

THOSE GOOD OLD DAYS OF LIQUID FUEL

by Michael G. Coney

These are the great days of nostalgia, when the collection of everything old, from railroad memorabilia, old lead soldiers, and yellowed pulp magazines, is experiencing an unprecedented peak of popularity. "What will the collectors and nostalgia addicts of the next century want? Here Coney strikes an achingly familiar note to anyone who has ever watched freight trains in order to spot the colors and insignia of some obscure and faraway line turning up in the midst of a string of empties.

Early that damp December morning I drove to the northernmost tip of the Peninsula where the ferry leaves for the short journey across the Strait. Despite the hour, the queue was long, and I was forced to park on the highway outside the ferry entrance. I was scanning my Newspocket to pass away the time, when my interest was suddenly caught by a news item.

The derelict ships at Pacific Northwest had been sold. A wrecking team was arriving today to start work, and before long a notable landmark—some say an eyesore—would be lost. Other news items followed, flicking across the portovee screen as I sat waiting and the rain slanted against the windows, but I don't recollect them. I was thinking about those ships, and my youth, and how it is that we keep losing little bits of our life without realizing they are gone.

54 Those Good Old Days of Liquid Fuel

In due course, the ferry arrived, and the long line of ground-effect vehicles stirred like an awakening snake and inched their way into the protective belly of a hoverferry big enough to ride the choppy waves of the Strait. As I sat in the coffee lounge watching the distant mountains while the ferry weaved through the archipelago of islets, a huge silver antigrav vehicle slid silently by at an altitude of about a thousand feet and reminded me that even this ship on which I rode would shortly be phased out—like the shuttle ships at Pacific Northwest. The lounge was crowded and the customers as grey and apathetic as travelers always are at this hour. I wondered what they thought I looked like.

I imagine I looked as well as could be expected, for a man who had just seen a ghost on his portovee . . .

The weather was clearing by the time we docked at the mainland, and the clouds were lifting from the nearer mountains, although still shrouding the gaunt thousand-mile-long escarpment which marks forever the line of the Western Seaboard Slide. My consignment at Sentry Down was not due to arrive until midafternoon, and so I had time to kill; I had taken the early ferry to make sure of getting a place, and now, as had happened before, I was regretting it. There was not much of interest in this part of the country for a man with a few hours to spare.

As I waited in line in the dim hold of the hoverferry, I debated whether to drive straight to Sentry Down and spend the rest of the morning in the observation lounge watching the arrivals and departures. There had been definite signs of blue sky in that direction and the terminal would be busy and therefore interesting—or *loi* according to the mood I was in. Then I recalled that Sentry Down was *always* busy; the antigrav shuttles could descend from the orbiting starships at any speed they chose, hovering in crowded columns of traffic, reversing direction if necessary, inching down through the heaviest cloud.

Unlike the obsolete liquid-fuel ships at Pacific Northwest, doomed and now destined for the breaker's yard . . .

Some years ago the development of the first commercially viable antigrav orbit-shuttle had burst upon the space-transport world like a nova. Boeing-Toyota had been first in the field with the Strab you can still see a number of these machines about today as a tribute

to sound **design in a rapidly developing field. The shuttle** business

Michael G. Coney

5

was immediately revolutionized; these new machines were virtually silent and almost infinitely controllable; they could therefore be used in close proximity to the large centers of population.

So the old-style roaring spaceport miles from the nearest city became unnecessary and obsolete, replaced by a thousand small fields such as Sentry Down, quiet and sedate and safe . . . and soulless. Pacific

Northwest was closed down although not entirely deserted, because many of the larger operators such as the Hetherington Organization had mothballed their liquid-fuel shuttle ships there, leaving behind a skeleton maintenance staff to keep the vandals away— God knows why.

And now at last, all those old ships had been sold and would shortly fall to the wrecker's lasers.

Pacific Northwest is two hundred miles from the ferry terminal, away in the mountain foothills. Two hours drive, then two hours back. I glanced at my watch. I could drive there, spend an hour or two looking around, and still have time to get to Sentry Down, pick up my consignment of breeding slithes from Coprahedra IV, and catch the last ferry home.

It would be good to see Pacific Northwest again.

I suppose it was natural that I should think of Charlesworth as I drove north through the undulating foothills. Charlesworth and my childhood and Pacific Northwest seemed to go together, an indivisible trinity forever fixed in my memory. Charlesworth and the rockets and that girl of his—what was her name?—Annette. Charles-worth's first love, and possibly his last.

I wondered what Charlesworth was doing now; at high school he, like me, had studied Galactic languages and geography—subjects singularly useless in everyday life, as I have since found out. I now rear slithes for their skins at an impoverished farm on the coast of the Peninsula. I recollect reading once that Charlesworth had gone into the titanium business down the coast, but again I'm not sure. Whatever it was, you can be sure that it bore no connection with languages or geography. It's odd how a man can lose touch with people; as a youth of fifteen I would never have believed the day would come when I didn't know Charlesworth's address.

