

Volume 5

Number 6

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35¢ STORIES

May, 1955

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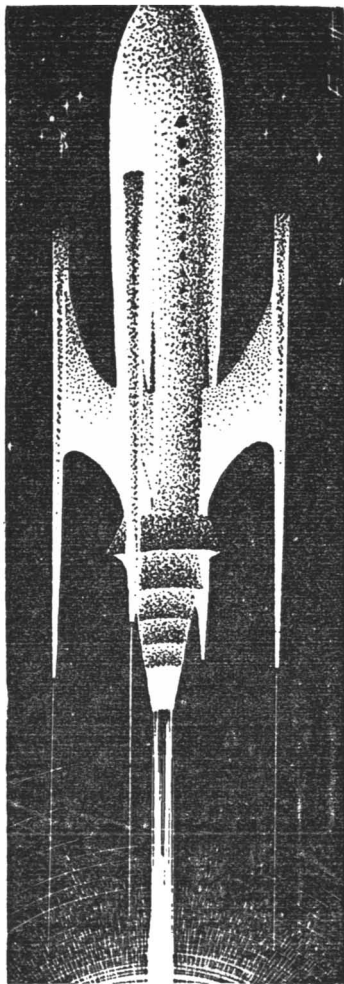
COVER BY EMSH

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SCIENCE FICTION STORIES, May, 1955, published bi-monthly by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices at 841 Church Street, New York 13, New York. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass., under the act of March 2, 1879. Entire contents copyright 1955 by Columbia Publications, Inc., 35¢ per copy; yearly subscriptions \$3.18. Printed in the U. S. A.



The ship would return, eventually—
but not the colonists.

UGLY DUCKLING

by Barbara Constant

*It didn't seem possible that
Judith and Mike could be
colonists...*

MARGO YAWNED. "Didn't suppose they'd really ever get any further than the moon," she remarked, letting her eyes wander idly over the headlines splashed across the front page of the newspaper. "I'm half-tempted to go down and file my own application as a colonist, just for the kicks." Her trilling little laugh was a sound of boredom, rather than amusement. She patted the yawn away ostentatiously.

Judith, dallying over her table setting, felt her heart lurch. Now was the time for the little speech she had been mentally rehearsing all day. It was silly to feel so afraid

of her own mother, but her mouth was brassy and her tongue felt thick and clumsy.

"I—I thought I would go down and apply, at least," she mumbled, half hoping that Margo would answer, half hoping that she would ignore the remark completely, as she so often did ignore her daughter.

This time Margo chose to hear. "You thought *you'd* apply!" she gasped. The surprise in her voice was anything but flattering. Judith flinched away from that amused gaze, suddenly conscious of every ounce of her 145 pounds, bitterly aware of the contrast between her own stocky body and her mother's svelte slimness.

"Don't say any more," she begged silently. "Oh, *don't* say any more!" But if Margo was aware of the mute plea, she ignored it.

"You'd better just concentrate on watching your diet, Chubby," she advised her daughter. "They'll want only perfect specimens for this trip, you can be certain. Ron and I might qualify—you'll just be wasting your time and theirs if you go to that meeting." Deliberately, she selected a chocolate cream from the temptingly-exposed box.

Miserably, Judith watched her mother lingeringly savor the sweet. Her own mouth watered, but she stuck to her resolution grimly—it had been weeks since she had suc-

cumbed to the temptation of candy and pastries, weeks of counting calories religiously, refusing second helpings, suffering pangs of hunger that kept her awake nights... weeks of watching the needle of the scales waver indecisively, then flick derisively back to the self-same accusing point.

Diet? She groaned inwardly, but said nothing. There was nothing to say. Margo felt, and made her feelings obvious, that it was entirely Judith's own lack of will-power that caused her to be chunky and unpopular, more absorbed in reading and dreaming than in the pursuits Margo considered suitable. To Judith's own self-conscious knowledge of her weight had been added the humiliation of Margo's open jibes—not even twenty-two years had inured her to them.

