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## Terraforming Planets © Matias Travieso-Diaz

*Posted by Author Z. Knight* (<https://pridebookcafe.com/author/zknight/?v=7516fd43adaa>) under *Original Fiction* (<https://pridebookcafe.com/category/original-fiction/?v=7516fd43adaa>)



A generation after the establishment of New Lanark, Earth's first off world colony, the Economics department of my university was awarded a grant to study how the colony's farmers were faring under the restrictive management practices of the colonial government. The school sent me, one of its PhD candidates, to Mars to do a project on the issue.

Traveling to the New Lanark countryside was difficult. After a couple of days in the colony's capital city of Bountiful, I was transported east by a rover bus and then further into the countryside by a "matchstick truck," so named because you stood by the side of the road and climbed aboard when one such truck came by. Then you stood inside the truck packed tightly, as a matchstick, with dozens of other travelers.

Finally, I arrived at my destination, an "agricultural co-operative" near Dallin, right in the center of the terraformed southern hemisphere of Mars. The co-operative had a frontier town look; everything was improvised and rudimentary. The houses were aluminum dwellings with plastic tile roofs and cardboard-covered dirt floors, a throwback to the pioneer homes of many centuries ago. Existence was rough and work extended from sunrise to sunset. I found myself with little money and nothing on which to spend it. There was electric power but no internet.

I got along well with the local population, although my long hair and effete demeanor reeked of despised Earthsider. I was accepted, however, because I tried to work as hard as the other farm hands. Laboring on the field served to disguise my true purpose, which was to travel all over the farms, attend meetings, and have frank discussions with the farmers to learn about their problems and the methods they used to overcome them.

That way, I was able to assess the farmer's response to the government's dictate that sixty percent of the co-operatives' output was to be turned over to the State and the farmers had to consume some of the remainder and eke out a living by selling the rest on the town markets. The system was inefficient, unfair and hard on the co-operative members, forcing them to perform many tricks to survive (like selling illegally part of their output on the black market and keeping two sets of books to report only part of their production to the government inspectors) but human ingenuity prevailed, even in a distant outpost in Mars. I intended to present my findings, in a sanitized form to protect the co-operative owners, in a paper that would meet academic requirements towards my doctoral degree.

The farm where I was detached was run by a grumpy old man who kept a picture of Che Guevara on the wall of the living room. I suspect the only reason he accepted me was that the assignment from the Economics department of my university came with a small



stipend and authorization to use me as free labor. The wife was recently widowed and lived only for her son from her previous marriage. That son was what drew my attention from the get go. His name was Ronald, but everyone called him “Ronnie.” Ronnie had just turned eighteen and had curly raven hair, liquid brown eyes, a well-padded body, and sensual lips that parted frequently with the impish grin of a Caravaggio.

He was lovely but unattainable. New Lanark was a Socialist state but its citizens were as puritanical as the fundamentalists now ruling the Earth. The regime would not look kindly on a thirty-year old foreigner ravishing a local boy, even one above the age of consent. And I knew that if the step-father discovered my intentions, there would be trouble.

My second day at work was a hot one: it was summer in Mars’ southern hemisphere and, while the surface temperatures outside the terraformed areas were well below freezing, the stationary mirrors in orbit that focused the sun’s rays on the colony made it very warm on the farm. We went out to the field to pick up the beans that grew on the rocky soil. Soon Ronnie took his shirt off. It was the first time I had seen his sun-tanned upper body. He must have seen me staring, because I felt tension rise between us. I looked away quickly.

As we were going in for supper, he questioned me. “You were checking my body out today, weren’t you?” I quickly denied it: “No, Ronnie, I wasn’t.” He came closer and said quietly, “I know what you want... and I want it too. I have been wanting it for a long time, but out here it’s impossible. “

Words died in my throat. I took Ronnie by the hand and led him deep into the field. We stopped and I kissed him. His lips were warm and soft. “Oh! Oh!”, he grunted.

I then came to my senses. “We can’t do this here,” I whispered. “It’s too dangerous. Come to my shack tonight, ok?” Ronnie nodded and sighed. “I’ll come; I promise.”

