

The opening of The Investigator's Choice

By David Pennant

Sequel to The Piano Teacher and The Inventor's Folly

From: Mission 702
To: Undisclosed Recipients

I just wish I could blow my nose!

I'm sorry to start off in such an unattractive way, but I do want you to know how enormously frustrating I find it that I cannot snort into a handkerchief. Not that I actually want to, you understand. I don't even know if the nose is blocked or not. It's the principle of the thing. I feel so powerless. I find I can't get used to it. You may not care about my problem, but I do!

Now. The matters that will interest you most.

All the hard data will be sent to you automatically, naturally, but looking from my position, the mission is in great shape. It truly does feel as if the spaceship is simply me, shooting forwards at some unimaginable speed, with my arms outstretched, able to look in every direction, feeling entirely comfortable. How they have managed to do it, I've no idea. There must be cameras pointing all round - a minimum of sixteen I would guess, passing the picture to some complex interface which outputs direct to my brain. As I move my eyes to right or left, as it were, the machinery corresponds and the view changes. It will be the same with all my other senses I imagine. If we were to pass through a wet cloud for example (please don't laugh, it's just for illustration), then I would feel the clamminess on my face. Realistically, it must be horrendously cold outside the ship, but they have kindly spared me feeling that. And of course, there's nothing to smell. Maybe that is why I find the nose problem so difficult; if there was something to smell, then I would know the nose was functioning fine. As it is, I am in permanent limbo with it.

Of course, there is no sound either, as there is no atmosphere in space for sound to travel through. Curiously, I don't miss using my ears.

I wonder if there is atmosphere on board?

Come to think of it, I have no actual proof that there is a spaceship at all. This is a weird feeling. Before my refit, I could look at my own body, but in my new state I cannot look at the ship itself. Curious. I can observe over inter-stellar distances, but I cannot study my immediate surroundings. It is so strange.

I cannot even see the probes leaving. I take it that is how the mission is arranged. I am the parent craft (please excuse the expression) heading for the centre of the galaxy. But the spaces between stars are so vast that the chances of ever passing close to a stellar system are very remote. Indeed, it could even be that two galaxies on a collision course could pass through each other without a single star encountering another star in the process. How amazing is that?

The mission is about researching star systems. So there must be probes leaving us all the time, it seems to me, snaking off to the stars to right and left. They send back information here, and it gets transmitted on to you lot. That's fine as far as it goes, but as we get ever further

away, it takes longer and longer for the information to reach you. So I become increasingly important as the years pass and decisions need to be made on the spot. At least, I think that's the explanation.

They do something clever with the time gaps. I like to think of the machines here as having a human side to them, which is why I refer to them as 'they'. The length of time for information to come back from a neighbouring star will be years rather than months, because of the huge distances. Then you have to allow time for the probe get there in the first place of course, which could be several years, even decades. So it would be no good hanging about waiting for the data to start coming. There is nothing instant about galaxy exploration. Why, there are a hundred thousand million stars to study!

But here's the clever bit. I find now I can bob from star to star in my mind. I feel I am there, present, you understand. I'm not watching it all on a screen. It is me, inspecting the planets, studying the moons, swooping round the suns and so forth. The information must have been sent back by the probes, stored on board, and fed to me as I request it. At present there are just fourteen star systems that I can hop about to, but as the years pass, there will be hundreds more on tap.

When I have worked out why they decided to put me on the mission, I will let you know. At present, I still haven't got it. I feel rather mystified.

I'd better be upfront with you. I was found guilty of destroying the human heads in the laboratory (in the business quarter of Marxon, Targetto), all one hundred and forty of them, in the explosion. I assure you it's not true. I lost my own daughter in the process. Why would I want to destroy her?

Rather than serving an endless prison sentence on a minor moon, I requested coming on the mission in her place, even if it did mean a refit. To my surprise, they agreed. Not that they discussed it with me; I simply found myself here one day. It was quite a shock, I can tell you!

All for now,
Chris

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"Mum," Chloe shouted, bursting into the sitting room in her track suit, hockey stick in hand, "David's coming round later, but I might not be back in time, as it's the last match of the season. About half past six. See you."

"Play well." Araminta Winter waved happily at her eighteen year old daughter as she shot out of the door. She had really grown up the last year or two. No wonder the boys were interested. Shame David was so much older than her, though, but then he was very nice with it. Let her find her own way.

She returned to her fashion magazine. Mustn't let her twin daughters outstrip her.

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One thing I can do for you is to give you an overview of the mission. The trouble with machines is that they pour out data at a fantastic rate, but with no sense of what is important. So let me summarise.

Briefly, planets come in all shapes and sizes. There is no standard. Human beings cope best with natural gravity as found on earth. Although they have found ways of tweaking the gravity on larger planets, it doesn't work very well (I'm being blunt here) so ideally earth-size

planets or moons are what we are looking for. Another way of expressing this is that there needs to be enough gravity to hold on to the atmosphere, which would otherwise sweep off into space, but not too much gravity so as not to crush us.

Well, we have found four planets that fit that category so far. Pretty good for only fourteen star systems studied, you might think, and I would agree with you.

However, next comes temperature. Human beings are very fussy. Although temperatures in space range from thousands, even millions of degrees Centigrade down to absolute zero, which is -273 I think, we shudder if it goes below ten and complain if it rises above thirty-five. That's a pretty tight specification when you think about it. Same with plants and trees. They are even more particular. So distance of planet or moon from the parent body, amount of heat coming from the latter and so forth are all crucial.