Silently, she touched the letter tucked in her apron pocket for reassurance, then went back to setting the table, mentally itemizing the meal in her own mind.

PORK CHOPS, french-fried potatoes, cole slaw with cream dressing, hot rolls, buttered peas, frosted layer cake for her parents. A broiled lamb chop, undressed salad, unbuttered peas, dietetic fruit for herself. Judith sighed. It *seemed* as if she should lose weight, but she didn't. Maybe Dr. Willett—but she shrank away from the thought of stepping on his scales,

noting the nurse's eyebrow, listening to his little lecture on overweight. Last time he had spoken of some kind of tests—well, as soon as she lost ten pounds, she'd go see him. Shrugging the matter away with an effort, she let her mind slip back to the newspaper story. No doubt Margo was right—there would be little use in her going down for an interview as a prospective candidate for the proposed trip. But she was going to try it, anyway.

Even as she moved competently between stove and refrigerator, Judith was picturing the bookshelves in her bedroom, sagging under their weight of tattered, bright-covered copies of the science fiction magazines she had been reading since a precociously early age, bulging with clippings from newspapers and magazines... stories of a successful robot flight to the moon, then of a manned flight... tragic tales of the explorers who failed to return, jubilant reports of those who did... the discovery of an atomic fuel, of a cosmic-ray-impervious alloy. And finally, pictures of a gleaming rocket ship that inched its way towards completion under the bright white New Mexico sun.

Today, the banner headlines in the paper... her own copy, that she could clip without jeering comments from her parent. She could see the story, recall it almost

word for word, and did so as her hands automatically set silver and napkins, salt and pepper, glasses and condiments in place on the table.

"Panel of psychologists and doctors start selection of crew for star jump," the words blared. *"Local interviewing will take place at municipal auditorium in downtown Colorado Springs tomorrow, at both afternoon and evening sessions. Candidates selected will be trained at Alamogordo rocket site."*

The footnote to the article was in her pocket—a letter, a miracle. It had sent her, wide-eyed and incredulous, to her mother's room, only to be stopped short by a casual, "Later, Judith, I'm dressing for the Branson's cocktail party now."

Safely in the kitchen, away from any eyes, Judith took the letter from her pocket and read it through again. Already, although only hours old, it was dog-eared and wrinkled. But the words were unchanged.

"Dear Miss Martin," it said, unmistakably. *"Your medical and scholastic records indicate that you may be acceptable as a candidate for the interstellar trip now being planned. If interested, please attend one of the meetings at the City Auditorium, August 10, at 3 and 9 p.m. Bring this letter, as well as a transcript of your college records."*

...Judith chose the evening session. It was over three miles from her home to the big gray auditorium, but she walked. "Walking is so good for your figure," Margo remarked frequently, usually from a reclining position on the quilted satin of her chaise longue. "I'm sure you don't get enough exercise."

At any rate, Judith welcomed the silent blocks she could devote to dreaming, while the dream was still possible. Too vividly for comfort, she remembered her happy anticipation on other such walks... the basketball games from which she went home alone, while the boys and girls around her paired off in laughing couples for after-game parties... the dramatics class where she hung dresses and turned hems while other girls walked on behind the footlights. Probably it would happen again tonight—the apologetic, "Well, I'm afraid not everyone can actually make the trip—but we certainly need some help cleaning up the auditorium... typing letters... packing suitcases."

It hadn't happened yet. As she walked, she could still indulge in the little private revery in which a slim, glamorous Judith walked down a slanting gangplank beside a tall, broad-shouldered man in the close-fitting uniform of a space explorer under heavens that were green or purple, on to ground that was not the familiar brown earth,

but the red sands of Mars, the shifting pumice dust of the moon, the unguessed-at color and texture of whatever passed for soil on one of the far-away worlds that was not even so much as a pinpoint in the evening sky...

