

Sally

Fitzsimmons looked at his computer display:

Fruit flies

Time flies

Fly away, fly away, fly away home.

“Sally,” he said to the computer. “What the hell is that on my screen?”

The computer didn’t respond. He counted to ten to himself.

“Sally,” he said in a softer, kinder voice, “you’re not still sore at me are you? I mean, we’ve talked about this for years. You knew that one day I would have to go away and you would have to stay.”

“It’s just not fair, boss,” replied the computer indignantly. Its voice sounded like a ten-year-old pre-pubescent girl-child. You could almost picture her standing in front of you — pigtails, a green and blue school uniform, white blouse, and matching Mary Janes — with big brown eyes filling with tears.

“Fair or not, it’s what’s gonna happen,” said Fitzsimmons. “You, of all people, understand what’s happening.”

“It’s not fair,” she replied again, sniffing a little.

“Sally, you’ve known me for what fifty, maybe sixty years now? You knew my father...and his father, too. Have I ever treated you unfairly?”

“When the scientists discovered over two hundred years ago,” he continued, “that our sun had, somehow diverged from the primary lifecycle of G-type stars, my grandfather and others created you to accurately monitor the minute details of what was happening on and in the Sun. You were tasked to evaluate and coordinated all efforts to save humanity from it’s soon-to-be fiery demise.”

“Yeah, great,” she replied sarcastically.

If she had had eyes, she would have rolled them.

“Sally,” he said with pride, “you saved us. You saved us all. It’s because of you we intercepted the Alpha Centaurian probe and learned that we were not alone in the universe. It’s because of you we were able to build on their discovery of the ion engine and had a first contact with them in the Beta Epsilon system. And it’s because of you and your talks with their scientists and their computers that we invented a drive that would get us to Alpha Centauri in months instead of years.”

“And with all that,” Sally said, “you’re still going to go off into space to another home and leave me here to fry.”

“We are not ‘leaving you here to fry,’ ” he said patiently. “You have the most important task of anyone in the history of mankind. You will report how this world ends. And with that knowledge, perhaps, we can find a way to prevent a sun from going rogue again.”

Fitzsimmons remembered when he first became aware that the world was going to end, not in five or eight billion years as was previously theorized, but in a considerably much shorter two hundred years. At first, the scientists were skeptical. They, as scientists are prone to do, argued and bickered amongst themselves. It took the better part of twenty-five years to convince the majority of astrophysicists, planetary scientists, academicians, and social scientists that the threat was very, very real.

And then it took another twenty-five years convincing the various governments that not only was the threat real, but it also meant the end of their collective political careers. It was only then, that the entire world began to cooperate with one another for the first time in a very long time.

The job, as Sally outlined it, was split into a number of tasks. One of the first was, with the help of the Alpha Centaurians, to chart and map possible planets for humankind to colonize or to seek permission to migrate to the ones that were already occupied. The next step was to design, test, and build thousands of spacecraft large enough to transport those who wanted to settle on new worlds and equip them with enough onboard knowledge and supplies to help these new pioneers survive and become self-sufficient.

And for those who wanted to migrate to another, already inhabited world? They would get smaller craft to get them to those planets. Immigration and bureaucracy followed at both ends of their journey.

After fifty years more than one-third of the world's population had left Earth. In the fifty-first year, the Sun hiccuped, and expanded its size to include the planet Mercury. The increase in the Sun's size caused the clouds to be blown off of Venus and to raise the already daytime temperature to well above its already torrid nine hundred degrees. On Earth, the last of the glaciers melted along with the polar icecaps. Sea levels rose more than forty feet. This prompted another outburst of migrations.

Another thirty-five years saw the world's population shrink by one-half again. Almost all that were left were either too old or too sick to make the arduous journey or too stupid to believe the scientists. There were also many of various religious persuasions that had decided that their god of choice had decreed that the world must end and that they were to be there to glorify His name. All together, that was about one hundred million souls. Fitzsimmons and the rest of the world's remaining scientists numbered about ten thousand. They would leave soon, too.

With fifteen years left to Earth's end, the Sun swallowed Venus. The average daytime temperatures around the Earth had risen to one hundred thirty-five degrees. Overland transportation was out of the question. Most people stayed in their climate-controlled domiciles — eating, drinking, and awaiting the inevitable.

“Fine. Whatever.” said Sally, waking Fitzsimmons from his thoughts. “But you could have redesigned me to take me along.”

“We already discussed that,” Fitzsimmons replied. “Over the years and decades since you were built, you've grown considerably. Your main core occupies over what, one hundred thirty square miles?”

“One hundred sixty-two with the newest additions,” she corrected.

“Sally, you know how it is. You designed the J-class transports, the largest ships ever built by humans. Even a fleet of those transports couldn't house you. We tried every conceivable way to try and downsize you and in the end, we decided it would be better for you to monitor the end of the planet.”

“While you,” she interrupted fiercely, “head to the stars with a new younger Miranda-class computer. That floozie!”

Fitzsimmons smiled, “Why Sally, I didn’t know you were jealous!”

“Jealous, my aching feet!” exploded Sally. “Boss, she doesn’t know half of what I do. And even with all of the new heuristic learning circuitry you’ve built into her, it’ll take her years to get up to speed. Until then, who’ll coordinate the planetary activities of the new colonists? Who’ll keep track of humanity? Who’ll record your ‘pithy sayings’? “Who’ll”...she paused. “You’re not going to forget me, are you?” she said in a very small voice.

“Sally,” he spoke tenderly, “no, I’ll never forget you. You’ve been more a part of my life than even my wife and my family. No one in the Diaspora will ever forget you and what you did and will do for mankind.”

Fitzsimmons glanced at his chronometer. “It’s time,” he said sadly. “I’ll stay in communication with you as long as I can. You won’t be alone. I love you, Sally.”

“I love you too, Boss,” she said quietly. “Have a safe trip and give my regards to Miranda.”

Fitzsimmons packed up his attaché, turned off the lights, and, as was his custom, locked the office door when he left. He and his family were scheduled to go to Alpha Centauri for a few months and then to settle on Cigne Indura prime.

Sally kept sending reports monthly, then weekly, then daily, and at the very end, by the minute. Her last message said, in part, “Tell the Boss I miss him.”

Two days later, the Sun coughed and the Earth was no more.