

ALL THE PRETTY HUMANS

not by Cormac McCarthy

The turbolift and the sound of the turbolift stopped with a soft sloughing and the doors hissed open for him to enter the bridge and hissed shut again when he had. The floor muted his nonhuman footfalls. In his trim mustard-colored Federation uniform the android stood on the bridge so palely looking at his crewmates working. He looked at Worf at his Security station. He looked across the curved expanse of railing. The baldheaded captain seated in his chair polishing his English tacksaddle. To the captain's left and to his right, Counselor Troi and Commander Riker. Lastly he looked at the viewscreen before them out of which hurtled blindwhite specks of gas accreted over aeons from the echo of their making as if the ship itself summoned their pinprick light from the increate dark ahead of it, white dwarf and red giant and contact binary, born of the act of forging through hyperspace itself, parsec on sector on quadrant filling the screen to sideslip by as if in passing all the matter of Creation were relegated to entropy, to history, to memory. Then he turned and went toward the captain. This was not flying. This was not flying.

The bald man looked up when the android stood before him. Yes Mr Data?

Captain. One our shuttlecraft is missing.
Missing?

My guess is the Vakerans we were conveying to Bamanos Two snuck by our security subroutines. I would be willing to bet my favorite Deadwood City holodeck program they erased any record of the craft being removed from the bay.

Which shuttlecraft, Mr Data?

Rosinante.

Your favorite, wasn't it, Will?

Yeah. She's a good shuttle. He began rolling a cigarette.

How long ago, Data?

Eleven hours, fifty-seven minutes. Give or take.

Riker spat on the deck. Out of sensor range by now. Hell, Cap'n, they're probably long gone across the Neutral Zone.

Very well, Number One. You and Mr Data know what to do.

In the shuttlecraft bay Data checked his phaser and the charge of his phaser and he checked the engines and the level of the dipsticks and he saw they all were full and that his phaser was set on stun and he returned it to its velcro holster and saw to their provisions because who could say how long they might be gone or how far? Not man or god or computer or even space itself, for these are distances not measured by any tricorder or sensor, which was why the fullness of the phaser charge was so important a thing.

In the pilot's chair Riker powered up the console and stroked the controls with familiar hands and under his breath he spoke to the skittish craft in the way of men born to pilot machines, and he told the navigation console where they were going and what they were looking for and never did he doubt that the shuttlecraft understood, for such machines though not alive in the way men are alive or even in the way of animals or Ferengi nonetheless share a common soul which was created for space travel by the will of men and never were these machines more alive than when they were ploughing the overwrought dark and led by the firm commands and hands of those who built them and

knew them and loved them well.

Scout, you're cleared for departure. Soon as you cross the Border you'll be on your own, Will.

Always was, Cap.

They flew all day into the eternal night continually losing and regaining the *Rosinante's* ion trail leading into the Neutral Zone into which all men stared and few men dared for when they fared they came out scared from that place there. Riker set the autopilot and patted the console and spoke to it reassuringly in a language Data thought unseemly as at the replicator he rustled up beans and Vegan tortillas and bitter Martian High Mountain coffee. Riker ate in silence while Data watched his reflection in the forward port like the ghost of a machine. Soon Riker wiped his plate clean with his tortilla and flung his coffeegrinds in the replicator and Data set the environmental controls to emit a soft muted crackle as of a campfire and Riker fully reclined his chair and slept covered by his thin electric bedroll while Data kept the watch, and while Riker slept he dreamed of ion trails in the cold vast reaches crossing and recrossing and nearly dispersed, the remnants of shuttlecraft passed long before, etheric disturbances of ancient battles hardfought, and won, and disengaged, and as he tracked them with his Academy skills hardlearned he found them all, dozens of them capering, cavorting, nacelles alight and nosing and dodging, all the pretty shuttlecraft flying in that ether which is space itself and which cannot be spoken of but only written about to critical acclaim and prestigious awards.

He awoke to steady beeping and Data's voice. The android was smoking a cheroot and staring out the port. Company, Commander.

He sat up. Who?

Ferengi Marauder. Been hailing us.

On screen.

The grinning illsculpted face of an unwashed Ferengi with crooked teeth filled the comm screen and Riker felt his own face go hard. He had in his time encountered many Ferengi, and always his face went hard.

Ooday ouyay eeksay omulansray, umanhay?

Negative, Ferengi, we are seeking a stolen shuttlecraft. Not Romulans.

The Ferengi turned to one side and spat. Iarlay! Ouyay areyay pyingsay!

Amesay otay ouyay. End transmission.

Data cut the signal. Commander, I got me a sensor ping shows a decaying warp-coil field signature just like what you'd expect from a shuttlecraft engine turned off in the past ten or twelve hours.

That a fact? Riker spat. The *Scout's* deck was by now slightly moist with expectorant. Where they stabling her, Mr Data?

Cargo bay of that Ferengi ship.

Open a channel.

When the Ferengi appeared again Riker turned his head and spat. Ferengi vessel, you are in possession of our stolen shuttlecraft. Now, I'm sure you didn't know no better when you bought it, but it was stolen from us all the same.

The peasant Ferengi face turned to one side and spat. Oh, no, no! Ees no Federationale sheep! Ees Ferengi shuttle. Ferengi!

Then I guess you won't mind showing us your ownership papers.

The Ferengi squinted and showed his crooked brown teeth. Papers? We don't got to show you any steinking papers!

Data looked up from his console. They are powering up their weapons, Commander.

Eet ees a small thing, thees matter of a shuttlecraft. The Ferengi made a brushing motion. What ees thees thing? Onay attermay. The Ferengi told them it was not given for

men to know the ways of shuttlecraft. He told them he himself had seen shuttlecraft that would not operate for men who sought them but would respond without complaint to those who claimed them. He said space was big and stars were many. He mentioned a dusty little moon he visited certain summers as a child. There was a one-eyed Norsican, a giant lizard, a bowl of bright green eggs. He quoted from the King James Bible and from Carlos Castañeda. He claim-ed the Federationales were Vakerans and had the souls of Vakerans. He talked a great deal about a great many things, and Riker said yes, yes, he understood, all the while nodding and not looking away while Data transported over to the looming vessel directly onto the flight deck of the shuttlecraft in question and powered it up and took off and headed back in tandem with Riker out of the Neutral Zone and away from the Border and back toward the *Enterprise* patiently waiting like a thing extant before the expanding universe it-self had burst to being, and the Ferengi, still speaking of the importance of shiny buttons and hygiene and shuttlecraft eti-quette and the metaphysical and existential matters with which all illiterate and uneducated peasants are preoccupied, never noticed until they had gone and left behind them only the unpleasant odor all humans left in the noses of Ferengi.

Riker and Data gave the shuttlecraft their head and ran them till their warp cores were lathered and frothing, and they let go the navigation controls because given free rein a shuttlecraft will always find its own way home.

Commander Riker in his faithful *Scout* contacted Data on the recovered *Rosinante* and congratulated him on a job well done.

Oh, shucks, Commander. It were not nothing.

Riker frowned. In the background he could hear music. What's that you're playing, Mr Data?

Aaron Copland, Commander. It seemed appropriate, somehow.