IT WAS A good dream. It lasted right up to the door of the auditorium, then Judith found that the dream faded; her heart sank, her feet moved slowly, and she clung to the shadows. The bright yawning door of the auditorium looked frighteningly like a trap, rather than the beginning of the path to high adventure. She quickened her pace, hurried on past the door and on around the block. "I'm early," she told herself; "I'll go in next time around."

Silhouettes were crossing that lighted rectangle as she neared it again. She slowed for a second, then, irresolutely, went on past. It was no longer early.

She walked slowly. In what seemed like seconds, however, the door yawned in front of her. And, "Third time's the charm!" a man's voice said encouragingly. It was a nice voice, warm and friendly.

Never speak to a stranger. Margo's words rang warningly in her mind. Heedlessly, she smiled up at the tall figure beside her. "How'd you know?" she asked shyly.

He grinned. His grin was as nice as his voice and constructed on the same large scale as the rest of him. He nodded down at the half-eaten candy bar in his hand. "My third," he admitted. "Been trying to get up the nerve to go in myself, so I guessed that's what you were doing when you kept going past me. Maybe it'll be easier to do it together, hmmm?"

It was easier. Walking in beside Mike, Judith felt small. In fact, she felt almost like the adventurous girl of her dream. And Mike looked like the man she had pictured beside her on the gangplank. Well, almost like him. Of course, Mike was a little more heavysset. But he was tall, and a tall man needed some extra weight. Anyway, men could be heavy, but nobody ever called them "Fatty." Her mouth felt dry again. Consciously, she concentrated on the crowd as she walked down the aisle beside Mike and settled uncomfortably into one of the uncompromising wooden seats.

"So far, so good," Mike whispered. "At least, we got inside before someone said, 'so sorry'."

Judith stared at him. Why, that bitter remark had been like an echo of her own inner thoughts. She caught her breath—so that was why Mike had been hesitating outside the door...the same fear of exclusion that haunted her!

HER WONDERING thought was interrupted by the stir as a small gray man walked to the center of the bare stage. Judith leaned forward tensely, clutching her precious letter and her school credits as if they had suddenly been endowed with a life of their own and might somehow get away from her. She scarcely stirred during the next half hour. Beside her, Mike was just as intent.

"You can understand, therefore," concluded the speaker, "why the candidates for this expedition *must* be volunteers. For almost a year, those accepted will be subjected to the most exhaustive psychological and physical conditioning. We have chosen and trained, during arduous years, the crews for the star ship, the scientists who will accompany the selected candidates. Those men will return with the ship and with news of the trip and the planet where it ends. We are now selecting the colonists for whom this will be a one-way journey. From the two thousand whom we select to start the training, we hope there will be a hundred who will successfully pass every test. Those who do will say goodbye to their homes, their families, their earth. For twenty years or more, they will sleep in the stasis of deep-freeze..."

For the first time, he permitted himself a smile. "At least," he admitted, "it has one merit—for

the first time, it will *really* be possible for a woman to *stay* twenty years old for twenty years, since there is no aging in stasis."

Quickly, he was serious again. "We are looking for young men and women," he went on, "who are physically able to survive the years in deepfreeze, intellectually capable of adapting to new conditions, emotionally able to stand the severance of all familiar ties. As you know, crowded conditions on earth increase day by day...although new techniques have enabled us to feed earth's new millions, the time approaches when we must have more land, or cease to reproduce, stagnate, and die.

"The stars are light years away—all earth's combined efforts have achieved only the one ship now being readied to journey outwards. We can but hope that it will reach its destination, that this group of colonists will successfully prepare the way for thousands to follow. *None of you who go can hope to return*—you will find your glory only in the knowledge of what your sacrifice will mean to mankind."

This time his pause was long and deliberate, long enough for the whispers to become thoroughly audible. The clamor died immediately as he raised his hand for silence. "Will those of you who are still interested please remain seated," he finished. "And will

those of you who find you really prefer to stay on earth, leave now? Remember, there is no stigma attached to deciding not to volunteer—you couldn't *pay* me to go!"

