see the Apennines sink to the ground, so he lifted his ship to watch the continents drift back together.

When he had finally gotten off Pluto, he had gone back to the L-5, but he'd left without seeing Sabrina. He went to Mars, but a hundred bubble cities had sprouted along the oxygen pipeline. Mars wasn't home either.

He'd seen too much to think of one place as home; everyplace was home, even the cities with their concerts and theaters. But how could you go home to everyplace? The answer to that had given him that one last deed to do.

The continents flattened out into one and began to dissolve into gas as the earth turned into a huge, churning mass of clouds. The planets began to whirl, spiraling outward in glowing gasses as their curved fingers reached out to each other and the exploding sun, and Burns' craft rode the earth's spiral as he gazed out to the stars, now visibly coming closer together, coming home, home sweet home. Every language had a word for it from the ancient, refined Chinese character to the inarticulate grunt of the caveman. It needed no explanation. Man could no more ignore it than mass could refuse to heed the universal force of gravity. Burns was going home at a rate constantly accelerating by the square of the time he traveled.

The stars became indistinguishable in a brilliant glowing bonfire, and the tiny ship lunged forward like a salmon, arching its back as the enormous gravity pulled it more directly into the current.