

Beth and the Twilight Star

by Richard Elam

Beth Harrison and her father had driven into the desert to look for dead branches of “jumping cactus,” which were used in making lamps for Mr. Harrison’s tourist shop in Tucson. He and Beth had just gotten out of the station wagon and were gazing up a slope of bristly cacti.

“This looks like a good place, Daddy,” Beth said.
Mr. Harrison nodded. “We’ll have to hurry, though. It’s getting late.”

They started up the sandy slope carrying straw market bags that would hold their gleanings.

“Maybe we’ll see some Flying Saucers,” Beth said half-jokingly. “Someone thought he saw one out here the other day.”

Her father grinned. “Flying Saucers indeed! You and that lively imagination of yours, Beth!”

They set to work searching for dead branches. They found a few good specimens. But they were not enough to suit Beth and she decided to broaden the search. She went over the slope and up and down another, and before long her roaming carried her out of sight of her father.

Amidst the stunning colors of the sunset, Beth could make out a lone star—Sirius—the brightest true star in all the sky. It reminded her of a pearl glowing in the heavens.

Presently Beth had a bag full of cactus wood for the lamp shop. She was about to return to her father when suddenly she saw something ahead that she had not noticed before. Almost hidden within a dense thicket of smoky green *paloverde* was a shiny surface that reflected the dying sun’s rays. Her imagination stirred, Beth decided to investigate.

She put down her bag and made her way into the thicket. As she moved carefully through the thorns, she found some of the branches pushed aside as if someone had used this path before. She was almost through when she tripped and fell head-first. Her forehead bumped against an unyielding branch, causing her to see more than one star this time.

She didn’t know how long she lay on the ground half-stunned before she got to her feet. There was a painful bruise on her forehead, but her curiosity was still strong and she went on. The shiny surface turned out to be a wall as smooth and glossy as steel.

“Jeepers!” Beth thought. “What can it be?”

She reached out to touch the wall. Before she could do so, a door opened in the wall.

The first thing she noticed beyond was a soft yellow light filling a handsome room. Feeling like Alice on the threshold of Wonderland, she stepped inside, more thrilled than afraid.

She heard a sighing behind her and saw the door closing shut. Only then did she become frightened. She beat against the wall, wishing that she had not been so rash as to venture into such a

strange place.

She heard a voice say, "That will not help."

Beth turned and saw a girl of about her own age standing on a richly-carpeted platform across the room. The odd unearthliness of the girl struck Beth immediately. She was pretty and her skin was milky white. Her costume seemed to be of a blue phosphorescent material, as did her shoes. Her short hair was almost as red as glowing coals.

"Wh—who are you?" Beth stammered.

"I am Linnia," the girl replied in a voice that sounded almost as if she were singing. "You are Beth."

"Yes," Beth replied in amazement, "but how did you—?"

"I can read your mind."

Beth gulped. "You can?"

"Come over and sit down," Linnia said. "We shall talk."

She sat in a nearby chair that seemed to be made of steel matchsticks, it looked so frail. Beth sat in the chair opposite and found that it was very sturdy.

"You are thinking that I look very strange to you," Linnia said. "You seem strange to me too, but that is because we are of different worlds."

Beth gulped again. "D—different worlds?"

Suddenly the yellow light in the room changed to a pulsing orange. Linnia straightened up quickly. "That is the signal," she spoke. "I did not expect it so soon. We must hurry and prepare ourselves!"

Beth started asking questions, but Linnia said not now. Beth found herself following the girl across the room to a row of couches. Beth lay down on one and somehow knew exactly what she was to do. She guessed that Linnia was putting the thoughts into her head. She lifted the straps that hung at the sides and buckled them across her body.

The couch was soft as a cloud and Beth was thinking how much she would like to have a bed like this when all at once she felt herself sinking deeply into the cushion as if a great hand were thrusting her down. For several moments she was as giddy as if she were riding the roller-coaster at the carnival. Then finally her breath came back and she felt herself rise to the top of the cushion again.

"We can get up," she heard Linnia say. "We're coasting now."

They unbuckled their straps and rose to their feet. Linnia walked over to the wall, pressed a button, and a blind rolled back, revealing a long window.

“Look,” Linnia said.

Beth joined her and looked out the window. Her heart fairly rose into her throat. She was up in the sky, far up in the sky! Through a veil of clouds beneath she could see the curve of the earth itself!

Beth seized Linnia by the arm. “Jeepers, what’s going on! Where are you taking me?”

Linnia pointed to the white beacon of Sirius in the blue-black sky.

“You’re from Sirius?” Beth asked in amazement.

“Yes, from Tata Moori, one of its planets. Our work on earth is through for right now and my father and I are returning home to make a report.”

Linnia went on to say that her father’s space ship was only one of many which were studying the earth to see how the people here lived. Her father’s assignment had been to make an analysis of the soil. The visitors intended no harm and in time they planned to meet the people of earth face to face.