There was a polite spattering of applause and appreciative laughter, a curious little hush, then orderly confusion as one person after another frowned, conferred with his neighbor, then, with growing certainty of step, moved toward the outside door and the blessedly familiar routines of everyday life. Surprisingly few remained behind.

JUDITH stayed, and so did Mike. "I wonder," Judith mused aloud, "why they even threw these meetings open to the public? Seems as if they could have gotten enough volunteers just among the scientists who designed the star ship. Or else asked just those select few whom they really felt had special skill or talent to offer."

"Partly politics," Mike opined. "Remember all the stink Senator McLarky raised about 'the scientific caste system'? And it could be that scientists don't make good colonists—that's all I can think of." He glanced at the envelope he held, the twin of Judith's. "Looks as if they *did* do some pre-selecting, at any rate."

"Make yourselves comfortable," suggested the speaker as he left the stage; "this interviewing may take some time."

Judith did not feel like talking. Apparently, neither did Mike. In complete, if companionable, silence, they waited as the minutes dragged out into one hour, then two. And then Judith was the next in line.

"The front door, afterwards," Mike said, as she moved blindly forward in answer to the beckoning finger. Blessedly, Judith felt nothing except a curious numbness as she forced her leaden legs to carry her forward...

The numbness had vanished as she waited outside in the velvet night. The stars were diamonds, the moon a silver scimitar, the night breeze perfumed, the cool stone of the building a pleasant support at her back. She was vividly aware of every facet of the wonderful world around her...and when Mike charged out, preceded by his face-wide grin, the very heavens exploded into a spinning maelstrom of delight.

All he said was, "Would you like a double banana split?" And all she answered was, "Topped with hot fudge sauce and extra whipped cream?" That was all that needed to be said. And they laughed together like two wild children, and walked the streets as proudly as though the stars were already within their grasp.

Later, though, they were grave and quiet. "I don't think I'll tell Dad," Mike said. "I'll just leave

a note. Not that he could stop me from going...but he'd laugh. I just don't want to be laughed at."

"Neither do I," Judith admitted. "But I think we ought to tell them, Mike. After all, remember what the teachers used to say in school—'sticks and stones can...'"

"... 'break your bones, but words can never hurt you'" Mike finished in chorus with her. "Okay. I'll tell Dad, and you tell your mother; but I don't have to enjoy it."

Nor did she, Judith decided ruefully later. The childhood chant was not exactly true. It seemed unlikely that she could feel much more bruised and beaten by actual blows than she felt by the time the unflattering surprise, the incredulous laughter, the taunting remarks had died down.

"You?" Margo said. "As a star colonist? Have you gone mad? Or have they gone mad? Not that I'd consider letting you go, even if by some fluke you *did* get a chance."

And, later, finally accepting the fact that Judith was being given a chance and *was* going, "Well, they have months to train you in. If you really *want* to go, they might even be able to get you to stick to a diet long enough to get through the door of the ship! But I doubt it."

And later yet. "Oh, Judith, for heaven's sake stop looking so *smug*."

You'll make people think you are happy just to get away from me. Nobody knows how hard I've tried to make you pretty and popular and a credit to me. *Stop interrupting me*—I don't want to hear any wild tales about why they wanted you. I don't care, I tell you. I know. They just couldn't get any *normal* people to volunteer, that's all."

MIKE LOOKED as tired as Judith felt, when they met in the shadow of the plane that was to take them to Alamogordo. "Sticks and stones . . . ?" he queried bitterly.

"Whoever wrote that needs re-educating." Judith's tone matched Mike's. And then, because there was really very little need to say more, they simply stood there, hand in hand, waiting for someone to come and tell them where to go and what to do when they got there.

