

LESTER DEL REY

Many men have made a life work of editing a magazine; Lester del Rey, very nearly single-handedly, edits five—at least one of them, *Space Science Fiction*, close to the top of its field. Since this occupies fewer than 60 of the 168 hours in a week, he fills his idle time with a writing production schedule which has been known to top 50,000 words over a weekend. (In spite of the fact that, it has reliably been reported, he is unable to so much as type his name on a page until he has taken apart, oiled and reassembled the typewriter—of which he owns seven.) What is more, the words are very good words indeed. For instance, see . . .

Idealist



Waking was filled with fear. He tried to cling to the absolute unconsciousness his sleep had once been, but it was impossible. His mind jumped and quivered. There was pain there, but the vague memory of pain was stronger than the reality. He felt himself holding his breath, and let it out slowly, waiting for the sounds of violence.

Everything was silent, except for the ticking near him that was too slow to be a clock. There were no sounds of the Station . . .

The Station! He chased the thought down, and drew a complete blank. This was no railroad station. This was some neverland where even weight was missing. He seemed to be floating in emptiness, with only a faint draft of air across part of his face, and a weak pressure of something warm on the rest of him.

Then he smelled the faint odor in the air and knew it must be a hospital room. The warmth of the cloth around his head became bandages. The weightless feeling must be the

aftereffect of drugs. Even the deepness of his sleep and the fear of some dreadful vagueness could be products of the drug. In that case, his expectation of violence was a hang-over from the accident that . . .

Memory failed, just as something touched it. It was as if it came to a stone wall and bounced back. The dreadful word *amnesia* struck at him, but was followed at once by reassurance. He was Paul Fenton, who would finish his engineering work at Caltech some day and have a chance to work on the rockets that would give men wings to the planets. He was in the Air Force now, first in his group, anxious to rid the world of the menace that lay over it and get back to his studies. He'd just been assigned . . .

Again there was a slipping of his memory, but it didn't matter. He knew he was sane, hungry, and burning with thirst. The pain still bothered him, but it was going away.

He tried to sit up, but something held him back. Tardily, his eyes opened, to see a webbing sack apparently surrounding his body. Four thin elastic cords led from it to the walls—metal walls in a tiny room, with everything apparently fastened down. There was a chair on the ceiling, machines on two walls, and a bottle bobbing about in the air currents from a small ventilator, unsupported in mid-air!

Space! It wasn't speculation, but certainty. He was in free fall, in a space-ship. His first wild idea of an alien race vanished before it was full-blown. The things he could see were clearly of human make—and he'd known somehow that it had to be human.

Attached to his arm was a tube that led up to a clicking machine, where a meter registered zero. The drug must have been continuously dripped from there, until it was exhausted.

"Nurse!" His voice echoed hollowly against the metal walls. He waited, without answer, and shouted again. "Nurse! Doctor! Somebody!"

The ship was silent, except for the ticking of the machine and the faint drone of a fan. Fenton jerked the needle from under the bandage and began pulling himself out of the cocoon. His body moved well enough, now. On one wall was a plastic bag with a strange, green uniform in it, and he found that the clothes fitted him. He zipped the jacket closed,

and automatically located and lit a cigarette. The smoke relieved some of the tension, until he noticed the P.F. engraved over an elaborate seal on the lighter. It showed a stylized space-ship leaving Earth, heading to what might have been a space station.

He sucked harder, considering why his initials should be there, and why the uniform seemed tailored for him. Then it dawned on him that he had no memory of learning to smoke.

When he finally found a flat surface on one machine that could serve as a mirror, another shock hit him. It was his own face, under the bandage that was wound around the top of his skull—but an older, grimmer face, with bitter crow's-feet around the eyes. His body had filled out, and what little hair he could see had touches of gray mixed with the brown. He might have been thirty-five, instead of the eighteen he remembered.

The lost years hit him where nothing else had touched. He screamed and threw himself to the door of the tiny room. It wrenched open in his hand, showing a long tube.

"Nurse! Hey! Help!"

But the only answer was the echo of his own voice bouncing off the tube walls. The ship, or whatever it was, was a dead thing. He called until his lungs ached, and nothing happened.