“Well, I have already met you,” Beth said boldly, “and I’m ready to go back!”

Linnia shook her flame-topped head. “We tried to keep our ship hidden, but you found it, Beth, and so there is nothing to do but take you back with us for awhile. When you came close, the electric eye opened the door and let you inside before it was time for any earth person to see one of our ships.”

“But my father and mother,” Beth said desperately, “and my friends! They’ll be worried to death! You must not take me, Linnia! Please, isn’t there something you can do?”

Linnia studied Beth’s pleading face. Then she replied, “I’ll talk to my father. He’s busy running the ship, but I’ll do what I can for you. While I’m gone, you can see what it’s like on our world by pushing the button on that cabinet against the wall. Father and I look at the film sometimes to keep from getting homesick.”

Beth was in no mood for looking at pictures. She was feeling worse by the minute as she considered what it would be like to be parted from her family and friends. As she sat in the chair, dreading and wondering, suddenly it became too much for her and she began to cry.

“Jeepers, why did I ever wander off from Daddy?” she moaned.

The tears made her feel better and presently she was calm enough to go over to the cabinet and turn it on. A large screen brightened and she saw a strange land unfolding before her eyes.

There were winding highways raised into the sky and skyscrapers like tall crystal columns. She saw motorcars of tear-drop design and helicopters filling the air. The people looked much like Linnia, with phosphorescent clothing, and all had hair as flaming red as Linnia’s own.

Yes, Tata Moori looked like an exciting place to visit, but it was not a visit Beth would want to make without another person from her own planet. As she thought about her predicament, she began to be scared again and the tears filled her eyes once more. Why, Sirius was *trillions* of miles from Earth!

She went to the window. The dwindling earth was becoming a green ball against the black deeps of space. The stars were dazzling and seemed as countless as the sands of the seashore. The view made Beth terribly homesick.

Finally Linnia returned.

Beth looked at her anxiously, trying to read her fate in the foreign girl's eyes.

"What did your father say?" Beth asked, with fluttering heart. "Did he say he'd take me back? Please tell me he did!"

Linnia smiled. "Yes, Beth. He said that we are not supposed to take younger persons to Tata Moori. He was angry with me for not telling him you were aboard, but I told him you came in just before we blasted off."

"Gee, I'm so relieved!" Beth said happily. "I don't mean I wouldn't like your company, Linnia, but you know how it is."

"Yes, I know," Linnia replied wistfully. "I have missed my mother and friends too. I had to take my brother's place on this trip when he became sick. You see, everyone on Tata Moori learns science when they are very young."

"I've been wondering how it is that you speak English, Linnia."

"We keep tuned in on your radio and television," Linnia answered. "That's how we learned your language and so many other things about you."

"You people seem to be ahead of us in progress," Beth said. "I believe there is much we can learn from you."

"We can learn much from you too," Linnia spoke. "I hope the people of our planets are permitted to meet very soon."

The girls had to belt down on their couches again because of the mounting speed at which they were returning to earth. Beth felt herself sinking deeply into her cushion once more and she grew breathless again. Minutes later, the ship stopped moving.

Beth hurriedly unbuckled and ran over to the window. Through a break in the *paloverde* thicket she could see her father's station wagon parked at the roadside. She was back at the same place she had started from.

"Thank goodness!" she breathed.

Linnia walked with her to the outer door.

"My father said he'd like to have met you," Linnia said, "but he is too busy preparing for our blast off again. We must hurry because we are behind schedule. Before you leave, Beth, Father has said that you must promise never to speak a word about all this to anyone. I have searched your mind and I know you to be honest."

Beth was disappointed that she could not make known her fabulous journey, but she promised that she would never tell.

Linnia waved her hand at the door and the electric eye opened it.

“Goodbye, Beth,” Linnia said.

“Goodbye, Linnia.”

Beth heard the sighing of the door as it closed behind her.

Suddenly her head began aching and she remembered the fall she had taken earlier. As she made her way out of the thicket, she began to have a queer feeling about her adventure. It made her wonder if perhaps she might not have been unconscious and imagined the whole thing.

When she reached the car, her father said with some concern, “You were gone so long I started to come for you, Beth. What happened to your forehead?”

She told him about her fall but did not mention the space ship.

“Did you see something land a few minutes ago, Daddy?” Beth asked.

Mr. Harrison grinned. “You mean, maybe, a Flying Saucer? No, I’m afraid I didn’t. Are you sure your imagination isn’t working overtime again, Beth?”

As they were about to get into the car, Beth saw a dark object in the distance rise from the ground and move off into the deepening twilight. She was certain she did not imagine this.

“You saw that, didn’t you, Daddy?” Beth asked.

Mr. Harrison nodded. “Probably a hawk. Hmm, it looks like it’s heading right for the Evening Star, doesn’t it?”

Beth gazed at the brilliant light of Sirius, gorgeously bright now with darkness closing in.

“I wish I knew if it really was,” Beth murmured.

Source:

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