That was, in a large part, the biggest thing they did for the next year. Mornings were devoted to classes—classes in agriculture, animal husbandry, woodcraft, medicine, metalcraft, astronomy. But from noon until nightfall they were simply "on tap" for the testing the lecturer had mentioned with such blithe brevity.

Not necessarily *doing* anything, just *waiting* to do something. Waiting in line to eat, waiting in line

for a physical examination, waiting in line for an interview with some visiting psychologist, waiting in line to try a brief turn in the deep-freeze, waiting in line, as Mike muttered, to *get* in line!

"At least," Judith remarked wryly one night, sipping a chocolate malt with very little enthusiasm, "I'll bet we're becoming the most *patient* group of people on earth."

"We'd better be," Mike said grimly; "being impatient is just about the surest way I know of getting your walking papers."

His grimness was matched by other's expressions, for time was growing short now. Week by week, day by day, the ranks were thinning. Dormitories that had once buzzed with a hundred girls' voices now echoed remotely to the thin sound of mere dozens. In the men's section, the exuberant pillow fights, high-spirited wrestling, and boisterous telling of tales had subsided into long silences.

But even as the colonists-to-be sank into a kind of weary apathy, the workers on the gigantic ship stepped up their tempo. Day and night, clanging hammers, chattering riveting machines, and throbbing engines wove a background tapestry of sound. . . .

Abruptly, like a shot of adrenal, came the news—blared from loudspeakers, posted on bulletin boards, passed from person to person. "The ship is ready. Final tests are now

being made—final elimination will soon take place. Take-off is scheduled for next week. Repeat—*Take-off is scheduled for next week.*"

And the inevitable postscript, "There will be no final leaves. Each colonist may name two people to whom he or she would like to say a personal goodbye. Those selected will be flown here to witness the take-off."

JUDITH AND Mike went to the office together to file their requests. It was evening; the lighted doorway reminded Judith of the auditorium where all of this had started. The sickening thud of her heart was also poignantly familiar.

"I think," she said slowly, "I won't request any visitors. I believe... a letter..."

"No," said Mike firmly. "We faced up to them before. We can again. For the last time." He gave Judith a little encouraging pat. "I doubt that even sticks and stones could hurt us now," he said.

The forms filled out, they strolled back down the dusty street to the almost-deserted drugstore. Mike glanced up at the star-filled heavens as they went inside. "So close," he murmured. "Neither of us must fail *now*, Judith!"

Oddly enough, this was the first time Judith had seriously considered the possibility that one of them

might go, the other be left behind. She shuddered convulsively, suddenly feeling faint and sick. Mike's big hand closed consolingly around hers. "Double or nothing," he said lightly. "If we *both* stay behind, it won't be unbearable." He smiled at her. "We can put up a solid front against the world, anyhow."

The lump in Judith's throat dissolved abruptly as she whooped with startled laughter. Mike's below joined hers, while the few other customers turned and stared curiously.

"We could always join a side-show," Judith suggested weakly, and Mike doubled up again.

"Just for that, woman," he stated severely, finally gaining control of himself, "We'll finish off the evening with two egg salad sandwiches apiece."

"Yes *sir*," said the boy behind the counter with noxious pleasure.

Judith and Mike only laughed harder, to his complete and obvious amazement. "Boy," admonished Mike, struggling for composure, "wipe that grin off your face, or we'll walk out of here without paying our check!"

"But you *never* pay..." The boy started to protest, then reddened and ignored them pointedly as he spread bread lavishly with butter, heaped on the salad mixture, and shoved the food across the counter.

They ate in silence. It took a

long time. "Probably," she finally managed to say, "it is just as well we don't have much longer to go. If I had to face another month of milk shakes and egg salad sandwiches and bananas and..."

Mike shuddered. "Spare me the resume," he said. "I know just what you mean."

OUTSIDE, as always, Judith's eyes swung upwards and knew that, beside her, Mike was looking with her. So far away—those little pinpoints of light—so many miles, so many years, so many dreams away. She felt a cold shiver run down her back. And then Mike had turned her with a gentle nudge into the dark shadows between her dormitory and the one beside it.

