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About 2200 words

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A Whole Bean Tempest

by Peter Martinson

“Miranda, dark roast, drip. Got it. What’s your name?”

“Mark.”

Mark Paris watched the barista write “Bart” on the plastic cup, and then place it on the counter. Slightly annoyed, Mark looked around Elsinore Station coffee shop. But for the view outside, it wouldn’t be hard to mistake the place for a small Starbucks back on old Terra Firma. Espresso machines spitting out steam like suddenly disturbed pit bulls. A small, homemade batch of probably tasty pastries under a glass surface. A few metal tables sporting metal chairs with blue plastic rectangles for backs, three of which were occupied by what looked like super tall college students staring hard into their laptops, fat headphones covering most of their heads.

But then there was the view. Instead of an urban intersection with cars waiting for their light to turn; Uranus. Big, pale green Uranus. Mark remembered the feelings he’d had when he was a kid back in Philadelphia, looking up at those tall buildings. Or looking down from mile-high ComcastMeta One, the head spinning, eyes watering vertigo. That experience does not prepare you for being face to face with a planet, floating in the deep black of space.

Uranus. The butt of all juvenile jokes. It was too big to all fit in one viewport. When Mark walked right up to the viewport and smashed his face against it, he could still only barely make out the right limb of the planet. As he watched, that limb slowly migrated up the rim of the viewport, and for a moment Mark could almost feel himself rotating downward while the planet stayed still. But only for a moment.

The SNEEZE, SPIT, HISS of an espresso machine brought his attention back to what tall Uranus girl was doing. She had already placed the paper filter into the steel funnel and filled it with those sweet, semi-coarse grounds, and was just starting to pour the scalding water. Mark watched the thin stream of dark joy snake from the bottom of the cone down into his cup.

For a few moments, Mark could almost convince himself that the drip of coffee followed a straight line, instead of the slightly antispinward, curved arc that all falling objects followed on a rotating space station. And those few moments brought his imagination back to when he first tried the coffee from Miranda.

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“Mark, are you getting all this?”

Mark wrenched his eyes away from the pale green plastic canister that had arrested his attention, and looked at a display of various video feeds and metrics. Mark certainly had not been getting this. “Uh, sorry, what?”

“Mark!” yelled Windy Rogers-Chan, one of the two-man fix team out repairing Guard-4, a communications relay satellite at the Uranus-Sun Lagrange 4 point, near Uranus’s Trojan asteroids. Though system communication could still go via the L5 station, AT&T liked to have full redundancy. If Guard-5 was also lost, it would badly hinder communications among the outer planets.

The other mechanic, Alejandro Cota, was waiting patiently, looking at Windy’s headcam, with his gloved paw resting on the open door of an access panel. Inside were a couple cards that were designed to be replaceable in case of a failure or upgrade. One of the cards was clearly missing.

“I know it’s hard work sitting on your ass up there, Mark, but I need you to acknowledge that the C-card is missing, and that it was missing when Alex opened the panel,” said Windy.

“Oh, yeah,” stammered Mark, “clearly C-card is gone, and was missing before Alex opened the panel.”

“Thanks Mark,” replied Windy, “Back to work, pal.”

Mark considered the issue. First, the damage was easily repairable, since their ship carried a stock of all the regular cards. Second, more importantly, this is now the third L4 job where they’d run into a missing C-card. These things don’t fall out on their own. Maybe the manufacturer forgot to install it, or a previous fix team forgot to replace it. But then the laser would fail to stay aligned from the get go. A more likely cause was that someone removed it on purpose.

But wasn’t it hard to think clearly about a Solar System-wide ring of satellite saboteurs when you haven’t had your coffee yet?

Mark hadn’t had coffee in three Earth days.

The coffee maker was broken, and needed new parts to function.

Mark’s team could fix any problem on a laser communication satellite, but couldn’t fix the coffee maker. Mark absolutely thirsted for coffee. Especially for some dark roasted Miranda, which he had never tasted before, yet sat perfectly ground in that pale green canister he was holding with both hands.

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Miranda coffee beans. A long growth, low field variety.

On Earth, coffee is grown high in the mountains. The higher up you can grow it, but still remain below freezing, the denser the bean. Denser beans, like those from Ethiopia or Columbia, are the sweetest and most acidic. And also the most coveted.

Growers had tried reproducing those conditions in controlled environments on Earth, but with mixed results. There was something about being high up that produced fantastic beans, which included sharp swings in temperature, low pest pressures, intense light, and lower oxygen content, but also something else. A *je ne sais qua* that advantaged those Colombian and Ethiopian farmers.

It may have been that those beans just wanted to get outside the Earth’s protective geomagnetic field. Because, oh, did the flavor profiles expand once we started growing coffee in space. The first off-planet cultivars were grown on the Moon by American colonists. The taste may not have been as delicious as the best Ethiopian brew, but the profile was so significantly different that Lunar Beans became a bit of a delicacy sought after by terrestrial connoisseurs.

Today, we know that coffee beans respond differently to all growing locations in the Solar System. Botanists still don’t understand the exact configuration of conditions that produce these novel flavor profiles, but it seems that, as long as the farmer is skilled at growing the bean, the taste is governed by the geometric position of the growing bean relative to the Sun and other celestial bodies.

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The job would take another hour or two to complete, as Mark imagined what those beans would become once brewed.

