

## The Right's Tough

by Robert J. Sawyer

“The funny thing about this place,” said Hauptmann, pointing at the White House as he and Chin walked west on the Mall, “is that the food is actually good.”

“What’s funny about that?” asked Chin.

“Well, it’s a tourist attraction, right? A historic site. People come from all over the world to see where the American government was headquartered, back when there *were* governments. The guys who own it now could serve absolute crap, charge exorbitant prices, and the place would still be packed. But the food really is great. Besides, tomorrow the crowds will arrive; we might as well eat here while we can.”

Chin nodded. "All right," he said. "Let's give it a try."

The room Hauptmann and Chin were seated in had been the State Dining Room. Its oak-paneled walls sported framed portraits of all sixty-one men and seven women who had served as presidents before the office had been abolished.

"What do you suppose they'll be like?" asked Chin, after they'd placed their orders.

"Who?" said Hauptmann.

"The spacers. The astronauts."

Hauptmann frowned, considering this. "That's a good question. They left on their voyage—what?" He glanced down at his weblink, strapped to his forearm. The device had been following the conversation, of course, and had immediately submitted Hauptmann's query to the web. "Two hundred and ten years ago," Hauptmann said, reading the figure off the ten-by-five-centimeter display. He looked up. "Well, what was the *world* like back then? Bureaucracy. Government. Freedoms curtailed." He shook his head. "Our world is going to be like a breath of fresh air for them."

Chin smiled. "After more than a century aboard a starship, fresh air is exactly what they're going to want."

Neither Hauptmann nor his weblink pointed out the obvious: that although a century had passed on Earth since the *Olduvai* started its return voyage from Franklin's World, only a couple of years had passed aboard the ship and, for almost all of that, the crew had been in cryosleep.

The waiter brought their food, a Clinton (pork ribs

and mashed potatoes with gravy) for Hauptmann, and a Nosworthy (tofu and eggplant) for Chin. They continued chatting as they ate.

When the bill came, it sat between them for a few moments. Finally, Chin said, "Can you get it? I'll pay you back tomorrow."

Hauptmann's weblink automatically sent out a query when Chin made his request, seeking documents containing Chin's name and phrases such as "overdue personal debt." Hauptmann glanced down at the weblink's screen; it was displaying seven hits. "Actually, old boy," said Hauptmann, "your track record isn't so hot in that area. Why don't *you* pick up the check for both of us, and *I'll* pay you back tomorrow? I'm good for it."

Chin glanced at his own weblink. "So you are," he said, reaching for the bill.

"And don't be stingy with the tip," said Hauptmann, consulting his own display again. "Dave Preston from Peoria posted that you only left five percent when he went out to dinner with you last year."

Chin smiled good-naturedly and reached for his debit card. "You can't get away with anything these days, can you?"

The owners of the White House had been brilliant, absolutely brilliant.

The message, received by people all over Earth, had been simple: "This is Captain Joseph Plato of the UNSA *Olduvai* to Mission Control. Hello, Earth! Long time no see. Our entire crew has been revived from suspended animation, and we will arrive home in twelve

days. It's our intention to bring our landing module down at the point from which it was originally launched, the Kennedy Space Center. Please advise if this is acceptable."

And while the rest of the world reacted with surprise—who even remembered that an old space-survey vessel was due to return this year?—the owners of the White House sent a reply. "Hello, *Olduvai!* Glad to hear you're safe and sound. The Kennedy Space Center was shut down over a hundred and fifty years ago. But, tell you what, why don't you land on the White House lawn?"

Of course, that signal was beamed up into space; at the time, no one on Earth knew what had been said. But everyone heard the reply Plato sent back. "We'd be delighted to land at the White House! Expect us to touch down at noon Eastern time on August 14."

When people figured out exactly what had happened, it was generally agreed that the owners of the White House had pulled off one of the greatest publicity coups in post-governmental history.

No one had ever managed to rally a million people onto the Mall before. Three centuries previously, Martin Luther King had only drawn 250,000; the four separate events that had called themselves "Million-Man Marches" had attracted maybe 400,000 apiece. And, of course, since there was no longer any government at which to aim protests, these days the Mall normally only drew history buffs. They would stare at the slick blackness of the Vietnam Wall, at the nineteen haunted soldiers of the Korean memorial, at the

blood-red spire of the Colombian tower—at the stark reminders of why governments were not good things.

But today, Hauptmann thought, it looked like that magic figure might indeed have been reached: although billions were doubtless watching from their homes through virtual-reality hookups, it did seem as if a million people had come in the flesh to watch the return of the only astronauts Earth had ever sent outside the solar system.

Hauptmann felt perfectly safe standing in the massive crowd. His weblink would notify him if anyone with a trustworthiness rating below 85 percent got within a dozen meters of him; even those who chose not to wear weblinks could be identified at a distance by their distinctive biometrics. Hauptmann had once seen aerial footage of a would-be pickpocket moving through a crowd. A bubble opened up around the woman as she walked along, people hustling away from her as their weblinks sounded warnings.