In the dimness, she could not see his face. "Judy," he murmured huskily. The words sounded strange. "Like peppermints," Judith thought, and sought, in some bewilderment, for the link. Granny—that was it. Little, sharp-eyed Granny, the only person who had ever used the affectionate diminutive. A nickname had seemed out of place for the chunky toddler, the stocky girl, the hefty teen-ager. She supposed, ruefully, that it was even less suitable now, but, none the less, she responded to it with a warm thrill of pleasure.

"Judy," Mike said again, and then his lips were against hers and

for a breathless moment Judy was able to shut her eyes and her mind against the external stars and to concentrate on the ones that revolved giddily in her own head.

"Together?" Mike queried gently. And then, more certainly, "Together, Judy, no matter what happens."

Judith did not answer. She couldn't. But she touched one hand gently, tentatively, against his cheek, before she turned and fled into the building, to lie awake thinking, not of the tests to come the next day, not of the weeding out that would again halve the hopefuls who remained, but of the feel of Mike's body against her own, of the sound of his words, the warmth of his lips.

"Why, I'm in love!" Judy said to herself, and laughed aloud in the quiet night... Suddenly it seemed completely unimportant whether she were chosen to ride the star ship. There were other things in life besides adventure and service, other stars besides those in the skies. Wistfully, she found herself longing for her mother's presence. Surely now, with this new happiness filling her, she could break down the barriers between herself and Margo. Mentally, she pictured herself curled up at the foot of Margo's chaise longue. In spite of herself, she saw Margo's

expression as it had been the last time, heard Margo say. . .

Judith laughed again. This time the sound was not a happy one. Clumsily, she slipped out of bed and padded over to stare out at the towering rocket. The stars were still the answer. The only answer, now.

Judith felt as somber and gray as the day itself as she joined the line of girls before the cafeteria the next morning.

Apparently others shared her mood. In morose silence, they downed their breakfast. Judith was sure, stealing a glance down the rows of somber faces, that to others besides herself the waffles were cardboard, the syrup ink, the tasty little sausages just so many twigs. But she ate, from sheer habit. So did the others. Then, still silent, they filed into the auditorium for another lecture.

AT NOON the next day the small white envelopes were delivered. One to a person—and no way to tell from the discreetly plain envelopes whether the news inside were good or bad. Beside Judith, one of the other girls toyed indecisively with hers.

"Seems as if there could have been a better way to do this," she said. "I'm afraid to open it."

"I guess there isn't *ever* any good way to break bad news," Judith agreed abstractedly, sharing the

moment of indecision. And then, determinedly, she ripped the envelope open.

Her name had been typed in across the top of a form sheet. Beneath it, the message was stark and impersonal. "*You have been selected to be one of the colonists. Report to the auditorium at 6 p.m. for a final briefing. Equipment will be issued at that time.*"

Judith drew a deep breath, realized from the surge of giddiness that it was the first for several seconds. Beside her she heard an odd sound, half-way between a gasp and sigh, and turned to see the girl who had spoken collapse on the floor, a limp rag doll. Men who had apparently been waiting for just such an occurrence were beside her in a moment.

Without thinking, Judith dropped her eyes to the paper in the girl's hand. "*We regret to inform you that you were eliminated in the final tests for the first group of colonists. It is in the best interests of the expedition, as well as in your own, that you undergo a period of rehabilitation before returning to civilian life. Busses will leave the rocket site for a nearby sanitarium at 5 p.m.*"

Judith reread the lines slowly, then smiled. For the first time since the night Mike kissed her, the tautness around her heart relaxed. The future, then, would *not* have been completely hopeless had

she been rejected.

But she was going...she and Mike...with a little moan, she hurried out of the quickly-emptying room. Mike. Mike! How could she have forgotten him, even for a moment?

