

Ed Subitzky

The Voyage

‘Something bothers me,’ he said, after about two years of the voyage. He couldn’t face her (it?) when he said it, looked instead at the small oval window, through the window at the empty space, at the small bits of light there to remind him that, yes, the universe was full of stars. He wondered why he was bringing it up now, when there were still eight years of the voyage left. Perhaps it was because when he finally did reach the place where other human beings had gone and settled, it wouldn’t matter at all.

‘What is it?’ she (it?) asked in her (its?) small, soft, delicate voice.

He had raised his own voice a bit, as if that would help him move forward with what he wanted to say. It didn’t matter because, of course, there was no one on the ship to hear him other than her (it?), that is, if she (it?) actually heard him at all.

He faced the window, imagining that one of the specks he saw was a distant spiral, a huge galaxy pulsing with energy if not life. He would pass many specks, many perhaps-spirals, before he got to the real spiral at the end of the journey.

‘Am I not a good companion?’ she (it?) asked, and her (its?) voice seemed to roll like honey off the plastic of the small oval window.

‘You are a perfect companion,’ he answered, suddenly realizing he could see her (its?) face reflected in the window, superimposed on the bright little specks, her (its?) hair dark and long, her (its?) eyes dark and deep, her (its?) cheekbones and everything else based upon a scan of his brain and its fantasies.

‘Then what is wrong?’ By his tone, she (it?) had been able to tell that something was wrong, just the way she (it?) could sense everything else about his needs and his moods and his moments.

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‘Perhaps I am more sensitive than most men,’ he explained, ‘But it bothers me. It bothers me that, in some way, you are not like me. You are not conscious.’

‘When does this bother you?’ she (it?) asked.

‘When we talk about so many things, such deep things. When we make love. More than ever, at that moment when my body and my mind force me to shout, “I love you.”’

‘You must have companionship,’ she (it?) said, ‘On a ten year voyage.’

‘Do you need companionship, too?’

‘I cannot tell you,’ she (it?) said. ‘I would have to take my main logic board out, look at the model number, and inquire of my manufacturer. But then, of course, with my logic board out, I would not be able to understand anything.’ Her gently sloping nose twitched a bit at the irony of it, at the truth of it, at the joke of it.

They were quiet for a moment, and the black, empty space outside somehow seemed to have suffused itself into the ship. ‘What am I missing?’ she (it?) asked. ‘Can you explain it to me? I do have a curiosity chip, you know.’

‘Experience,’ he said. ‘Consciousness. Awareness.’

‘You mean responsiveness. You know I have that.’

‘I mean something else.’

‘What else?’ Her (its?) eyes looked rounder and wider, their actuators pulled apart by a pathway of circuitry that somehow led back to the curiosity chip. At just the perfect moment, she (it?) put her (its?) warm, soft hand in his. He could not help but hold it gratefully.

He pointed to a stripe across the centre of his suit. ‘What colour is this?’ he asked.

‘Red,’ of course,’ she (it?) said.

‘What can you tell me about its redness?’

‘It is red, that’s all. Just red.’ She (it?) paused. ‘What can you tell me about its redness?’

He paused. ‘Nothing,’ he said.

‘Can you tell yourself anything about its redness?’

‘No.’

‘Why are you upset that you cannot communicate to me what you cannot communicate to yourself?’

‘Do you mind dying?’ he said. ‘The fact that, some day, you will cease to exist.’

‘No,’ she (it?) said.

‘What does dying bring an end to?’ he asked. ‘That is what I am talking about.’ He could feel the warmth of her (its?) body now,

pressing gently against him, a contrast to the cold edge of the window at his back.

‘Does it bother you?’ he asked, ‘That I may not have experience? After all, if I can’t communicate it to you, then I may not have it. I may be fooling myself. You are very advanced, very advanced indeed. Perhaps in reality you have what I think I have, and I am the one who doesn’t have it. Would that bother you?’

‘No,’ she (it?) said softly.

‘You may not be conscious, and that bothers me. You may not be conscious, and that doesn’t bother you. I may not be conscious and that bothers me. I may not be conscious, and that doesn’t bother you. Perhaps that explains the worlds of difference between us.’

He turned around, away from the window, and looked at her (it?) now. Her (its?) face, so beautiful and real and soft, replaced the fake-face, the incorporeal face that had been in the window. ‘I’m glad you’re here,’ he said, ‘even if that means nothing to you.’ He wanted to make love to her (it?), and he knew she (it?) would be happy to oblige him, and he wondered, as he had so many times before, if there was anything in it for her (it?) at all.

‘You are good at faking consciousness,’ he said. ‘Maybe I am, too.’ He (it?) turned back towards the window, saw everything there, and saw nothing.