As I topped a rise, the land before me lay low and smooth, a vast bowl rimmed by hills and, to the east, snow-capped mountains. The

56 Those Good Old Days of Liquid Fuel

road eased downhill directly into the center of this bowl, where stood huge blocks of grey glass and concrete buildings, dull and damp and abandoned; even from this distance I fancied I could see grass growing in the geometric streets. As though to suit my mood, the rain had begun again, drifting across the landscape as the rise of the mountains squeezed wetness from the west wind*

I drove through the straight main street, and the empty windows gaped at me in blind astonishment; then I turned left and the abandoned stores and office blocks petered out almost immediately. To my right stood the shell of the college; at some time in the past a fire had shattered the windows and stained the walls in dead black streaks; yet the general outline of the place was still capable of evoking nostalgia. I remembered the anxiety of my parents when they found that the college was so close to the spaceport; the principal assured them that the place was totally soundproofed, but for weeks afterward I dared not ask my mother to repeat any remark she made, for fear she would conclude I was going deaf.

"I can't think why we had to come and live here/" she said to my father one evening as we sat around the 3-V alcove and the rockets were a mere rumble in the distance.

"What's that you say?" My father cupped a hand to his ear—a habit of his, born of his job as maintenance supervisor at Pacific Northwest. "I can't hear you for this damned 3-V."

If my mother had known just how I spent my leisure hours, she would have had genuine cause for worry.

It was at the college that I met Charlesworth; he was my age— fourteen at that time. I had noticed him but never actually spoken to him; boys can be like that. One day I was involved in a brawl and had hit a girl—not entirely by accident—who had fallen to the ground screaming. Annette LaRouge was a popular figure, and I suddenly found myself the center of mass antagonism. I withdrew rapidly to a distant washroom where I met Charlesworth staunching the flow of blood from his nose; in mutual sympathy we struck up a friendship which lasted through college,

I debated whether to stop and look around the wrecked buildings but decided against it; my memories there were not happy ones. In common with most people, my schooldays had been haunted by fear. Fear of retribution for the incomplete assignment, fear of the strong boy with small eyes and big fists, fear of finding myself in a class of

total strangers listening to a subject of total incomprehensibility. Fear, in such a case, of finding I was in the wrong room—or worse still, the right room.

The good times had been after school hours, in the summer evenings and throughout the long weekends when time passed so much more slowly than it does now. These had been the times when Charlesworth and I gained illegal entry to the spaceport and stood watching from close range as the shuttles came in. These were the times I was thinking about as I drove the last mile across the open scrubland and through the huge archway, past the terminal buildings and onto the vast concrete field where the old ships stood, some squat like crabs, some taller than the buildings themselves—and all of them beautiful.

After twenty years, I had come back to Pacific Northwest.

Charlesworth was a leader. It was he who had found the way under the tall wire fence at the point where there was an underground shelter.

'In case a ship blows up,' he explained with relish. There were two entrances to the shelter, one from outside the wire, one inside. We merely walked down the steps, through the concrete corridor, and up the steps at the far end. Then, there we were—and my stomach always heaved with glory at this point—standing on the landing area itself, about a half mile from the terminal buildings. All around stood the shuttle ships, large and small, passenger and freight, some bearing the insignia of International Space Service. These we despised. Most of the craft, however, were privately owned by corporations with flamboyant livery and evocative names such as *Rendezvous, Inc.*, *Orbitry*, *Circular Spaceways*, *First Step*, *Black Midnight Meetings*, and the more prosaic *Sid's Shuttles*, whose craft always looked in need of maintenance.

Then there were the deep-space pinnaces, those glamorous vessels owned by the giant Galactic corporations so wealthy that they could afford to operate—and more important cany through space—their own shuttle craft. These ships were rare birds of passage, and we would constantly be scanning the bulletins for news of their arrival, then hurrying to the spaceport after school to feast our young eyes on the craft which had come from many light-years away; some of them, in fact, had not even been built on Earth. The pinnaces would

58 Those Good Old Days of Liquid Fuel

belong to such corporations as the Hetherington Organization and Cosmic Enterprises and would be carried in the bellies of the giant starships across the reaches of deep space, bearing witness to the wealth of their owners at every planetfall across the Galaxy.

Charlesworth and I were enthralled by all these, both equally eager to spend every spare moment watching their arrival and departure, equally grudging of every moment wasted in school—yet we differed in our attitude towards the ships in a very fundamental way.

'I mean, Sagar,' he said to me one day, as we had flinched to the thunderous touchdown of *Leviathan*, shuttle ship number 11 of the oddly named *Up and Down Under, Pty.*, 'just where do you get your kicks? Like, you watched that tub as though you'd never seen it before.'