THE CROWD that waited behind the ropes stirred restlessly. A wave of motion rippled through it as the parents, relatives, and close friends of the colonists were ushered into the roped-off area on the inner fringes of the crowd. Nearer the rocket. Still not very near. Lines of motionless men, bayonets at rest, but eyes alert, were a silent reminder that there still existed enemies of the projected flight. Nobody, those armed lines indicated, would get close to the star ship—nobody save the crew and the colonists.

On the dias in front of the crowd, a little man spoke into a microphone.

"The crew who will guide the *Star Corsair*," he said simply. "The scientists who will accompany them." The doors of the nearby building swung wide. Tall slim crew members, grizzled serious scientists, proud young mechanics walked across the ramp to the thunder of a thousand voices. "These are the men," the speaker said softly, "who will, God willing, direct the ship to its destination,

bring back to us word of another frontier conquered, of a new world and new hope for our children and our children's children." The crowd roared its approval.

"In a moment," said the speaker, and the noise dwindled and whispered away into nothingness. Throughout the world everything stopped for a second, a moment. a timeless interval, as eyes and ears turned to television screens, to loudspeakers, to radios. "One hundred men and women will walk across this ramp, pause to say goodbye to this life and this world. Selflessly, in full knowledge that they will never return, these hundred have trained through the long months for the longer years that lie between us and the stars. You may have wondered—you must have wondered—why none of those who failed to complete the course of training have yet returned to their homes, why we have insisted on a period of rehabilitation before permitting them to do so. In a moment, you will know the reason..."

He paused. Man turned to man, woman to woman, and a murmur of speculation swept through the crowd.

"Farewell to the Gods!" Margo murmured sardonically to her husband. "Well, they *must* have worked a miracle to make a star voyager out of Judith!"

"You all probably have mental

pictures," the speaker continued, "of the beautiful lasses and handsome lads who will carry humanity's hopes out into space. Reality, however, frequently lacks glamor."

Margo looked at her husband questioningly. "Do you know what he's talking about?" she asked.

It was a credit to the speaker's personality that she asked her question in a whisper. . . another mark in his favor that Margo's husband, for the first time in years, instead of murmuring, "Yes, dear," snapped, "Shut up!" And it was a real miracle that Margo, wide-eyed with surprise, *did* stop talking.

"It will be over two decades," said the lecturer, "before these voyagers reach their goal." The murmur of the crowd swelled and died and swelled again. He waited imperturbably. "They will not be conscious of time's passing," he said, "because they will travel in the frozen stasis we have developed, nourished by the nutrient fluid in which they sleep and, more importantly, *by the nutriment which they take with them, as part of themselves!*" He stopped dramatically. The door of the building nearby opened, and out into the hush came a white clad group. Slowly, with obvious effort, it moved sluggishly across the cleared ground towards the waiting lines of people.

"Judith!" screamed Margo, shocked recognition on her face as

one of the massively fat women stopped in front of her. "Judith!"

Judith smiled at the angry little woman. Beneath her serene, knowledgeable gaze, Margo was silent.

"Remember how I couldn't ever seem to lose weight," Judith asked gently. "Dr. Willett tried to have me run metabolism tests, but I was so humiliated about the whole matter that I never listened to him. I should have. You were right, you see, when you said I wasn't normal. None of us are. Normal people can't stand prolonged deepfreeze. But a thyroid deficiency makes it possible for me—and the others—to store enough fat to keep us alive—and after landing, we can live comfortably on the same number of calories that would starve someone like you." For the first time, she looked a little uncertain of herself. "Won't you wish me luck, Mother?" she begged.

Margo only stared in stunned silence.

Then Mike moved up to where Judith waited. Quietly, she turned and trudged toward the gleaming star ship, shapeless, short of breath, far from being the slim girl of her long-ago dream, but walking proudly and carrying her stupendous bulk with dignity, as befitted one of man's first envoys to another world.

