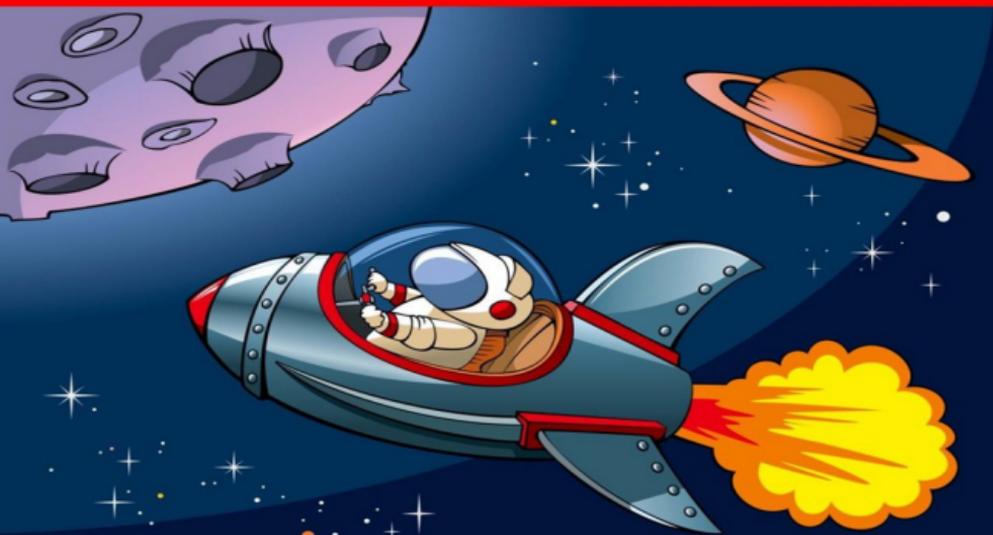


HONEST JOHN'S
FINE USED
SPACESHIPS
(A Short Story)



Jamie McNabb

Honest John's Fine Used Spaceships by Jamie McNabb

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Honest John's Fine Used Spaceships

by Jamie McNabb

I needed a ship. I need the right kind of ship, if you know what I mean. So I asked around. Everybody I talked to said I ought go see Honest John.

"You gotta be kidding me," I said. The guys and gals could be real comedians. "Honest John?"

"Yeah," Mandy said. Mandy knew more about the business than almost anybody else, and she did most of her own work on her own freighter.

"Honest John knows the market—the business, you understand?—and he doesn't ask a lot of fool questions."

I knew him by distant reputation, and his reputation didn't match what she'd told me about him. How could a fancy-schmancy guy like that, a

thoroughgoing citizen, have any idea what I was after? On the other hand, I'd land myself in a thoroughgoing jam if I couldn't deliver, so I decided to leave no stone unturned and all that other stuff.

His dealership was up in D Hanger, close to the habitat's axis of rotation. What passed for gravity up here in the nose-bleed section was like watered-down booze. The kicks were few and far between, but if you drank enough, you'd get a buzz.

The dealership's door was open, so I waltzed on in. My steps felt like I was a puppet on strings, half walking and half dragged from place to place. I probably looked like it, too.

The reek in his office was something else, not dirty, but cutting, like one of those citrus cleaners. Maybe that was why the door was open, he'd been cleaning up and wanted to air the place out.

Then it hit me. It wasn't a cleaner; it was Earl Grey tea.

"You Honest John?" I asked the ponce behind the supposed-to-be-impressive desk. It was made out of wood, antique looking, with nothing on it but

an old-fashioned desk blotter, a green-shaded lamp, and a holographic calendar.

The guy put down his half-eaten croissant. He was in his middle fifties, bald, and of middle height and less than middle weight. I could've wiped the floor with two of him.

"Yes?" he asked, and wiped his fingers on a gleaming white linen napkin. "May I help you?"

I could tell right off this guy wouldn't be caught dead eating a *crescent roll*.

"You Honest John?"

"In the flesh," he said.

"That's good 'cause I don't wanna be talkin' to no ghosts!"

"Oh, how very droll." He sounded like one of those highbrow Earth-side tourists who come through the planets every once in a while. Lots of money, easy marks.

"Droll?"

"Funny."

"Oh, yeah, that's me, all right. Funny. I'm a laugh a minute," I said.

"Would you care for tea?" he asked, and sipped

his.

"No, thanks," I said, and kept my opinion of tea to myself. "Here's how it is," I went on, "I'm lookin' for a ship that'll make the Saturn run in two parsecs."

His eyes bulged and he made a sort of polite choking sound, as though he'd swallowed his tea the wrong way and didn't want to admit it. The whole thing made him look like a pink frog.