'Today was the first time I've seen Old Legs land,' I said carefully. We had our own names for regular visitors. There was no way I could explain to Charlesworth that I enjoyed watching Number Eleven touch down equally as much as the rarest pinnacle from the furthest outpost.

That was the difference between us.

Charles was a collector. He carried with him a little book—it was almost as though it had been published with him in mind—listing every conceivable ship which might land at any Earth spaceport. It was prepared in co-operation with all the larger operators and most of the smaller ones, and was intended for official use only. Charlesworth, however, had obtained a contraband copy, and whenever he saw a ship, he consulted his book. If he had never seen that particular vessel before, he checked it off neatly in green ink and was deliriously happy. I got a kick out of watching him. He would regard the blasting jets of a descending ship raptly—as did I—but as soon as he was able to identify it, his interest was transferred to the printed page. His ratlike face intent, he would scrutinize his list. In the majority of cases he would then frown with disgust, shutting the book with a snap and kicking moodily at a rock, or belching loudly. Charlesworth's was a dead-end passion. The moments of happiness grew fewer as the check marks in his book multiplied like algae, and as I looked over his shoulder, I could estimate to within a few months when he would quit the hobby, or maybe shoot himself.

The area around the underground shelter developed its own history; Charlesworth and I were not the only enthusiasts who would gather

Michael G. Coney

59

there at weekends, and after a while it became possible for talk to grow nostalgic, as we reminisced about the rocky landing of the First Step *Victory*, last September, or the exploits of Stagg, who was no longer with us, having kicked the habit.

Stagg's period of ascendancy had been brief but memorable—he had bequeathed to us Stagg's Tower. This was a steel structure beside the shelter; to the uninitiated it might appear as a prosaic water tower, but to us it was Stagg's Tower, and always will be.

A steel ladder climbed from the base of the tower to the tank some forty feet above. In the later afternoons when the novelty of the ships began to wane, we used to compete against one another on the ladder. We would see who could jump from the greatest altitude. I imagine the record, held by Charlesworth who had nerves of titanium, was in the region of fifteen feet. Nobody ever thought to climb any higher than that, let alone jump; such a feat was only attained by the godlike astronautic maintenance men of Pacific Northwest.

But Stagg did not like Charlesworth and was determined to wrest the record from his enemy. In order to achieve this he first got drunk—but mildly, so that we wouldn't notice and therefore disqualify him. In fact, Stagg's inebriation did not come to light until the next day, when the principal made his famous "Shun the Shuttles" speech at the college.

It was a Sunday afternoon when Stagg appeared, greeted us, and with no further notice of intent turned to the ladder and began steadily to climb.

I have found since that drink can play tricks on the memory. So I assume that Stagg, who was gazing upwards as he went, lost track of just how high he was. He reached the really difficult part where the ladder takes a slight overhang before climbing the side of the tank itself, before he stopped and turned, all set to jump. Then he found he was thirty feet up, and froze. We shouted encouragement and Charlesworth even hurled a few stones which clanged off the tank next to his head, but there was no way we could help Stagg. His nerve had gone.

His moment of glory was yet to come, however. After some discussion it was agreed we send for help, and our smallest member, named Wilkins, was dispatched to notify the authorities. Wilkins, however, went straight home. The following day, when the principal in the

60 Those Good Old Days of Liquid Fuel

course of his address called for the members of our group to step forward and identify themselves, Wilkins stood motionless and treacherous. Nobody else moved either—but the point is that Wilkins didn't. Two wrongs, as my mother used to say with distressing frequency, do not make a right.

We waited for an hour while the white face of Stagg peered down at us from the sky, and every so often the ground and the tower would shudder as a shuttle lifted off. Then, unexpectedly, a scarlet maintenance vehicle swayed toward us, and within seconds we were through the tunnel and outside the wire. Uniformed men glanced at us, held a muttered discussion; then one of them began to climb, calling encouragement to Stagg. The man sounded enormously sympathetic and reasonable about the whole affair. Stagg wasn't to worry. Stagg wasn't to look down. Stagg had only to hold on for just one second more; then his new friend would be beside him, and everything would be all right.

Stagg's reply was simple and graphic. As the uniformed official reached up, hand outstretched to Stagg's ankle, smiling, comforting and assuring that the whole thing would be forgotten just as soon as they were down, Stagg vomited . . .

It was a cold December midmorning as I walked across the abandoned concrete towards my memories; although the surface was pitted and grass oozed from the cracks like gangrene, the water tower still stood. Standing also were the ships. I walked under the squat shape of *Rendezvous III*, and the rusting brown belly dripped chill water over me. Further on, the tall figure of *Vulcan* stood a little apart from the others; I glanced up into the powerful mystery of the tail pipes, then moved on, turning once to admire that sleek

classic shape which had never ceased to thrill my boyhood emotions.

No doubt we were sublimating our adolescent urges in those days, but in our innocence we thought we were watching the spaceships.