That night I waited impatiently for him to come. It seemed like an eternity until I heard a soft knock on my door. I opened it. Ronnie stood there with no shirt on, sporting tight, torn shorts. As I was soon to discover, he wore no underwear.

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We made love over and over until dawn. On the days that followed, we kept on coupling like rabbits — night after night, for the rest of my stay on the farm.



A few weeks later, the allowed term of my research was over and I needed to go back to Earth. Two nights before I had to leave, we discussed logistics. “So, how am I going to keep in touch with you? I can’t send you messages or holovids here.” I said. Ronnie knotted his eyebrows and after a while replied: “I’ll talk to my best friend, Nick, who lives on the farm next to us, to see if it is OK for you to send holovids to me through him. He may ask what this is all about, but I’ll be discreet, and in any case I trust Nick. We have known each other since childhood.”

“But how can he send holovids back and forth between us without being discovered?”

“His father is the Secretary of the co-operative and gets a lot of official messages and holovids from the government. He has a mail drop in Bountiful. Nick goes there once or twice a week to get the correspondence and can smuggle our exchanges. I have a holovid kit, so I can see your messages and generate my own, which he will send out from the post office.”

I was not happy with trusting the future of our relationship to a third party, but there was little else we could do. Since Nick lived in the adjacent farm, keeping in contact with him would at least be easy for Ronnie.

The following night I asked Ronnie whether he had talked to Nick. He sighed. “Yes, he is OK with serving as intermediary, but...” His hesitation told me at once that there was a problem. “But what?” “I had to tell him about our relationship and how we wanted to keep in touch until I can somehow get to live with you on Earth.”

“Oh.” I gulped. “And what did he say to that?”

“He surprised me. He said he would help me, but I had to pay him.” “How is that?” I asked, suspicion creeping into my voice. “He wants my body as payment. This was a shocker, because I have always thought that Nick was straight.”

“Do you mean you have to become his whore?”

Ronnie let out a little whimper. “Yeah, but it isn’t so bad. He has had several girlfriends, so the deal between us couldn’t possibly be serious.”

“I don’t like it. If you start sleeping around you may be found out and get in trouble with the government.”

“I know, but what else can I do? I don’t want to lose contact with you.”



I relented. “OK, baby, neither do I. But promise you’ll be very careful.”

4

Six months later I was back at home, thinking of a way to share my life with Ronnie. There was no way to smuggle him out of Mars, and getting him into Earth would also be nearly impossible. The Earth’s government sought to control population growth by shipping undesirables out to off-planet colonies and did not welcome immigrants.

I presented my predicament to my advisor, an old maid by the name of Chantal D’Auvigny. Chantal was sympathetic, but the best she could suggest was that I apply for Ronnie to be allowed to come in as a visiting scholar, and then overstaying his admission after he got to Earth. That required massive fraud on my part (for one thing, Ronnie had not even finished High School and had no academic credentials of any kind). It also called for the complicity of Dr. D’Auvigny, who agreed to endorse my request only because she neared retirement and had “little left to lose.” It was a long shot, but in my desperation, I was willing to risk jail in order to get Ronnie out of Mars.

I began processing the application through bureaucratic channels. Meanwhile, I corresponded with Nick, with messages to be delivered to Ronnie. I was careful with what I said in my holovids, knowing that they could be played by snooping eyes. Ronnie’s replies, however, were disturbing. Nick was turning more and more frequently to Ronnie for sex. Ronnie had acquiesced to his demands, on the understanding that they would end once he got to rejoin me.

I grew increasingly angry and indicated my annoyance in my messages to Ronnie. He always responded by saying that Nick was a nice kid but didn’t measure up to me in any way, so I needed not be angry. I thought of catching the first available shuttle to Mars and confronting the pair, but tried to make the best of a bad deal.

5

Matters managed to limp along until the end of Ronnie’s final year in high school. Ronnie reported that, since he was now of age, he was allowed to consume hard liquor in public, and had gotten a bit plastered at his graduation party; but nothing compared with Nick, who had been drinking non-stop since he arrived at the party. It was approaching midnight, and Nick had staggered to where Ronnie stood, grabbed him by the waist, and come to the center of the floor with him. There, Nick had embraced him



and begun dancing with him before the astonished assembly. There were boos and hisses and Nick responded by twirling Ronnie around a couple of times and kissing him eagerly.