Slow, steady! He thought the words, but his heart went on racing, and a clammy sweat broke out, itching under the bandages. With a desperate lunge, he went sailing up the tube, braking his landing against the further door with his hands. He stopped there, feeling a faint weight. He knew automatically that weight picked up as he went further from the center of the spinning Station, but he had no time to consider the odd knowledge.

He ripped open the door, and dropped through it, into a room filled with green plants in tanks. Again he shouted, driving himself to a frenzy of sound that rebounded savagely from the metal walls.

But it was useless. The Station was as silent as the growing plants that replenished its air supplies. There was no sound of humanity to reach his ears.

Instinct sent his legs pumping, driving him toward the door of the room. He was reaching for it when he tripped over something and fell to his hands and knees, skidding forward in the light pseudo-gravity.

It was a corpse. The lieutenant bore the stylized symbol of Hydroponics on his shoulder, but there was only part of a head above it. Fenton jerked back from contact with the gore, and then saw that the corner of one of the tanks was spattered. The man's head had crashed there violently, and the tank had stood the shock better than his skull.

There were other marks of violence. Some of the tanks had spilled, leaving the floor damp in places, even though the water had been drained away. Others had broken under some shock. The plants had stood it, in some places. In others, they were matted down as if a hand had squashed them.

Fenton got up, the sickness stronger in him, and opened the door with some effort. It had warped, and stuck. But beyond it, there was worse than what lay behind.

Part of a girl lay smashed against a wall, and here the smell showed that she had been lying there for more than a single day. The sick, cloying odor of human death was heavy in the room where the plants had not covered it. Fenton saw a man's body, with a lever projecting from it, and then he was out of there.

The next room held nothing, beyond some wrecked machinery. But the one beyond that had been a bunkroom! He dashed through it, and through others beyond. Something had hit the space-station—he knew it was a station now—and the violence of that had been enough to kill and maim anything or anyone not specifically protected. He'd been lucky. The elastic webbing suspension must have soaked up enough of the blow to save him. And, apparently, the center of the Station hadn't been touched as heavily as the outer edges.

That could only mean an explosion of some kind. Raw space wouldn't carry an explosive force for any distance. He was aware of a lot of such details now, without having any real memory of how he came to the place. But the back of his head was taking it for granted that sometime during his

memory blackout he'd been sent here. A lot could happen in fifteen years or so.

Then he glanced at his own shoulders, and the device had sudden meaning for him. He took it for granted now that this was his own uniform—and the symbol showed that he had been a lieutenant, serving as a pilot on the little ferries that worked between the supply ships and the Station.

Somehow, that was too much for his mind, yet. Everything ebbed out of it, and he stood motionless, trying to think where he was, and why his mother had left him there. But it passed quickly. He jerked his hand off a section of the wall where blood had splattered, and the rebound of his senses brought wisps of memory with it.

He'd been assigned from the Air Force to study the piloting of rockets. There were scraps of memory which indicated that he had spent several years piloting ships up, while the Station was built, until it was assembled and he was berthed here permanently by his own desires. The great Station had become his life. Why not? It would forever end the threat of war. With it, men could take their struggles out against space, instead of against themselves. It was the opening achievement of man's final triumph, the great ideal to which his generation had striven.

"Idealism!" he said, suddenly, and spat on the floor. He shook himself, then. It was as senseless a gesture as any human could make. Without idealism, what was there for the race but the mud from which they had pulled themselves?

Section by section, he went through the silent Station, but it was pretty much the same. In the other half, he found the great control room closed and locked. He back-tracked, no longer sick at the sight of death.

Now he was afraid of being alone, and driven to a frenzy of speed by the need to keep his mind from wondering what had caused this. He couldn't think of that.

He came to the section of the Station farthest from that in which he had first emerged. Here the shock had been much weaker—softened enough by distance from whatever the source was to leave few signs of it. Hope quickened in him, then. There might still be people here.

He found a man, finally. The section had been practically

deserted. It was a quadrant of the ship devoted to scientific exploration, and to the study of space itself. Something seemed to have drawn the men away from here, before the blow came.