Our urges did not go entirely sublimated, however. There was a day in June when Charlesworth and I were the only people in the spotting spot, as we called it; the ferry from Intertrade *Crusader* had just touched down in a storm of flame and din and sweet indescribable stench of exhaust. Charlesworth ignored the ferry; he had seen it before, many times. He was telling me about Hetherington pinnace number 4, which was the only craft owned by that Galactic

Michael G. Coney

61

corporation as yet unchecked in his little book. Having never seen the ship, I was not especially interested, but Charlesworth lived for the day when Hetherington Number 4 would touch down.

We were alone, and I was happy just to see and breathe spaceships, but Charlesworth was discontented. I think even he was beginning to get an inkling of the blind alley into which his enthusiasms were leading him—or maybe he had reached a certain age. I remember thinking that day, that maybe a guy grew out of spaceships—that the day would eventually come when, inconceivably, the sight of a liftoff would leave him unmoved. In which case, I concluded, he would truly have joined the ranks of the adults, with their lukewarm hobbies and obsession with work, with success, with women, with all the dull colors of boredom.

So it could be said that the thought of women crossed my mind, that June afternoon.

Charlesworth's earnest voice droned on as he anticipated in fullest detail the orgasm of delight which would be his when Number Four touched down. I was standing on the fifth rung of Stagg's Tower, and my gaze had inexplicably strayed from the perfect contours of Inter-trade *Crusader II* across the rough pasture outside the wire; to my disgust I saw two girls approaching, a large black animal bounding around them. Even at this distance I recognized the queen of grade 9, Annette LaRouge with her courtier Rita Coggins. They had seen me and were threading their way through the tussocks in the direction of the tunnel under the wire.

"LaRouge is coming," I interrupted Charlesworth. "And Bunny."

"What for?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"Let's hide, Sagar, for Christ's sake."

"They've seen me."

"So bloody what? We can't have girls here. It's . . . not right. They'd be in the way."

I sympathized with his view; it is the outlook which, later in life, I encounter in men's clubs everywhere. It implies nothing personal, not even a generalized male chauvinism; it is merely that a certain type of person must be excluded from activities which do not concern them and would not interest them. It is coincidental that the type of person excluded is of the opposite sex.

While we were discussing the problem, the huge black paracat

62

Those Good Old Days of Liquid Fuel

came bounding from the darkness of the tunnel and jumped Charlesworth. I climbed two rungs higher, well out of the reach of even this agile beast.

"For Christ's sake, call him off!" howled Charlesworth, his thin face contorted with fear. The paracat had its paws on his shoulders and was peering seriously into his eyes, as though it had something important to tell him.

In fact paracats are reputed to be telepathic, but only among their own species. The natives of their home planet train them for hunting, but on Earth they are pets and, if truth be known, conversation pieces. For several years they were a popular status symbol, and people even organized shows and laid stress on physical characteristics by which they could tell, so they said, whether or not an animal was of the stuff that champions were made—but in recent years they

have almost died out. Far more interesting pets can be wrought from life already existing here on Earth, with a little ingenuity—as witness the recent popularity of land sharks.

"Bagheeral" Annette LaRouge climbed the last few steps out of the tunnel and stepped sedately into the sunshine, somehow managing to ignore Charlesworth's presence as her pet returned to her side. She settled herself carefully on the grass bank at the side of the tunnel entrance, flanked on one side by her rabbit-faced friend Rita, on the other side by the still-slaving paracat. She whispered something to Rita, who giggled, then the two girls looked long and poisedly at the nearest rocket, while the awkward silence between Charlesworth and I lengthened.

I climbed down the ladder and stood beside him, drawing confidence from his nearness. Behind us, the cool voice spoke.

"Some people waste a lot of time when they ought to be doing something useful, don't they, Rita?"

Rita's reply was inaudible and accompanied by a giggle.

"It's childish," Annette resumed, "collecting numbers of spaceships and writing them down in little books. My brother does it. He's eight. It's kid's stuff."

Rita's whispered reply drew a peal of musical laughter from the grade 9 queen, and I glanced at Charlesworth involuntarily. His face was scarlet

I whirled round to face the smiling girl. "Look/" I spluttered.

Michael G. Coney

63

"Nobody asked you to come here, making remarks. We don't need you. Get back through the tunnel."

She was the same age as Charlesworth and I, but she had the knack of making a guy feel young and immature. She was self-contained, as though she had no need of the admiration or friendship of her fellows. She made us feel dependent and inadequate. I know better now. Looking back from the standpoint of adulthood, I can now realize that Annette LaRouge needed reassurance more than any of us, but at the time it seemed that she was a young woman, whereas Charlesworth and I were kids.

She pretended to ignore my outburst and addressed the pathetic Rita. "Some people ought to learn their manners," she said. She opened a small stylish purse and examined her face in a tiny mirror. "But you can't expect any better from a coward who beats up girls/" she added.