Finally he cleared his throat and asked, "Come again?"

"You heard me," I said.

"I was afraid so," he said. "I'm sorry, but no such ship exists."

"Whaddya mean, 'No such ship exists'?"

He sipped his Earl Grey tea. The stink of it was making my head hurt. I never could stand oranges. I was okay with bananas and grapefruit, but never with oranges.

He put his china cup back on its china saucer. I was beginning to *taste* the Earl Grey.

He said, "I mean that no ship can possibly make the Saturn run in two *parsecs*."

"They're doing it all the time."

"No, my friend, I assure you they are not. You must understand: a parsec is a unit of dis—"

"Listen here, Jack," I said. I wasn't about to put up with no hoity-toity lecture from some citizen I could buy with the lint in my pocket. "I understand plenty." On the other hand, Mandy had said this tea-sipping jerk knew the score, so maybe the trouble was that I was wrong about just how fast some of the guys were haulin' their loads. "Okay," I said, forcing myself to ease back on the throttles. "Have it your way: three parsecs."

"No, not in three parsecs, either."

I wasn't used to bein' talked to like that.

"What's the matter? Ain't my money good enough for you?"

He took a dainty nibble off the end of his croissant, his pinky hooked just so, a genuine society dude.

"Well?" I asked. "Ain't it good enough?"

"On the contrary. I'm quite sure your money is as good as anyone else's."

"Then what's your beef, pal?"

"No beef. I'm a vegetarian."

"Oh, a comedian, eh?"

"Well, I do enjoy my little jokes."

"I can see that," I said, "but I ain't here for you to entertain me. I wanna buy a ship."

"Yes, I understand."

The way he said it! Normally I would have walked out or burned a third eye in his forehead, but I had merchandise on one end, and anxious buyers on the other, and uniformed people in between who didn't want the two ends to meet up.

I decided to try again. I started out by sitting down in one of his Earth-side-style chairs. It was wood, or what looked like wood, with green-leather, or what looked like leather, upholstery. The leather was smooth without being slippery, comfortable without being mushy. Not bad.

"Come on," I said, "Why won't you sell me a ship? It's not like I can find one laying around, not this far out."

"I'd be more than happy to sell you a ship, but what you ask is impossible."

"Maybe for *you*."

Honest John arched an eyebrow. "Very well," he said. His voice had a new hardness to it, as though he were finally getting down to cases. "There are two phrases the use of which will make a man both happy and wealthy: 'Yes, dear' and 'The customer is always right.'"

"I couldn't agree more," I said.

Honest John took out a paper folder—a cream-colored *paper* folder! Who used paper file folders in this day and age? He passed it across to me.

"I assume you're looking for a fast freighter, compact, highly maneuverable, stealth capability?"

"Yeah. That's right. A really stealthy, really fast freighter."

He pointed at the folder. "My current inventory."

I leafed through it. Some of the ships were beauties. Others looked like dogs from the outside, but I could tell, being the judge of freighter flesh that I am, that they were fast.

"Hey, these're gorgeous," I said.

"Indeed they are," he said, "but none of them can make the Saturn run in two parsecs."

"Then why did you show 'em to me?"

He pressed a button. The door slicked closed, and the windows across the front of his dealership turned opaque. A static-noise generator came on. It sounded like Vivaldi: tum-tum-tum-dah-tum.

He shrugged. "A person in my position can't be too careful. However, I can tell you're a man of rare discernment and profound understanding."

"Yeah, so whadda about these ships?"

"I only showed them to you so you'd be able to appreciate the vessels I'm about to offer you. I don't normally include them in my, well, *initial* presentations. They're extremely expensive. Only for the truly discriminating."

My heart thumped. It was beginning to look like the two ends were gonna meet up after all, with the uniforms none the wiser. Maybe Mandy hadn't been wrong about this dillweed, after all.

He reached back into his desk and brought out a second folder. It was a high-class black.

The ships in this one looked more like big space yachts. They gleamed and their lines swept up like eagle's wings.

He touched a finger to the side of his nose. "Just between you and me," he said, "I can guarantee that every one of these ships can make the Saturn run in less than one light month!"

I felt my face break into a toothy grin. One light month! One lousy month! I'd have the fastest freighter in the business!

I heard paper rattlin', and realized my hands had started to shake from the excitement of it.

"Tea?" he offered.

"Yet bet," I said. Under normal circumstances, I could hardly gag the stuff down, but I had to be a good customer, a polite guest, his good buddy. After all, in my business Honest John was *the* guy to have on your side.

The End