

Star Drive

by Tom Jolly

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Bala Maku carefully turned up the air pressure on the breathing air, far away from the Honda Fit automobile. A thirty foot line fed the air from the tank to a valve welded onto the side of the Honda. Abo Mwangi crouched next to Bala, behind a thick piece of plywood. “What happened the first time you tried this?” Abo asked.

“The front wind shield popped out at twenty-two PSI,” Bala said. “It landed on Mari’s corn, and she was very angry with me.”

Abo looked over his shoulder at the beat-up car. Bala had welded steel rods over the outer surface of the car’s windows, like jail bars, with rubber pads underneath each bar so that the windows wouldn’t crack as they pushed against the bars. “The car’s windows appear to be designed to keep pressure out instead of in,” Bala continued. He looked down at his gage. “We are at thirty PSI. Over two atmospheres!”

“And that is the same as being in space at one atmosphere?”

“Yes, of course,” Bala said. He stood up and walked over to the car, which was hissing loudly. “There are still a lot of small leaks. I welded the biggest holes. These cars float very well, for a while, even if you don’t fill in all the holes, so they are mostly airtight. If you teleport the car into space, then you will still need a tank of air, though, and I doubt that it would last more than a half-hour.”

Abo joined him and put his hands on his hips, staring critically at the ugly, patchwork thing. “You should have started from scratch. It would look better.”

Bala waved his hand at the monster. “This was cheap. No engine!”

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When he was very young, Abo had learned he could teleport himself and the things he touched, and nearly crushed some houses with a large boulder by accident. He became more

cautious as the years went by, hiding his ability as it got him into more and more trouble. He was even accused of being a witch. His actions caused dangerous people to come looking for him, though it didn't keep him from doing fast transports for certain customers, especially if borders were a problem. It put food on the table.

But the edge of space, where the air became too thin, had always been a problem for him. He never made enough money to buy an actual space suit; the more transports he performed, the more notorious and visible he became, and the more likely he was to be trapped or killed by some nefarious and enterprising villain.

He enlisted the aid of his childhood friend, Bala Maku, to help him create a tiny spaceship. One with no rockets, no radio, no air recycler, and no computer. What Bala told Abo was this; "A rocket should be made out of metal, and for yours, you will need windows so you can see where you are going. We will start with a car, and modify it for space."

And now they had one.

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Bala and Abo sat in the front seat of the car, looking through the vertical bars welded across the windshield at the rusty hood, and beyond that, weeds and rocks and dirt. Bala was in the driver's seat for no other reason than he wanted to pretend he was driving the car into space. At the small shack they kept for these remote tests away from prying eyes, Abo's wife Mari waved at the two of them, expecting them both back for lunch. They had done crazier things than this before.

"Are you ready?" Abo asked.

"I..." Bala said, and then they were one hundred kilometers high, looking down on the Earth in their flying Honda.

Bala gasped, his eyes widened, and both hands were white-knuckled as he gripped the steering wheel. The car immediately began to fall in the vacuum, and the two of them felt their stomachs lurch.

"Are we in orbit?" Bala asked.

Abo had been reading a bit about orbits and flying in space since Bala started welding supporting structure onto the car and said, "No, I sent us straight up. Now we are just falling down. To be in orbit, we have to go very fast around the Earth."

"How fast?" Bala asked.

“It depends on how high we are. If we orbit close to the Earth, we need to go around the Earth at over seven kilometers per second. But I have no reference to measure that just using my eyes.” He looked out the window of the car through the self-adhesive polarized sun screen attached to the window, wondering if they might get a sunburn. It felt very warm. He teleported the car to rotate it, so the bottom was facing the sun.

The right side window was filled with a view of a giant blue marble, the reflected light dimly illuminating the inside of the car. Bala pointed and said, “Is that Kenya?”

Abo nodded. “The border lines seem to be missing,” he joked.

Excitedly, Bala said, “Look! A satellite,” as a dot of light flashed past them.

“I can use it as a reference to put us into orbit,” Abo said, and as quickly as a thought, the car was flitting alongside the spacecraft. The satellite appeared to be little more than a cylinder with solar panels adhered to its side, and a small antenna sticking out one end, surrounded by a cluster of other unrecognizable instruments.

“I do not recognize the satellite,” Bala said.

“I would not recognize any satellite,” Abo replied.

In awe, they watched the pearlescent oceans and clouds rotate below them for a while, commenting on various landmarks they thought they recognized, until Bala pointed at a small red dot in the sky. “Is that Mars?”

“I think it is. Should I try to jump there?” Abo suggested.

“How far can you jump?”

Abo shrugged, and suddenly they were much closer to the red dot. It was difficult to judge distance in space. “It is strange,” Abo said. “The Earth still looks very close. Let me just...” and then they jumped again, instantly closing the gap to the red dot.

“What!” Bala shouted, seeing a brilliant red sports car coming at him at a meter per second from only a few meters away, and he stomped on his brakes, jerked the steering wheel sideways, and honked the horn, which barely sounded through the frame to the inside the Honda, and then they ran into the only other car that was within a hundred thousand kilometers of them. The other driver, in a space suit, lurched forward in his seat with the impact, but they both only hit on a fender, and a few moments later Abo had gathered his wits about him and relocated their car. Through a number of quick jumps he dumped their orbital velocity and brought the car back down to their dusty retreat in Kenya.

Bala sat in the driver's seat still gripping the steering wheel, shaking. Abo stared at him, concerned, then slowly broke into a smile and started laughing. Bala turned red and stuttered, "What is so funny?"

"You put on the brakes! And the horn!" He continued laughing.

"Why was there a car in space? That is ridiculous." Bala grumbled and shook his head, then saw Mari motioning to them from the front stoop of the shack. "Teleport us out of this deathtrap and let's go eat lunch."

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A few thousand miles away a very rich man watched a video playback with his hand over his mouth, shaking his head at the image of two crazed men, one clutching the top of the dashboard, the other trying to steer his car in a vacuum, both clearly screaming, though no sound could be heard from the recording. The car swept out of camera range, and then couldn't be found again.

The rich man leaned back in his chair and rubbed his face. "What did I just see?" he asked.

"Sir," his assistant replied, "we aren't entirely sure."

After a while, he said, "Do you think my insurance..."

"Not a chance. Sir."

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