But the man was as dead as the others. A bullet had gone through his right temple and had come to rest six inches beyond, against the metal wall. It wasn't suicide—there was no gun there.

Further on, before he came to the section where the signs of shock grew stronger again, he found a dead man seated in a strap affair and a woman floating in a tank of some liquid. There were holes caused by bullets to show the cause of death, in both cases.

Then he was at the other entrance to the control room. He jerked it open. "Captain Allistair! Lieutenant Morgan!"

They sat there in their webbing control seats, but they could never answer him. Bullets had found them, apparently while they were working their controls. The other men who had filled the room were also dead. But these had not died quietly. They were in positions which indicated that they had tried to reach the door where Fenton now stood—and had failed. There were spots of lead along the walls, as if someone had opened up with a machine gun, spraying the whole of the room. Even the shock that had hit the Station could hide none of the attempt the men inside had made, but here there had been nothing but corpses before that shock came.

Fenton realized that his mind was slipping again, but this time he let it go. The bandage on his head hurt suddenly, and he reached for it, sobbing softly. "Sue. Sue! Suzy, don't let them . . ."

But Susan wasn't there. It was her day off, and the neighborhood kids were throwing rocks at him. They were bad kids . . .

He came back sharply this time, to find that he was clawing at a door, with the bandages held in one hand. He stopped sharply, and studied his head in the polished metal of the door. There was only a small, shaven section, with signs of stitches and healing around it. The concussion he'd gotten when he miscalculated the approach speed on his last desperate race back with more bombs from the supply ship must

have cracked his skull. It must not have been too bad, though, even if he could remember screaming in pain until they gave him the first of the continuous drugging. The bombs had . . .

He almost had it when a scream echoed down the corridor, faint, yet with all the hell of agony carried with it.

Fenton yelled back, and was rushing toward the sound, around the huge circle of the Station. It wasn't repeated, and he stopped to yell from time to time, and to listen. His heart was pounding again, and a sudden fear washed through him as he remembered the man with the machine gun.

Then he stumbled into the man—but he was a corpse, like the others. The machine gun was still clutched tightly, but a section of shelving had cut him half in two, and he hung there, an expression of utter bewilderment on his face. Fenton must have missed him the first time, or paid no attention to one body among the rest; the gunman had been before the first corpse with the bullet wound. Probably he'd been on his way to kill more when the shock hit him.

Fenton recoiled mentally from the picture of a man who could proceed on a mission of murder deliberately. But then the sound of a human voice reached him faintly, and he dashed on.

It was coming from the tube that led to the center of the Station, a weak moaning. Now it was less human, as if an animal had been wounded and left to die there.

He slid down the tube. The door to the room in which he had come to was still open, but there was another one beside it. He ripped it open, and one beyond that. There were only four rooms here in the tiny infirmary, and the last one had to be right. As if to prove it, another moan came.

He opened the door cautiously this time, but there was nothing to fear. In a cocoon like the one in which he had awakened, and with a similar drug tube in the arm, a girl's body lay. It was contorted in agony now, and the tied-down hands were thrashing slightly. The face was twisted, and a steady moan came from the opened mouth.

"Martha!" Fenton leaped forward, and then stopped. It had been Martha Graves, once. But now the body there was only human by definition. Too much work in the radiation laboratory had caught up with her, starting a vicious and almost

impossibly rapid brain tumor. The doctor had been forced to operate here, and most of the brain that had once held the genuine genius of the physicist had gone with the tumor, leaving only the animal functions behind. She had been supposed to leave on the next ship up.

Fenton couldn't understand the pain, though. They had meant to take her off the drugs the same day he had been hurt. Then a twinge from his own stomach supplied the answer. He dashed out toward the nearest galley, grabbing whatever unspoiled food was available and a plastic bulb of water. He swallowed rapidly on his way back.

The mouth of the unhappy creature drooled at the smell of the food. She sucked down the water, making a mess of it, and began swallowing some of the food. Her moans cut off, and a few minutes later she was asleep.