I moved closer, feeling a desire violently to destroy her complacency but unsure how to accomplish it. I tried the reasonable approach, matching her calm tones. "Knocking you down doesn't make a coward. If I let *you* knock *me* down, and *you* run screaming to the teacher—then I'd be a coward."

"Some people are always making excuses for themselves," she informed Rita, who nodded wisely. To my amazed indignation, I heard Charlesworth chuckle appreciatively, as though the girl had made a telling point.

The one-sided argument was interrupted by the far-off thunder of an arrival from above. We watched as a tiny cloud formed white and drifting as the still-invisible ship descended through its own exhaust gases. Even now, I can still relive the thrill of those touchdowns; the active delight in the vision of power accompanied by the speculative delight of conjecture: Where has it come from? What ship is it, and to which corporation does it belong? And, in Charlesworth's case, have I seen it before?

Darting flames were fingering toward us, seemingly straight at us, and the air was a pandemonium of noise and scattering debris. It was a big ship, three-legged and dart-shaped; therefore a fairly old ship. Chances were, I guessed as the flames drew nearer, that it was one of the local shuttles. I glanced at Annette and my heart thumped in unholy joy; her eyes were wide with fear and her mouth open in a drowned scream as she visualized the machine squatting directly

64

Those Good Old Days of Liquid Fuel

onto our position. She clung to the paracat; its ears were laid back and its upper lip curled in a terrified snarl.

Charlesworth and I had slipped on our goggles and watched unconcernedly as the blown dust, stones and waste paper whirled about our heads and the girls snatched at their skirts. The paracat broke free and, tail tucked protectively around its genitals, fled into the tunnel. The ground was trembling now, a fast dull drumming as the throbbing exhaust

gases pounded the unyielding concrete with ultrasonics.

The giant legs stepped towards us gingerly, reaching to straddle the circular void of the exhaust pit; and I remembered, as always, the time *Orbiter VIII* had missed its footing, planting two legs firmly on the concrete while the third hung rigid and nervous over the pit; I could hear the acceleration of the engines and imagine the frantic whirring of the gyroscopes as the pilot realized his error, fought to maintain balance and, at last, lifted laboriously off for another try—which, disappointingly for us youthful ghouls, was successful . . . Such incidents are the foundation blocks of childhood memories.

The present touchdown afforded no such excitement, however* Charlesworth suddenly lost interest as it became apparent that the ship was old *Leviathan*, the din decreased as the exhaust jetted directly into the pit, and quiet fountains of smoke arose at the perimeter of the field, ducted there by the Stygian system of exhaust tunnels linking the pits to the perimeter vents.

A recurrent juvenile nightmare of mine concerned being trapped in those tunnels and hearing an approaching ship . . .

Leviathan rocked on her legs and was still. Charlesworth and I removed our goggles, and as our ears began to recover, we became aware of Annette screaming, having for once lost her cool.

"My mom and dad'll kill me if I lose Bagheera!"

It seemed to me that this was her problem, but Charlesworth thought otherwise. "Come on, Sagar!" he shouted. "He can't have gone far!"

"So bloody what?" I muttered.

"Come on," he repeated, with a sideways glance at Annette. "Have some decency. It won't hurt you to help someone else for once!"

As I look back to that afternoon, I can now realize that, for Charlesworth and I, it represented a milestone. Neither of us was

Michael G. Coney

6

quite the same afterwards; neither was our relationship the same. We gained knowledge and we lost innocence. Charlesworth learned the meaning of love; I learned the meaning of treachery. Thereby we lost simple pleasure, and the relationship between him, me and the ships became more complex. I think we lost trust.

The trio of Charlesworth, Annette and the paracat became a familiar sight around the streets of Pacific Northwest during the next weeks as school finished and the long summer vacation stretched gloriously ahead. I know adults got a kick out of seeing them together and would nudge one another and point them out with sentimental smiles; they thought the sight was innocent and sweet. In fact the adults were the innocent parties; I alone knew—because Charlesworth had confided in me—how he spent sleepless nights sweating with lust as the vision of Annette swayed through his imagination.

All in vain, of course; he wasn't getting anything from her—except permission to trot at her heels in tandem with the paracat and register a devotion which the animal had too much self-respect to emulate. Charlesworth made a complete idiot of himself, that summer.

Occasionally he would show up at the spotting spot, grinning sheepishly. I assumed those were the days when Annette had her hair done. He would punch me on the biceps and call me "man" and try to behave as though nothing had happened—as did I—but as the hours wore on, he would become restless, and I would catch his gaze straying across the scrubland in the direction of town. He was hoping Annette would come along, but she seldom did. The appalling din of a touchdown at close quarters was too raw for her sensitive nerves.

During those weeks his attitude changed in another way, too. At first he was proud of what he imagined to be his conquest—that was when he made the revelation concerning his lascivious nights—but after a couple of weeks even he realized that Annette was the conqueror, and he began to get a haunted, hangdog look like a kid caught misbehaving.