Then the atmosphere needs to be equipped to filter out harmful radiation. Plenty of Oxygen for us to breathe. Enough Carbon Dioxide for the plants to breathe, but not too much. The whole thing's truly complex.

I have to confess, I don't expect we will ever find the perfect place. It's like house hunting. In the end, you find something that seems reasonable, and you learn to adapt.

Needless to say, only one of the four we have found is worth considering, and it will need a great deal of terraforming to get it into shape. I hope you guys back at home are working on that. I guess you must be. The secret is not to be in a hurry. We are talking thousands of years not hundreds in most cases.

It was truly remarkable to have found Targetto to be so suitable for our needs. Speeding up the rotation of the planet was brilliant, even if raising the sea level using chopped up asteroids is going to take an age. Not that it will affect me much. This is certainly a one way trip.

Chris

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The doorbell rang at ten to six. Araminta answered it, as there was nobody else at home, apart from her husband Bruce of course.

It was David.

"You're early. She won't be back for forty minutes."

"Not to worry." David had already breezed in. He was still wearing his suit from work; something high-powered to do with finance. "I'm happy to wait, if you don't mind."

"Not at all." It would be a pleasure. David was good company, with his winning smile and funny stories. Small wonder Chloe found him attractive. "I just need to look in on Bruce."

David settled himself on the sofa, and picked up the magazine Araminta had been looking at earlier while she made her way upstairs. She tiptoed into the bedroom. Bruce was fast asleep. She looked at him sadly. It was so tragic! To begin with, his spells of good health following his accident had lasted for months, sometimes even a whole year. However, as time passed, they were growing shorter, and the troughs between were becoming deeper and longer. He seemed to need so much sleep; the medics could not understand it. All pretence of his going back to piano teaching one day had long since evaporated. Why, he hardly touched the instrument now. He was aware of his deterioration, and trying to play pieces that had once been a doddle was now a great effort. He could do without the unpleasant reminder.

Araminta's rage and bitterness had come to a head one evening some four years earlier. Thankfully, there was no lasting damage done to people or property but it had been a close thing. She then accepted her mother's advice to go for counselling and therapy, and after twelve agonising

months of hitting pillows with cricket bats and goodness knows what else, she had finally managed to pull through.

One of the hardest parts had been when the girl who had made the accusation got in touch. Araminta had taken the phone call.

“Mrs. Winter, I wanted to let your husband know that I’ve become a Christian.”

“Oh?”

“It was a friend at work. She persuaded me to do a course with her. I found it really interesting, despite myself, and I finally prayed the prayer on the last page of the book, and it’s wonderful. I am so thrilled. I knew your husband would want to be told, because he wrote to me about believing in God all those years ago.”

“That’s lovely. I’m so pleased for you.” Say the words, and hope the feelings catch up later.

It had been very hard. The phone call reopened old wounds. Araminta kept telling herself that the girl herself had only made the allegation to a member of staff. She admitted later that the charge of sexual assault was fabricated, but by then Bruce had been escorted out of the school in shame, and the van had knocked him over in front of the station when he was lost in his thoughts.

It was not as if the girl herself had driven the van deliberately towards Bruce with the intent to kill him. Not really. Even though she knew it was silly, Araminta found herself imagining a teenager about the current age of Ben scantily dressed in a sporty top and shorts gripping the wheel of a transit with her foot hard down on the accelerator, and a look of wild excitement on her face as she raced towards Bruce. Try as she might, she could not erase the image. She had never seen the girl or the van; perhaps it would have been better if she had.

Why couldn’t the wretched van people have modernised and done their deliveries from a sky vehicle? Why persist with outdated technology, requiring fossil fuel of all things and harming the environment? Then there might have been no accident.

She ought to be pleased that someone had found God, but the truth was, she was livid. It was their own family that was Christian; who was this wretched girl to muscle in on it? She was robbing them of everything. It had only been Araminta’s faith that had got her through, and that by the barest of margins. Thinking of Jesus enduring crucifixion had been the best antidote to her feelings, she found. He had not yelled and shouted when he was going through it.

It was all very well for people to say, ‘You have to forgive.’ Even Jesus did not manage that, if you read the account carefully; he only asked his father to forgive them. That was something she had managed to do, repeatedly. God bless the girl. She meant it. But still the anger and pain would rise up within her from time to time when she wasn’t looking.

How good it was that they had money. At least that was not a worry. The complicated friendship with Jim Pond and Pikel had yielded that dividend at any rate.

Gloomy thoughts like these still tended to haunt Araminta, especially when she looked in on Bruce, lying so pathetically in the bed. Thank goodness that he didn’t snore. That would have been the last straw.

At least they had made progress in one department. Bruce had apologised so often for being hopeless that Araminta had found herself counting. “That’s the fourth time today!” she would exclaim. Then Bruce took to apologising for apologising. In the end, his wife had rationed him. “No more than three apologies in any one day!” she declared, in all seriousness. Bruce had got the point, and worked at it. Some days, he even managed to cut the apologies out altogether. From time to time, he would still express his regret for being such a burden. It was understandable. He felt it deeply.

Anyway, he was fine for the time being. Better go downstairs and join David.