“There it is!” shouted Chin, standing next to Hauptmann, pointing up. Breaking through the bottom of the cloud layer was the *Olduvai*'s lander, a silver hemisphere with black legs underneath. The exhaust from its central engine was no worse than that of any VTOL aircraft.

The lander grew ever bigger in Hauptmann's view as it came closer and closer to the ground. Hauptmann applauded along with everyone else as the craft settled onto the lawn of what had in days of yore been the president's residence.

It was an attractive ship—no question—but the technology was clearly old-fashioned: engine cones and

parabolic antennas, articulated legs and hinged hatches. And, of course, it was marked with the symbols of the pre-freedom era: five national flags plus logos for various governmental space agencies.

After a short time, a door on the side of the craft swung open and a figure appeared, standing on a platform within. Hauptmann was close enough to see the huge grin on the man's face as he waved wildly at the crowd.

Many of those around Hauptmann waved back, and the man turned around and began descending the ladder. The mothership's entire return voyage had been spent accelerating or decelerating at one g, and Franklin's World had a surface gravity 20 percent greater than Earth's. So the man—a glance at Hauptmann's weblink confirmed it was indeed Captain Plato—was perfectly steady on his feet as he stepped off the ladder onto the White House lawn.

Hauptmann hadn't been crazy enough to camp overnight on the Mall in order to be right up by the landing area, but he and Chin did arrive at the crack of dawn, and so were reasonably close to the front. Hauptmann could clearly hear Plato saying, "Hello, everyone! It's nice to be home!"

"Welcome back," shouted some people in the crowd, and "Good to have you home," shouted others. Hauptmann just smiled, but Chin was joining in the hollering.

Of course, Plato wasn't alone. One by one, his two dozen fellow explorers backed down the ladder into the summer heat. The members of the crowd—some

of who, Hauptmann gathered, were actually descendants of these men and women—were shaking the spacers' hands, thumping them on the back, hugging them, and generally having a great time.

At last, though, Captain Plato turned toward the White House; he seemed somewhat startled by the holographic GREAT EATS sign that floated above the rose garden. He turned back to the people surrounding him. "I didn't expect such a crowd," he said. "Forgive me for having to ask, but which one of you is the president?"

There was laughter from everyone but the astronauts. Chin prodded Hauptmann in the ribs. "How about that?" Chin said. "He's saying, 'Take me to your leader'!"

"There is no president anymore," said someone near Plato. "No kings, emperors, or prime ministers, either."

Another fellow, who clearly fancied himself a wit, said, "Shakespeare said kill all the lawyers; we didn't do that, but we did get rid of all the politicians . . . and the lawyers followed."

Plato blinked more than the noonday sun demanded. "No government of any kind?"

Nods all around; a chorus of "That's right," too.

"Then—then—what are we supposed to do now?" asked the captain.

Hauptmann decided to speak up. "Why, whatever you wish, of course."

Hauptmann actually got a chance to talk with Captain Plato later in the day. Although some of the spacers did have relatives who were offering them

accommodations in their homes, Plato and most of the others had been greeted by no one from their families.

"I'm not sure where to go," Plato said. "I mean, our salaries were supposed to be invested while we were away, but . . ."

Hauptmann nodded. "But the agency that was supposed to do the investing is long since gone, and, besides, government-issued money isn't worth anything anymore; you need corporate points."

Plato shrugged. "And I don't have any of those."

Hauptmann was a bit of a space buff, of course; that's why he'd come into the District to see the landing. To have a chance to talk to the captain in depth would be fabulous. "Would you like to stay with me?" he asked.

Plato looked surprised by the offer, but, well, it was clear that he *did* have to sleep somewhere—unless he planned to return to the orbiting mothership, of course. "Umm, sure," he said, shaking Hauptmann's hand. "Why not?"

Hauptmann's weblink was showing something he'd never seen before: the word "unknown" next to the text, "Trustworthiness rating for Joseph Tyler Plato." But, of course, that was only to be expected.

Chin was clearly jealous that Hauptmann had scored a spacer, and so he made an excuse to come over to Hauptmann's house in Takoma Park early the next morning.

Hauptmann and Chin listened spellbound as Plato regaled them with tales of Franklin's World and its four moons, its salmon-colored orbiting rings, its outcrops of giant crystals towering to the sky, and its neon-bright

cascades. No life had been found, which was why, of course, no quarantine was necessary. That lack of native organisms had been a huge disappointment, Plato said; he and his crew were still arguing over what mechanism had caused the oxygen signatures detected in Earth-based spectroscopic scans of Franklin's World, but whatever had made them wasn't biological.