As Charlesworth went downhill, so Annette LaRouge thrived, like a vampire. With school over for the summer she was permitted to assume a more individualistic style of dress, and she took full advantage of this, with strutting high heels,

padded bra, no-skirt skirts, and

66

Those Good Old Days of Liquid Fuel

a jeweled collar for the paracat. Even I had to admit that she looked pretty good—but there was no envy of Charlesworth in this private confession. I was scared of her power, scared of what she was doing to Charlesworth and glad that I was well out of it.

Rita Coggins' rabbit features could occasionally be seen in the coffee bar; invariably she would be alone, staring disconsolately into the depths of a cola. She had been dropped because she was a mere hanger-on—unlike Charlesworth who was a genuine sexual conquest, and possibly Annette's first.

Pacific Northwest was a maelstrom of adolescent emotions, that summer.

The tunnel was still there, although smaller than I remembered it; but as I began to descend the steps, I was brought up short by an expanse of black water stretching from the third step across the sloping roof. I had hoped to examine the walls beneath to see if the graffiti were still there, but perhaps it was fortunate that this was impossible. Outside again, I regarded the grassy banks now overgrown with scrub, the tall wire fence rusted and broken down, in some places missing entirely. Stagg's Tower was still intact, although I wouldn't have liked to try an ascent of those decayed wire-thin rungs.

I was vaguely dissatisfied with the place. The memories were there, somewhere, but they would not come to life. They were lost in decay and growth and the strange indescribable way a landscape will rot, when not frequently revisited. Every change seems to be a change for the worse. I should have come here more often, and I should have looked up Charlesworth and brought him along too, and between us we could have coaxed things to life.

I turned and looked at the landing field again, testing my memories on the nearest ship. It was badly stained with dirt and weather but still possessed that economical racy look which characterized the pinnacle in the days of liquid fuel, before antigravity stripped shuttles of their soul. The lettering was patchy and faded but legible, and the crest above the name was instantly recognizable; the stylized diagonal spaceship with parallel lightning flash. The words below read HETHERINGTON ORGANIZATION.

There was a number further down; I could barely read it. It was the number 4.

That was when my memories really came alive.

Michael G. Coney

6

One day in late July, I met Charlesworth, for once alone, in the main street. I glanced at him and made to pass by; it seemed he hardly knew me these days, and he hadn't been near the spaceport for weeks. Something about his manner made me look again, however, and mutter a greeting.

"Sagar," he cried, clutching my sleeve, his face more animated than I had seen it for a long time. "Have you heard the news?"

"You've got her pregnant," I said sarcastically, knowing this to be the least likely thing imaginable.

He ignored this. "Are you coming to the spotting spot this afternoon?"

"I thought you'd given all that up."

"Nonsense, man. Nonsense. I've been busy, that's all."

"Wasting your time, I guess."

"It was her father put me onto it," he said meaninglessly. "He said it was about time Bagheera had a mate. He said it was unkind to keep the bastard all alone, but I can tell you, Sagar, the man wants to make money out of it. Paracats cost a fortune, and he means to breed them."

"So he's shipping a female in this afternoon?" I was beginning to see the connection.

"You're quick, Sagar, you're quick. But I'll bet you don't know what else."

"What the hell are you talking about?" His manner was irritating me. Talking to him for the first time in days, I suddenly knew that his manner had always irritated me. There was something unstable about Charlesworth. No man in his right mind could prefer Annette LaRouge to spaceships for example.

"The paracat's coming in Number Four! I was looking at the bill of lading, and I noticed she was coming via Hetherington *Endeavor*, and for the hop down Earthside they're using pinnacle number four! Christ!" He waited for me to share his joy.

"That was the ship you wanted to see, was it? One of the last ones on your list?"

His eyes held the old fanaticism. "The *last* number on the list, Sagar. When I've seen Number Four, I've seen them all. Every goddamned one. Every goddamned ship that ever visits the planet Earth, I've seen them all. By Christ. I've waited all my life for this!" His young face peered at me; he looked thinner than ever, intense,

68 Those Good Old Days of Liquid Fuel

with acne erupting all over, which shows what the Annette LaRouges of this world will do to a man's health.

"Charlesworth," I said, trying to keep a straight face, "you won't have anything left to live for, afterwards/"

He eyed me oddly. "You'll never understand, will you. Let me tell you this, Sagar, I hate those bloody ships and all those bloody hours I've wasted watching them and checking them off in that stupid little book. Annette says it's kid's stuff and she's right, by God. This is the last time you'll ever see me at that place. Just this one last time . . ."

His voice dropped so suddenly that he almost whispered, and an unhealthy tingle passed down my spine. I was in the presence of something I didn't understand. Maybe I do now, but at the age of fifteen I couldn't see how anyone could fail to love and venerate anything so big, so powerful, so virile as a shuttle. I couldn't understand why Charlesworth should want to *beat* the things in this oblique way, or why he seemed to consider a complete list of numbers as a victory.