He pulled the needle out of her arm quietly, and stood debating with himself. Then he grimaced. The eighteen-year-old section of his mind had been uppermost, obviously. Nothing he could do now would worry what had been Martha Graves. He located a bottle of alcohol in the pharmacy, poured it into a bulb, and took it back to the gravity-free center, where he sponged her off gently. She awoke when he pulled her from the cocoon, and again when he put her back, but she fell asleep almost at once in both cases.

Then he went out and was sick. The idea had finally hit him. He was alone here with something that was still female, but no longer human. And as far as he knew, there might be no other human beings in the whole universe. The supply ships should have been here before the length of time that had obviously passed.

He was surprised at that, amazed at the fact that his brain had speculated on the end of the Earth, and had almost accepted it, below the level of his consciousness, while he had tended to the needs of the girl.

With a leap, he spun to the nearest hatch leading to the outer edge of the Station. He'd never even thought to investigate it, before. Then he saw the red signal over the lock, indicating that the half of the doughnut-tube farthest from the center was without air. Whatever had hit the Station must have opened the outer edge to space, and the inner section

had been saved only by the automatic seals that had immediately shut down.

He found a space-suit and climbed into it, checking its air supply. Then he set the hatch to manual, and crawled through.

It was worse than it had been below. Apparently the whole great outer seam of the Station had sprung open. The corpses here were bloated things, puffed out by the air pressure within them as they died.

But after the living death below, this didn't hit him as it might have done before. He made his way through the shambles that had been man's finest achievement. His half-memory of bombs was nagging at him, together with the things his brain had guessed at.

He located the big bomb bay, which was never to have been used, but to have prevented war by its mere existence. Here, five hundred H-bombs rested, their tubes ready to drive them on controlled courses to Earth. And here, probably, had been the place where the ones he was ferrying from the supply ship had been brought. How many? He had no idea. But now there were only a score of them, while the hand of one of the corpses was still tightly locked on the release lever of one of those.

Below him, the giant ball that was Earth lay cradled in space, blue-green on the lighted half towards which the Station was moving. He wondered whether the exact two-hour rotation of the Station had been disturbed. Probably not enough to show. And even completely wrecked, it could still sail on its orbit here forever, with nothing to slow it, and no way to fall at its present speed.

Then his eyes focused on a tiny spot of light on the dark side of the Earth—tiny here, but still larger and brighter than anything he could remember. It was as if the whole of a city had burst into flames.

He stood there, unwilling to believe what alone could explain it all. Somehow, the impossible had happened. War that had threatened so long had finally broken out. Men had turned against men—when all of space lay waiting for their conquest! Nation with atomic bombs had been pitted against nation with bacteriological weapons. The threat of the bombs from the

Station had become reality, and Earth had somehow reached up a long finger of wrath to strike back.

There had even been treason here. The man with the machine gun—Peter Olin, master mechanic, ten years with the Station, Fenton suddenly remembered—had betrayed them. It must have been in his mind for years, since there was no other reason for a smuggled gun here. He'd gotten control over the officers so quickly that no word had spread, and then had begun working backwards, killing as he went, not caring about the noise here where so many sounds passed down the echoing metal walls. And the great guided missile—perhaps from his own nation—had struck him down along with those he had wanted to betray. Only the two in the infirmary had been spared.

"Why?" he shouted. "Why?"

He was sobbing wildly, and his cries rang in his ears when he found himself back in the control room. The incipient insanity in his own voice snapped him back, slowly this time, through his childhood horror of violence, his bravado as a youth setting out to help save the world, and finally the present where his whole hope and faith had been tied up in this great hulk of metal around him.

It had failed. He faced it now—and he knew that even without all its slowly returning memories, his mind was back to the thirty-five-year level. There were twisted, bitter thoughts still, but he faced the fact which he couldn't have accepted once. The Station had failed, and his fellow men had blown out the spark of divinity in them and gone back to the jungles, with all the power of the science that could have made them star-men.

He was still crying, and he made no effort to stop it. But he was in control of himself.

Slowly, with a sick fear of what he must see, he moved to the screen that was set to show the scene on Earth toward which the telescope pointed. He flipped it on, adjusting the levers that controlled the instrument by a process of trial and error. For a moment he stopped then, and looked up toward the Moon that rode in space so far above him.