"I really am surprised," said Plato, when they took a break for late-morning coffee. "I expected debriefings and, well, frankly, for the government to have been prepared for our return."

Hauptmann nodded sympathetically. "Sorry about that. There are a lot of good things about getting rid of government, but one of the downsides, I guess, is the loss of all those little gnomes in cubicles who used to keep track of everything."

"We do have a lot of scientific data to share," said Plato.

Chin smiled. "If I were you, I'd hold out for the highest bidder. There's got to be some company somewhere that thinks it can make a profit off of what you've collected."

Plato tipped his head. "Well, until then, I, um, I'm going to need some of those corporate points you were talking about."

Hauptmann and Chin each glanced down at their weblinks; it was habit, really, nothing more, but . . .

But that nasty "unknown" was showing on the displays again, the devices having divined the implied question. Chin looked at Hauptmann. Hauptmann looked at Chin.

"That *is* a problem," Chin said.

The first evidence of real trouble was on the noon newscast. Plato watched aghast with Chin and Hauptmann as the story was reported. Leo Johnstone, one of the *Olduvai's* crew, had attempted to rape a woman over by the New Watergate towers. The security firm she subscribed to had responded to her weblink's call for help, and Johnstone had been stopped.

"That idiot," Plato said, shaking his head back and forth, as soon as the report had finished. "That bloody idiot." He looked first at Chin and then at Hauptmann, and spread his arms. "Of course, there was a lot of pairing-off during our mission, but Johnstone had been alone. He kept saying he couldn't wait to get back on terra firma. 'We'll all get heroes' welcomes when we return,' he'd say, 'and I'll have as many women as I want.'"

Hauptmann's eyes went wide. "He really thought that?"

"Oh, yes," said Plato. "'We're astronauts,' he kept saying. 'We've got the Right Stuff.'"

Hauptmann glanced down; his weblink was dutifully displaying an explanation of the arcane reference. "Oh," he said.

Plato lifted his eyebrows. "What's going to happen to Johnstone?"

Chin exhaled noisily. "He's finished," he said softly. "What?" said Plato.

"Finished," agreed Hauptmann. "See, until now he didn't have a trustworthiness rating." Plato's face conveyed his confusion. "Since the day we were born,"

continued Hauptmann, "other people have been commenting about us on the web. 'Freddie is a bully,' 'Jimmy stole my lunch,' 'Sally cheated on the test.'"

"But surely no one cares about what you did as a child," said Plato.

"It goes on your whole life," said Chin. "People gossip endlessly about other people on the web, and our weblinks"—he held up his right arm so that Plato could see the device—"search and correlate information about anyone we're dealing with or come physically close to. That's why we don't need governments anymore; governments exist to regulate, and, thanks to the trustworthiness ratings, our society is self-regulating."

"It was inevitable," said Hauptmann. "From the day the web was born, from the day the first search engine was created. All we needed was smarter search agents, greater bandwidth, and everyone being online."

"But you spacers," said Chin, "predate that sort of thing. Oh, you had a crude web, but most of those postings were lost thanks to electromagnetic pulses from the Colombian War. You guys are clean slates. It's not that you have *zero* trustworthiness ratings; rather, you've got *no* trustworthiness ratings at all."

"Except for your man Johnstone," said Hauptmann, sadly. "If it was on the news," and he cocked a thumb at the wall monitor, "then it's on the web, and everyone knows about it. A leper would be more welcome than someone with that kind of talk associated with him."

"So what should he do?" asked Plato. "What should all of us from the *Olduvai* do?"

There weren't a million people on the Mall this time. There weren't even a hundred thousand. And the mood wasn't jubilant; rather, a melancholy cloud hung over everyone.

But it *was* the best answer. Everyone could see that. The *Olduvai's* lander had been refurbished, and crews from Earth's orbiting space stations had visited the mothership, upgrading and refurbishing it, as well.

Captain Plato looked despondent; Johnstone and the several others of the twenty-five who had now publicly contravened acceptable standards of behavior looked embarrassed and contrite.

Hauptmann and Chin had no trouble getting to the front of the crowd this time. They already knew what Plato was going to say, having discussed it with him on the way over. And so they watched the faces in the crowd—still a huge number of people, but seeming positively post-apocalyptic in comparison to the throng of a few days before.

"People of the Earth," said Plato, addressing his physical and virtual audiences. "We knew we'd come back to a world much changed, an Earth centuries older than the one we'd left behind. We'd hoped—and those of us who pray had prayed—that it would be a better place. And, in many ways, it clearly is.

"We'll find a new home," Plato continued. "Of that I'm sure. And we'll build a new society—one, we hope, that might be as peaceful and efficient as yours. We—all twenty-five of us—have already agreed on one thing that should get us off on the right foot." He looked

at the men and women of his crew, then turned and faced the people of the Free Earth for the last time. "When we find a new world to settle, we won't be planting any flags in its soil."