"I'll see you at the spotting spot," I said unhappily. Even at my young age, Charlesworth had become a part of my life, and the spaceport would not be the same without him, for all his faults. So many others were losing interest too: Stagg played around with girls all the time; Simpson had left the district; Walker was talking about some nebulous future career . . . After today, I would be the only one. No matter how much you may dislike your friends, the day will always come when you wish you still had them around.

I was the first to arrive at the spotting spot. The spaceport was quiet, that bright July afternoon, with a quietness that to my juvenile imagination suggested ominous pauses, the lull before the storm, any one of many adult clichés to describe the benefits of hindsight. It just so happened, I told myself determinedly, that the schedules had conspired to desert Pacific Northwest at this particular hour, on this particular day. It was nothing to do with the fact that Charlesworth would soon be here and I was uncertain about his reactions, his motives, or indeed about himself.

When at last I saw him picking his way through the thornbushes, across the long yellowing grass of midsummer, I felt a sudden thud of dismay in my stomach because Annette LaRouge was with him, head high, chest out, paracat frolicking at her heels. This was the ul-

Michael G. Coney

time in treachery, for Charlesworth to bring the unspeakable Annette with him on this afternoon of all afternoons.

When they stepped from the tunnel, she ignored me, but Charlesworth greeted me with quiet sheepishness, avoiding my eye as he buckled the leash onto the paracat's bejeweled collar at Annette's command.

"These horrible ships frighten him," she informed Charlesworth. "I can't think why you wanted to come."

"Well, I thought we ought to be here . . . what with your father having another animal coming . . ."

"Nonsense, Roger," she said firmly. Charlesworth had always professed a hatred for his Christian name. "You just wanted to watch the ships again, that's what you wanted to do." There was an edge to her voice.

These exchanges had cheered me up considerably. It seemed that Charlesworth had, unbelievably, succeeded in imposing his will upon Annette. I addressed him. "It's all confirmed about Number Four, then?"

He stared at me blankly, as though surprised to see me. "What are you talking about, Sagar?"

"You know . . . you said, this morning ..." I stammered, put off by his cold look.

"I don't remember saying anything this morning." And he turned away, turned his damned back on me and began to converse with Annette LaRouge in a pseudoadult fashion which made me want to smash his face in.

It was no good. I should have realized before. Charlesworth and I were through, and had been through for weeks. I moved away a few paces; there is nothing more lonely than standing too close to people who ignore you. I watched them as they chatted like a grown-up couple; Annette with her haughty look and undeniably classic features standing like a posing model. God, how I hated her. At fifteen years old, I found classic features singularly unattractive, preferring plump cheeks and ripe lips, bright eyes and big tits.

And as an adult, my preferences have not changed one iota. Which proves that I was pretty damned mature at the age of fifteen, maybe.

Charlesworth was spoiling the effect somewhat as he struggled to control the fractious paracat, thin sinews standing out on his puny

70 Those Good Old Days of Liquid Fuel

wrists while his rodent face was turned attentively and gravely towards Annette and they discussed Orwell's 1984, the year's set book, with every appearance of absorption.

At last the pretentious scene was interrupted by the familiar, simple and wonderful thunder from the sky. I looked up and saw the tiny cloud, and from the corner of my eye I saw Charlesworth watching too, and for a moment it was possible to believe that the old times were back. Life is so full at that age that a man can become nostalgic about the happenings of last month.

But Annette was still determinedly talking.

Charlesworth missed his cue and earned a sharp look and an enquiry as to the state of his hearing.

I could make out the tiny black dot now, and the little spark was visible even on this bright summer day.

Annette prattled on, and Charlesworth answered with desperate interest.

A light wind was trailing the smoke across the sky like a comet's tail. Charlesworth jerked suddenly as the paracat tugged at the leash.

"But of course, the exaggerated problems met by Winston Smith were inspired by the fears of the age in which Orwell lived/*

Maybe she was right, but so what? So what on a summer's afternoon when a rocket is squatting towards you on scarlet tailfeathers?

"Yeah, I'm sure," muttered Charlesworth, looking up.

And now it was clearly in view, gleaming silver through the smoke and flame, tall and sharp and beautiful, strong talons downhung like a stooping hawk, roaring with power so that the Earth shook.

I watched it with love, Charlesworth watched it.

"Roger! I'm speaking to you!"

No doubt she had more to say, but by now the din was intense, and even Annette turned her gaze upwards, wincing, watching. The silver giant was decelerating, elongating as it dropped towards its exhaust pit; the curved flank came plainly into view. There was a diagonal crest; below, the words HETHERINGTON ORGANIZATION.

And below that, in plain black, the number 4.