Men had been about to reach that. He'd even hoped that he might go along. Now it was lost.

Then he looked down, seeing the vision of what had been a city through the thin veil of clouds. Atmospheric disturbance blurred some of the outlines, but enough showed through. It was a slag heap, burned out of all resemblance to a scene of Earth. And for fifty miles beyond it, desolation spread out—a land where no life could live.

He shifted the telescope from time to time as the Station moved across the Earth, jumping from city to city, and finally seeking out the lesser ones. Some of those had obviously been hit only by the old-style A-bombs—but damage was complete enough.

He dropped the controls and let the scene below slide by as the Station cruised on. For a few minutes, a welcome numbness hit him. Then he stood up slowly. There would be poison in the dispensary.

He reached for the screen switch, and froze. In the scene, dots moved slowly. He dropped back to the webbing seat, staring down, trying to increase the magnification. The Station was over Africa now—and that meant that he was watching some of the larger animals, probably. But . . .

Something else moved, a mere dot in the screen, but still having a vague shape. Its speed told the real story though. It was an airplane. And now that he looked closer, he saw that the dots below were traveling too straight for beasts. They must be cars on a road!

Life still went on.

Fenton shook himself, and his trembling fingers reached for the switch of the ultra-frequency radio. He knew too little about it to do much more than turn it on and move the tuning dial across the band. For a minute there was silence. Then a faint sputter sounded, and he detected Morse code. He tuned in more carefully, until it was faint but clear, and reached for the microphone.

But the transmitter refused to go on, and the signal was in a language which he couldn't understand. Men, he thought for the thousandth time, should have a common speech to reflect their common origin. But it really didn't matter. He yanked open the housing of the transmitter, and jiggled with

the tubes inside, knowing it was foolish, but in an automatic hope.

One of the tubes was dark. He fumbled for the locker under the table, and began pawing through spare parts, hoping that the shock of the H-bomb that had probably exploded outside the Station had left one good tube of that type. He was in luck. The meter on the transmitter flashed on as soon as he made the change.

But now the Morse had vanished, since the Station had probably gone over the horizon. Even that didn't matter. Where some survived, there would be others. The cities and the sciences would be gone, but the race would continue. And down there now, he'd be needed, as every man who had any of the old skills would be needed.

Maybe men with some engineering training couldn't build more space-ships this generation. But they could help rebuild a world that might again look to the stars. And after the bitter lesson of this nearly fatal holocaust, there would surely be no more wars to hold them back.

It was sheer reaction to his depression, Fenton knew. But it made sense, too.

And he could return. There was the little emergency ship, with fuel enough to reach Earth easily. He could stock it with all the supplies available—there was no telling what might be short on Earth now. The oxygen tanks were gone with the wreckage of the outer half. But he could put in plants from the hydroponic section; in some ways, they'd be even better. With them to replace the oxygen in the air, there was no theoretical limit to how long a man could live in the closed world of a space-ship.

He got up from the radio desk and went out and toward the loading tube, where the little ship lay waiting.

Some measure of reality returned to cancel his false optimism, while he loaded the ship to the limit. The fact that men still lived didn't make their acts in this final war any less horrible, nor did it bring the conquest of space any nearer. Little by little, his sickness and his horror returned. But there was at least some hope, and without life there was none. Even the dumbest animals learned in time; and this time, man had

been given a lesson that could never be overlooked, while the great ruins of his cities still stood there to remind him.

It would be a bitter and a horrible life in such a world. But someday, in the far future, Fenton's descendants would stand on the Lunar Apennines and look up at Earth with pride on their faces.

Fenton finished his work and came back up through the ruined Station. Minute by minute the air seemed to be growing more foul with the smell of death. He came to the corpse of the traitor, Peter Olin, and his eyes dropped. Sometime, he'd have to face the fact that his race had produced men such as that; but not now—not now . . .

For a final time, his mind reeled and tried to run back to its childhood. But he held it firm, and walked past the corpse. That was the past. And from now on men would have to live for the future.

