

THE LONGER VIEW

Brenda Kalt

THE CHIEF SURGEON SAT in a padded leather chair, and I sat in a hard plastic one. The wall vents behind him blew fresh, filtered air, which dissipated into wisps before it got to me. Even on the top floor of Darber Institute, stale air smelled of ammonia. I coughed. He didn't.

At last he said, "Mr. Jones, dozens of faster-than-light candidates arrive at the Institute every year. Every one of them swears that he'd give his right arm to get a cranial implant, and every one except you is prepared to wait his turn. Nothing you've said gives me a reason to jump you to the head of the queue."

"I've bought the chip," I said, holding it up, "passed the test, and—" I coughed. Again. Again. "I can't wait eight months."

He frowned and picked a beebee nut from the bowl on his desk. "We publish the schedule years in advance. You should have timed your arrival better. Expecting to get an implant immediately so you can sign on an FTL ship is unrealistic." He pointed at a long, low, six-legged animal combing the edge of the carpet with one paw. "Even that idiot roller has better sense than to climb in a sleeper without a fixed-arrival contract."

Cough. "On 337c Eridani we take what we can get. The *Clarence* was the first ship that stopped in five years. I took it."

Something tapped my ankle, and I looked down. The roller was pulling at a scrap of paper under the chair leg. I shifted my weight, and the paper vanished. He moved on.

"Take the long view, Mr. Jones. I do." The Chief Surgeon popped open the beebee nut and tossed the shell in the direction of the roller. It rose on four legs, and the shell vanished. "If you can't wait for an appropriate ship, how can you possibly control an FTL interface?" He stood, and the office door slid open behind me. "Good-bye, Mr. Jones."

The roller reached the door before I did. With his tail clamped in his jaws and an occasional push from a hind leg, he rolled end-over-end faster than I walked. He led the way to the elevator and circled the foyer as I waited.

When the elevator arrived he rolled past me and uncoiled inside. "Main floor." He didn't move.

Flash
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*"Even that idiot roller
has better sense
than to climb in a sleeper
without a fixed-arrival contract."*

As we descended he squeaked, "I'm sorry you couldn't get an exception, sir. When you were talking to the Chief Surgeon, you seemed to have a good case."

I jumped. Rollers' voices were above human hearing, and few of them invested in speakers that reproduced their ultrasonic speech in human range. Even fewer spoke grammatical English.

"Thank you." I cleared my throat. "I thought so, too."

When we reached the lobby the air smelled sharper and my eyes teared. It occurred to me that staying long enough to get an implant, even an immediate one, would have been torture. I coughed my way to a bench and sat down. I would stay as long as I could before I went back to the *Clarence* and coldsleep.

Opposite me, the roller picked bits of lint from the edge of the carpet. I watched him. "I studied for years, borrowed money from every plantation owner on the South Continent, and put myself into coldsleep to get an FTL implant. Then this happens." I rubbed my face with my hands. "By the time I get home in coldsleep, my nieces and nephews will have grandchildren." My eyes watered again. "Damn, damn, damn."

"I have no experience with coldsleep, sir," the roller responded. "We long people cannot survive that physical state."

"Oh." Without FTL transport, species that couldn't survive coldsleep were stuck in their own solar system. In the Darber system they were trapped on one planet. On an impulse I tapped the bench beside me. "Want to sit down?"

The roller launched himself toward the spot. He skidded on landing, but he held on with his teeth and one front paw until he got his middle and rear legs under him. As he settled down, I saw where he'd put the trash from the Chief Surgeon's office—a kangaroo-type flap of skin on his abdomen. A moment later light reflected off his left front paw, and I saw an implanted microphone and speaker. So that's why he worked one-handed.

He sat beside me for a moment, panting slightly; then the elevator beeped. Immediately he rolled off the bench and un-

coiled on the opposite side of the hallway. He resumed collecting lint.

The Chief Surgeon appeared in the elevator doorway. When he saw the two of us, he said something under his breath and stepped inside again. As the elevator door closed, my companion stopped working.

“He’s taking the service entrance now. He won’t come through the lobby while you’re here.”

“Want to come back?” I asked. The roller landed accurately this time. When he was seated beside me I said, “Have you ever thought about getting a cranial implant?”

“Often, sir,” he answered. “But even a communication implant”—he held up his left arm—“requires money. An implant suitable for FTL work requires a great deal of money.”

“An entire planet’s money. I know.” I sat there, my eyes stinging with each blink. I reached into my pocket. “Here. Take this.”

The roller looked at me and at the wafer lying on my palm. He moved, and my hand was empty. A second later he was coiled on the other side of the hall. I stood up and coughed until I could get a breath. It was done. I would sleep away the years to 337c Eridani, to be a dyewood farmer as my father and grandfather had been. But part of me would stay here—or somewhere.

“Enjoy the universe.”

I walked out of Darber Institute and took a cab to the spaceport. 🚫

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BRENDA KALT



By all rights I should be writing Southern gothic. Decayed gentility, lives twining around each other like vines in a thicket—that’s my background.

I learned another way of life in graduate school. I

married a Yankee and worked in a then-emerging field: software. Life has been amazing.

I had always read genre fiction: mystery, science fiction, romance. Science fiction was my favorite because it flexed my mind. It made me think thoughts that I had never thought before.

When I started to write, I picked science fiction because I was compulsive about getting details right, and I thought I could guess in SF (little did I know!). I still have to get the details right, whether I research them or imagine them.

“The Longer View” started out as a ten-minute writing exercise in the Viable Paradise workshop. My fellow students liked it and wanted me to expand it—more background, more character development, more everything. I created that, but I liked the story less and less. Finally I pitched all the comments and started over with the tiny story I had written. The result was the thousand words that you’ve seen here. I hope you enjoyed them.