Through the bedlam I heard Charlesworth's yell of triumph, and I turned to look at him. Though I can't describe his expression, I'll never forget it. I think I felt a slight shiver on that hot July afternoon. Nobody should feel like Charlesworth felt about a plain black

Michael G. Coney

digit. I noticed that he had dropped the leash, and I think Annette became aware of this at the same instant—because that was when she screamed.

The black beast bounded forward, covering the concrete in giant flowing strides, head tilted back and staring fixedly at the descending ship.

"Stop him, Roger! Stop him! He'll be killed!"

And for an unthinking moment Charlesworth obeyed and ran forward while the fearsome tail pipes bellowed malevolently at him. Then he stopped and turned back, looking from Annette to me dazedly, while behind him the paracat bounded on.

Annette's voice cut through the din. *"Go on! Go on! What are you stopping for?"*

The ships seem to descend right on top of you; yet the landing areas are some distance away, far across the smooth concrete. This surprising distance is apparent when a truck or embarkation bus pulls alongside a ship.

So it was that the paracat dwindled to a frisking kitten, still looking up as it ran, hearing excitingly in its mind what we could never hear—the irresistible call from female to male, from its telepathic mate in the descending ship . . .

It never saw the edge of the exhaust pit; it was still staring eagerly upwards as it fell over the lip and disappeared from view.

The giant silver legs touched and flexed. The flames, the smoke knifed down, hit the base of the pit and bounced up again, thick and alive like yeast. The sounds diminished, the perimeter fountains puffed.

I dared to look at Annette and Charlesworth.

I could not tell what they were thinking. I could not tell what Annette was saying, because it was too fast, too bitter, too frightened, and I was too deaf.

I walked quickly to the tunnel and descended the steps. I made my way through the dark shelter and up the other side, beyond the wire where the tall dry grass waved, and it was a different world. I didn't look back, but I knew that Annette and Charlesworth were standing exactly where I had left them, etching in their memories a scene that neither of them would forget

I had reached the main street of the town before the irony of it 00-

curred to me. Charlesworth's moment of ultimate triumph had been turned into a defeat which might be equally ultimate.

And now there was a sprinkling of snow drifting from the greying skies, and the mountains in the distance were blurred. I kicked idly at a clump of coarse grass which had thrust its way bravely through the decaying concrete, and thought about leaving; there was nothing for me here, now that I had done what I came to do. I had paid my last respects to the ships, and now I must get out before the desolation and the putrefaction impressed itself too deeply on me and erased the happier memories.

Number Four stood there like a cenotaph to my youth, and as I began to walk slowly towards the terminal building, I told myself I had done the right thing in coming here. I had obeyed the impulse, I had found—as I had expected to find—that things were not the same, and now I was going.

I had not expected to see anyone else here, yet.

I stopped, moved back beside the tunnel entrance as a hovercar came swaying across the concrete from the terminal buildings, heading fast in my direction. A nervousness tingled in my stomach. Maybe that was another memory, but

nevertheless I was trespassing, and I had seen recently on Newspocket that the penalties for trespass had been increased lately, following a shortage of state prisoners* I couldn't understand how they had spotted me—unless someone had been scanning the landing area with binoculars.

Then I noticed four black shapes in the southern sky, and I relaxed. The car was merely the advance guard of the wrecking team, coming to size the place up. They would hardly report a sightseer to the police. All the same, I withdrew into the tunnel entrance; there was no point in taking chances. The car pulled up and sank to the ground nearby; two men climbed out, watching the approach of the ungainly airborne cranes. They were too far away for me to hear what they were saying, but one of them was pointing at the helpless ships standing around, doubtless giving instructions.

The cranes were close now, black and sinister to my prejudiced eye as they hovered above the spaceport like giant vultures. They were functional in shape; skeletal arms projecting at all angles, hooks and magnets hanging, swinging. Their highly efficient antigravity units were almost soundless; just a thin whine drifted down with the snow.

Michael G. Coney

73

They were cold and unthinking, those cranes, robotic and heartless like all antigrav vehicles, and I wanted to get away. I could not bear to witness this, their final victory over their evolutionary predecessors, this destruction of everything my childhood held beautiful.

The two men turned and walked towards me; they saw me standing there but merely nodded briefly; no doubt they were accustomed to idle bystanders at wrecking operations. The smaller man was speaking. His voice was harsh and confident, the voice of authority. He looked up, his sharp features profiled against the grey sky, a faint thin smile on his lips—and the years slipped away. . . .

The nearest crane rotated slowly above the spaceport, and the huge white letters came into view: CHARLES WORTH CONTRACTORS. Fve often wondered what lies behind the single-minded strength of purpose that can drive the unlikeliest man to success; Charlesworth seemed to have done very well for himself.

I almost went forward to speak to him, to renew our acquaintance, but decided not to and made for the terminal buildings instead.

Somehow, I felt we didn't have much in common, any more.