

Then it happened. Or, rather, it didn't happen.

The extra thrust just didn't come. I waited. Ten seconds. Twenty seconds. Thirty seconds. What was wrong? It had been a perfect trip so far. The first manned space-probe. Hot stuff, hot news. It had made me a hero before I'd even left the Moon. Except that we in the team knew I was no hero. I was on a sure thing, a snip, a certainty—seven probes we had sent out over the last ten years, all successful, all completely automatic, after that wild Russian rocket that went astray way back in 1961. The first astronauts and the first Moon Base had taught us a lot. First we sent machinery. Then T.V. cameras. Nice pictures too, remember? Of clouds. Venus was smothered in what looked like comfy, cosy cotton wool, never a break. Well, not when our cameras were there, anyway. If it wasn't cumulus it was that thick, soupy haze we have also come to know so well. Just as effective and just as infuriating. A little less thick and we would have seen the lush planet. But no. Press on regardless. Two chimpanzees, Bobo and Chuck. Again a complete success and a twelve-month check on both animals and subsequent litters showed no sign of any abnormality of any kind. Soon a small zoo had been sent to Venus and back, equally successfully, and the next animal on the list was Man—Me, to be exact, and by now I was raring to go. The new energy drive had been produced by then, energy in capsule form. Three tiny capsules, the size of aspirin tablets, could take a freighter to Earth and back to the Moon. A can of them took our probes out to Venus and back, in a shifting ten days.

So there I was, 27th August 1978, hurtling along a predetermined course to Venus, a course as well worn in our minds now as a cart track. And, for the first time, direction-finding apparatus stops working, ship begins to toss from left to right, then buckets from the nose like a toy yacht in a typhoon. Speed drops and drops and drops. I can't believe my eyes. We're stopping, so help me, we're stopping. I called you, Jamie. 'Base, base, can you hear me? This is an emergency, repeat, an EMERGENCY.' Click. Thank God. 'Hallo, Jamie, is that you? Listen, the tub's stopping, do you understand, she is stopping. I'm coming to a standstill. What is happening? What the hell is happening out there at Caravelle? Is this your idea of a joke? ANSWER ME!'

And do you know what the reply was, Jamie? Listen.

'No joke, Earthman. Please lie still. You have been disconnected from Caravelle Lunar and will shortly be lifted on to our ship for the usual interrogation. Please lie quite still. Your slightest movement could upset the fix. If we miss you the first time we shall have to rock you back into our orbit. We will call you again in ten of your Earth minutes.' Click.

Lying on my couch, I stare in shocked silence at the amplifier. The voice is still in my ears. A man's voice, deep and resonant, well-spoken English, and close, almost as if it were in the control hub with me. Jamie, do you hear? This is all going down on the tape. Who in the name of all space would call me 'Earthman' in just that way, with a faint 'you-are-not-one-of-us' intonation? What is a 'fix'? What is 'the usual interrogation'? Where is 'our ship'? And Jamie, something has just flashed across my mind. Do you remember when we discussed the possibility of the existence of Venusians and you said you hoped we would not regard them in the way that the first white people regarded the Red Indians? 'Poor savages,' they said. 'Poor ignorant savages.' Jamie, that's how the voice said 'Earthman'. That's just how he said it.

I'm ejecting the tape now, the ten minutes are almost up. Wish me luck, Jamie. Click.

Note: Message ends here, rest of tape is blank.

(Signed) PAUL JACOMY,

Senior Astro-Engineer,  
Caravelle Lunar.

\* \* \*

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and printed by the Aldine Press, Dunhams Lane, Letchworth, Hertfordshire