As Mark tasted the anticipated sweetness of the coffee, he fantasized about various brew methods. On Earth, he could just grab a French press and brew the perfect carafe. He could almost see the 175 F water being poured into the dry grounds, watching them swirl and dance as the carafe filled. Or maybe a cone filter, watching the dark soil rise to the top, while the pot below filled with the black ichor, a pungent odor wafting into his nostrils. Hell, Mark would use a regular drip coffee maker, or even--Heaven forbid!--a percolator at this point. Anything!

Mark heard Windy rattling off some description, but he wasn’t listening. He was staring at that pale green canister. Imagining which fruits he would taste after getting hit with that first acidic sweetness.

Enough! The only thing Mark was missing here was gravity. There was an old cone drip funnel down in the mess hall, which they used while the ship was accelerating between planets. Instead of dripping into a mug, Mark could use one of the old NASA space cups. Colloquially dubbed the “pussy cup” by some guys in the laser communication mechanics union, it had been designed over a hundred years ago to hold coffee while in free fall, using the liquid’s adhesive properties. But, it did look like a cross between a squid’s backside, a vagina, and a rustic teapot.

Mark snapped the magnetic bottom of the can to the stainless steel console and leaped towards the hatch. He passed through three more portals before arriving at the mess hall. It was quite sparse on the surface, and looked like any other floor. But the cabinets held all kinds of food stuffs, packaged in varieties of plastic bags, tubes, and cans. Enough to sustain a crew of three for many months in space. It also housed supplies, like the steel coffee funnel, micropore cone filters, measuring cups, liquid syringes, and, of course, some pussy cups.

He strung the setup to a big mommy hook, clipped it to a strap on his pants, and hurried back up to the command deck. Once there, he carefully arranged everything, sitting normal to the forward panel. Cup, coffee funnel, cone filter. Then he placed the measuring cup, water tube, and coffee can lovingly next to the apparatus. Finally, he programmed the ship’s computer to run a series of maneuvers that would last ten minutes, before returning exactly to the current position.

Mark got into position, finger hovering over the GO button. Suddenly remembering his crew out in the harsh black of space, he checked their stats and their image in the cameras. All good.

“Uh, guys, don’t be alarmed. I’m going run a test on *Banshee’s* side thrusters. Should only take about ten minutes.”

In the video feed, Mark saw Windy freeze. “Mark?” She was staring into the camera now, eyes digging deep into Mark’s conscience. “What are you doing?”

“It’s OK, won’t take long. Don’t worry.”

Mark’s finger hit GO.

At first, it was hard to tell anything was happening. But then Mark started to feel pressure on his body, as he got pressed gently against the front panel.

The ship had started to tumble, end over end, slowly gaining rotational speed. When Mark felt enough pressure, he started to smile, and popped open the coffee can.

The most wonderful symphony of smells burst into the atmosphere. Cherry, lime, lilac, oak. Mark almost cried as he carefully spooned grounds into the cone filter. When the ship got up to speed, he began to pump steaming water over the coffee.

Then, Mark started feeling dizzy. “Mark, what the fuck are you doing?” he heard Windy ask. The first drips came down from the funnel. They didn’t come down straight, but in a clear arc, splashing onto the panel next to the flesh colored cup. Getting dizzier, Mark pushed the cup under the stream, and continued to fill the funnel with water.

The dizziness grew quickly, and then gave way to nausea. Mark sat next to the makeshift coffee setup and tried to be still while adding hot water to the cone. The ship was at full spin now. Mark could hear his crew yelling angry words through the intercom, but he was concentrating so hard on watching the coffee drip down and on holding back puke that he could no longer parse the meaning of the words.

The stream of coffee bent very strongly in the antispinward direction. Mark thought back to the warnings that all rotating space stations had, on the way from hub to rim, that warned newcomers to move slowly at first or risk sickness. Mark always thought it was because of the disorientation, animal confusion, brought on by the eyes perceiving the odd motion of objects outside the station. But now, watching the arc of brewed coffee, he though of the juices sloshing around in his own head, trying their best to follow their free fall geodesic paths as Mark moved up and down, turned his head, moved his arms around. And that only made the nausea worse.

Finally, the coffee neared the top of the pussy cup, so Mark stopped adding water. He could feel the ship begin to slow its spin, and prepared to be weightless again. The strong aroma of nutty dark fruits still filled the cabin’s atmosphere, and Mark’s nostrils, but the sensation was no longer pleasant. As the ship slowed to a halt, coming again to its former rest position, Mark reached for the cup. He could now make out what Windy and Alex were yelling--various descriptions of what violent things they would do to him when they got back in the ship. Mark ignored these mundane unpleasantries as much as his pounding ears would allow, and brought the object of his toil to his lips. And then he barfed.

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“Bart!” The barista’s voice jolted Mark out of his imagination, out of the past. As he grabbed the white cup, he mumbled, “The name’s MARK.”

“Oh, sorry,” said the smiling gawky girl. “Hey, be careful, it’s really hot.”

“Sure, thanks,” Mark said with a smile, as he turned back to the table he had claimed, near that expansive porthole. He sat down and popped the plastic lid off the cup, and watched the pent up steam waft upwards toward the ceiling, vaguely intending to arc spinward. Then he turned his attention back to the coffee.

Oh, Miranda,

*So perfect and so peerless, are created*

*Of every creature’s best!*

Mark lifted the cup to his nose, took a deep breath, and let the intoxicating odor fill his soul. Then he took a sip.

“Ow! Goddamn!” That coffee sure was hot! Mark put the cup on the table and looked back out the window at Uranus. Once you burn your tongue, that’s it. You can’t unburn it.

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