He came to the control room with his muscles knotted in his sudden need to hear human voices. The station had circled the Earth and a little more. They were over America now, and it would be no foreign tongue. He wiped the sweat from his hands, and picked up the microphone.

"Calling Earth. Calling Earth. This is Space Station, calling Earth. I'm green at this, so keep answering until I can find you. Space Station calling Earth." His own voice was hoarse in his throat.

But in a few seconds he located the signal that was coming back at him. ". . . wondered. Damn it, some of those bombs went wild! We lost ninety-five percent, and things are pretty bad down here. But we got most of the other bastards before they could take us. Better land near me—I'll tell you where. Some places they blame you guys for starting it all. And before you leave, if you've got a bomb left on your racks, give them hell over there, Space Station. Give them the . . ."

Fenton spun the dial, and got a series of screams in his ears. Out of the hysteric nonsense, he gathered that the operator was suggesting that he bring down every culture in the biological experimental laboratory, before the enemies they feared could strike. "Only one bug! You've got a lot of unclassifieds," the voice was urging frantically. "Bring the whole lot, and

we'll find any that we can use. We've got to strike first! We need . . ."

Fenton's fingers fumbled on the dials of the radio, and he swayed over the desk. But there was no escape. Another turn of the tuning dial brought it into place with a click that locked it. It could only be the official frequency.

". . . Temporary HQ to Space Station. Come in." It was a flat, hard voice—the voice of a man who has been on duty for days without relief. "Come in."

"I'm getting you, HQ," Fenton acknowledged, and some of the life came back into him at the realization that there was an organization still functioning down there.

The voice answered almost at once. "Good. We've been signaling you for days. Thought you were all taken out by that damned enemy missile that got through. Can you still control . . . no, cancel that. I've just got an order for you. By our figures, you have nineteen bombs left, unless one or two missed our spotters. Here are your targets—and for God's sake, don't slip up the way you did before! First one goes to—get these, because I won't repeat—first to . . ."

Fenton cut off the radio and stood up slowly. He walked out of the corpse-littered control room, past the bodies of those shot by Olin's bullets, and past the corpse of Olin himself. He moved through the area where the explosion had snuffed out the lives of others. The dead no longer bothered him. They were nothing compared to what must exist on Earth.

He picked his way surely, out of already-acquired habit, until he found a space-suit and mounted up through the hatch to the outer section. The bombs still stood there, and there were twenty instead of nineteen. Beside them lay the bodies of men who had come up here to lead mankind to the stars, and who had died because of hatreds that should never have left Earth.

There were no longer nations down there—only enemies. They had learned nothing, and they had biological warfare left to complete what they had been unable to do with their bombs.

He found the body of a gentle old scientist he had known—a man who had been trying to find a cure out here for cancer, and had been near success. He touched his fingers to the clot

of blood beside the corpse, and then to one of the bombs. One by one, he christened all twenty. And one by one, he pulled back the firing levers, watching them take off for Earth. Somewhere down there, they would land. It didn't matter where. Men had sent their messengers of death out into space. Now they were going home. And if they helped to send men further back toward savagery, it didn't matter—with enough time, they might return. They might even unite now, believing that the Station had started the war, and bonding nation to nation to get up here faster to seek vengeance.

Paul Fenton didn't give a damn.

He went down to the infirmary to do what he had to do for what was left of Martha Graves. For a moment, he stood over her with a needle, and then shrugged, and picked her up. Maybe she wasn't human any more, but who was? And she could still get pleasure, if only from the taste of food and the comfort of sleep.

Outside, the little space-ship was waiting, and it could carry them far enough, and land. With the plants and provisions, they could go on living in it as long as he chose, probably.

No man had ever seen the other side of the Earth's satellite. That had to be corrected. No race should go on forever without leaving some monument to show that it has gone beyond its own narrow world, even if it could send only a single ship one way. The men who had dreamed and built the Station deserved that much, at least.

Paul Fenton paused inside the space-ship while the locks sealed shut, and he spat slowly at the floor under his feet.

"Idealist!" he swore at himself bitterly.

But his eyes were rising to stare at the Moon as he hit the controls and blasted off. The Earth began dropping further behind. He did not look back.