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Prominent Author

“MY HUSBAND,” said Mary Ellis, “although he is a very prompt man, and hasn’t been late to work in twenty-five years, is actually still someplace around the house.” She sipped at her faintly-scented hormone and carbohydrate drink. “As a matter of fact, he won’t be leaving for another ten minutes.”

“Incredible,” said Dorothy Lawrence, who had finished *her* drink, and now basked in the dermal-mist spray that descended over her virtually unclad body from an automatic jet above the couch. “What they won’t think of next!”

Mrs. Ellis beamed proudly, as if she personally were an employee of Terran Development. “Yes, it is incredible. According to somebody down at the office, the whole history of civilization can be explained in terms of transportation techniques. Of course, I don’t know anything about history. That’s for Government research people. But from what this man told Henry—”

“Where’s my briefcase?” came a fussy voice from the bedroom. “Good Lord, Mary. I know I left it on the clothes-cleaner last night.”

“You left it upstairs,” Mary replied, raising her voice slightly. “Look in the closet.”

“Why would it be in the closet?” Sounds of angry stirring-arounds. “You’d think a man’s own briefcase would be safe.” Henry Ellis stuck his head into the living room briefly. “I found it. Hello, Mrs. Lawrence.”

“Good morning,” Dorothy Lawrence replied. “Mary was explaining that you’re still here.”

“Yes, I’m still here.” Ellis straightened his tie, as the mirror revolved slowly around him. “Anything you want me to pick up downtown, honey?”

“No,” Mary replied. “Nothing I can think of. I’ll vid you at the office, if I remember something.”

“Is it true,” Mrs. Lawrence asked, “that *as soon as you step into it* you’re all the way downtown?”

“Well, almost all the way.”

“A hundred and sixty miles! It’s beyond belief. Why, it takes my husband two and a half hours to get his monojet through the commercial lanes and down at the parking lot and then walk all the way up to his office.”

“I know,” Ellis smuttered, grabbing his hat and coat. “Used to take me about that long. But no more.” He kissed his wife goodbye. “So long. See you tonight. Nice to have seen you again, Mrs. Lawrence.”

“Can I—watch?” Mrs. Lawrence asked hopefully.

“Watch? Of course, of course.” Ellis hurried through the house, out the back door and down the steps into the yard. “Come along!” he shouted impatiently. “I don’t want to be late. It’s nine fifty-nine and I have to be at my desk by ten.”

Mrs. Lawrence hurried eagerly after Ellis. In the back yard stood a big circular hoop that gleamed brightly in the mid-morning sun. Ellis turned some controls at the base. The hoop changed color, from silver to a shimmering red.

“Here I go!” Ellis shouted. He stepped briskly into the hoop. The hoop fluttered about him. There was a faint *pop*. The glow died.

“Good Heavens!” Mrs. Lawrence gasped. “He’s gone!”

“He’s in downtown N’York,” Mary Ellis corrected.

“I wish *my* husband had a Jiffi-scuttler. When they show up on the market commercially maybe I can afford to get him one.”

“Oh, they’re very handy,” Mary Ellis agreed. “He’s probably saying hello to the boys right this minute.”

Henry Ellis was in a sort of tunnel. All around him a gray, formless tube stretched out in both directions, a sort of hazy sewerpipe.

Framed in the opening behind him, he could see the faint outline of his own house. His backporch and yard, Mary standing on the steps in her red bra and slacks. Mrs. Lawrence beside her in green-checked shorts. The cedar tree and rows of petunias. A hill. The neat little houses of Cedar Groves, Pennsylvania. And in front of him—

New York City. A wavering glimpse of the busy streetcorner in front of his office. The great building itself, a section of concrete and glass and steel. People moving. Skyscrapers. Monojets landing in swarms. Aerial signs. Endless white-collar workers hurrying everywhere, rushing to their offices.

Ellis moved leisurely toward the New York end. He had taken the Jiffi-scuttler often enough to know just exactly how many steps it was. Five steps.