Several guys came in to separate them, and Nick began fighting them. Ronnie tried to rescue Nick, got a solid punch in the jaw that sent him sprawling, and a then a couple more hits until he lost consciousness.

He woke up on his cot, his mother hovering over him. He had a fierce headache, a hangover, and bruises all over the body, though no broken bones. His step-father made an appearance to declare: “I want you out of this house, you pervert. I want you gone, right now!” Only his mother’s frantic pleas had saved Ronnie from immediate dismissal, but he was to leave the house for good when he had done his work on the farm through harvest time, eight months hence. Nick had been expelled from school.

All of this came to me in a holovid that Ronnie somehow managed to send himself, and which concluded with a heart-rending plea: “Please, please, come and get me, now!!”

## 6

The day after receiving that message I emptied my bank account and booked an express shuttle from New York to Bountiful. Luckily, my passport and visa were still valid and I could claim that I was on a follow-up trip to further study the farm cooperatives.

When I got to Dallin five and a half months later, I was spared a scene with Ronnie’s step-father because he had gone into town. His mother was dismayed to learn the purpose of my visit. “I’ve come to take Ronnie away from here. We’ll go to Bountiful, and eventually he’ll come to live with me on Earth” I said tersely. She wrung her hands, argued querulously against my taking her baby away, cried, and threatened to denounce me. Finally, Ronnie cut her short: “Mother, I can no longer stay on this farm. In Bountiful I can be myself and have a better life.” With that, he turned his back and went to pack his meager possessions.

## 7

Upon arrival in Bountiful, we found a cheap hostel in which to stay while I looked for work. This proved a fruitless task; my political science training was of no value in the colony, and most of the manual labor in demand required skills and experience that I



lacked. Ronnie got himself work as janitor, a menial and ill-paying job that hardly covered our rent. He was sullen and distant, clearly missing Nick. We stopped having sex and barely spoke to each other.

To make matters worse, my visa was soon expiring and I was faced with the prospect of having to shuttle back to Earth alone. And my application for an entry permit for Ronnie as a visiting scholar had gotten nowhere.

I was on my fourth visit of the week at the employment office, where the scowls of the staff let me know that I was unwelcome. While waiting for my turn, I watched a newscast from Earth flash on the large monitors in the waiting room: some talking head was describing the progress of the terraforming project for Titan, Saturn's largest moon. The speaker explained that, as life on Earth was becoming nearly impossible, opening up another world for an accelerated human exodus had become a top priority. Titan was chosen because conditions there were far closer to Earth's than those that had made it so difficult to terraform Mars. The scientist stated: "Terraforming Titan is coming along so fast that we are already soliciting volunteers to establish the first colony there. In addition, we will be shipping out social undesirables: homosexuals, political deviants, atheists, and other scum."

When my number came up, I approached the window with an entirely different purpose in mind. I asked: "Is the New Lanark colony participating in the program to colonize Titan?"

The lady at the counter responded disinterestedly: "Yes, we have undesirables of our own that we would be glad to send away. We have a contract with the Earth's government to share transportation costs in exchange for space in the shuttle. Our first batch of travelers is being assembled. Are you interested in relocating?"

"Yes, my partner and I are looking for opportunities elsewhere in the Solar System."

At the words "my partner" the lady grimaced and pushed two forms across the window. "Here, you and *your partner* need to fill out these forms. You better return them soon, because a colonizing ship from Earth is landing in Bountiful in a week. Be prepared for a long travel; the trip from Mars to Titan will take well over two years.

"Two years" had a magical ring to my ears. Ronnie and I would be together for a long, long time, and hopefully would be able to rekindle the magic between us. When we arrived in Titan, we might even get married and start a new life. With luck — as the song went — there would be a place for us, a place for us somewhere.



“A Necklace of Witchwheat” ©  
Danielle Coombs

October 15, 2021

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