

ROCKET GIRLS

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Kristine Kathryn Rusch www.kriswrites.com found herself writing a lot of mystery fiction after she got vaccinated in 2021, for reasons she still does not understand. Which means that in 2022, she will publish a number of mystery stories in many venues, including our sister publication *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*. Her latest SF book, *The Chase*, is in her Diving Universe, with more to come, and for the first time in twenty years, she's currently wrapping up new projects in her fantasy world, *The Fey*. When she first started writing "Rocket Girls," she thought she had recovered her sense of whimsy, but maybe not . . .

Serious spacers don't parade around their starships half dressed. Or wearing tight clothing and heels so high they could puncture a floor. Serious spacers wear no make-up, don't dress their hair, and never ever ever wear jewelry. Serious spacers hate girl things because girl things make them seem unserious and seeming unserious prevents them from getting work.

Serious spacers are thin, tough, and weathered.

Serious spacers say "Please," and "Thank you" and hope to hell someone'll give them a commission.

Serious spacers—aren't me.

* * *

The attitude—the attitude started in school. Okay, never mind. I just lied. I lie a lot, but mostly that's for my job. We'll get to that. I'll try to be truthful here. It's a history, after all. A her-story, really, but that's beside the point. I'm putting down a record, because without records, there wouldn't be Rocket Girls, and without Rocket Girls, there would be no Space Bimbos.

But I get ahead of myself.

The attitude—*my* attitude—*my screw-you* attitude—well, I was probably born with it. I most likely came out of the womb (yes, vaginal birth, very old-fashioned) thinking, *Who are you people and what do you want with me?* Maybe wondering, *What is this place?* Maybe asking, *What fresh hell is this?*

As for that whole expected crying thing, which I know I did not do because Mom told that story a million times, I have an explanation for that too. First, Mom's version:

Born, didn't cry, didn't fuss, took us a while to realize she wasn't breathing. But the midwife figured it out, cleared her little throat with a pinky finger, and voila! my Angie, she entered the world.

My explanation? The entry into a new environment was surprising and unapproved. No one told me I was leaving somewhere warm and liquid, getting squeezed through a tube, and entering a place filled with *air*. I'm a scientist—okay, not really, another lie, but I have a scientist's mind—okay, yet another lie. I have a scientist's *curiosity*, and I'm sure I wasn't done exploring the old environment before I got to the new.

And, let's be honest here (and really, since I'm the only one talking, *I'll* be honest here): I'm a control freak. I have been known to not-cooperate with authority, especially authority that has an *agenda*. And I gotta tell you, those people in that room (birthing suite, whatever) had an agenda.

Typical me, I was more interested in control than survival. Although survival did walk out in the end. Of course I took a first breath at some point. Which is why I'm talking to you now.

About *attitude*.

It only got worse as time went on. For some reason, the parents sent me to an all-girls school. (I never did get the entire reasoning behind that one.) On Earth. (That part was totally, totally cool. When the administrators let us out of the school walls, of course.) And I got straight "A"s. God's truth.

(I'm holding up my hand here for those of you who can't see the holo image or the 2-D version, and are listening to it on some audio channel, or [worse], *reading* the transcript. [Sorry, you actual readers. I digress a lot. That's gotta be a minefield to wade through. At least they're cutting out the "um"s. Or, at least, that's what they said they'd do.] Anyway, holding up my hand is swearing to a statement, something else I learned on Earth. I learned a lot on Earth. That's not what this history is about. You'll have to ask me later about those things, and Earth, and my entire history, and how cool my life has been. You just asked about Space Bimbos, which leads directly to Rocket Girls, which is all I'm going to tell you. God knows, it's more than enough for one day.)

But behind the "A"s was the attitude. The straight "A"s made the authorities look the other way whenever anything went wrong, and, more importantly, kept the parents funneling cash at the place, so that I could stay with my pals. We grew up together, and we thought we were going to conquer the world. The world being, at that point, Earth, because none of us wanted to go back to the starbases or the Moon or Io or the places we took long, *long*, long journeys from to arrive at that bastion of education and history.

We hadn't yet discovered the Rocket Girls.

Ah, the Rocket Girls. I don't even know how to tell you about them because they are so fantastical, even now. I'd show them to you, except I lost my single copy—yes, *copy*—in a firefight off Starbase 867 decades ago. I'd love to show you the digital version I had, only my ship, *Rocket Girl Won*, blew up just outside Earth's solar system, back when we were fighting the Cascade Wars. I never backed up my computer system or my records. I didn't trust the web or the cloud or the net or whatever jargon you now use for that floating information data sphere, easily searchable, easily spyable, and easily stealable.

I'm sure, though, you could find an issue of *Rocket Girls* in that floating information sphere somewhere, but you'd have to check with me as to whether or not it was *our* issue. Because there were, like, fourteen of them still in existence when I was a girl, over a century ago.

Not fourteen of the issue. Fourteen existing copies of the *Rocket Girls* magazine or stories or whatever they called them back in the Paper Era. So much data got lost

then. We studied it all in school. Paper was fragile. It actually decayed and then vanished. By the end of what most of Earth called the twentieth century, someone tried to digitize as much of the paper crap as possible, but they kept only the “important” stuff, and pulp paper fiction magazines filled with lurid art weren’t considered important. Nor were the paperback books that so much of this stuff later got put into.

Designed to be disposable. That saying, “wraps the fish”? It comes from that era because all the news reports were on paper, and lasted only a day or so, before someone used the old paper to wrap cooked fish. Or something like that.

I looked it all up once. Studied the history of paper, of paper creations, even saw some actual ones in museums—not hands-on museums, but behind-the-glass museums that recreated a virtual experience for you. You could look at a paper copy of something, even hold it in your hand, turn the pages, sit in a twentieth century chair in a twentieth century house drinking twentieth century coffee listening to twentieth century music while you did so. Of course, it would all vanish at the end of the paid-viewing cycle, and you’d be stuck in a blank room with blank walls and a moldable chair, but it would feel real while you were doing it.

I understand some of you are watching me that way now, as if I’m sitting across from you.

I’m trying not to let that creep me out.

But for the record, I’m sitting in an actual room-room, with all kinds of equipment and a fresh-faced girl sitting across from me who professes to want to know everything Space Bimbo, as if I’m a relic (I’m not) and I don’t have another two centuries ahead of me (I like to believe my life is only a third over, even though I know not everyone makes it to three hundred). I’m still active and fighting and surviving, even if the Space Bimbos are gone—or at least the first generation of us. We’ve disbanded and moved on with our lives, and apparently, according to yon Fresh-Faced Sweetie across from me, the second generation of Space Bimbos is arising.

I’d rather they were Rocket Girls.

I warned you about these digressions, didn’t I? Because initially, I’d been talking about *Rocket Girls*, the paper story that we passed around at school. We didn’t know it was collectible or valuable or a bit of history that we were smearing our dirty fingers over and giggling at the arcane language and shocking attitudes.

Ruby’s father bought a whole pile of what he called pulps from a museum that was closing. The museum, owned by a long-forgotten city, was selling off its “treasures” to anyone willing to fork out the cash. The true treasures went to museums all over the galaxy.

The stuff that wasn’t important (we discussed “important” above) got sold locally or tossed out. Apparently, Ruby’s father had a thing for old fiction of the era so he bought a lot. Or maybe he just took it out of the garbage. I don’t know, I don’t care, except to tell you this:

There were twelve of us, best friends all. Ruby brought one *Rocket Girls* to school, and we passed it around like it was something forbidden. Maybe it was, I don’t know. No one ever took it from us, nor did anyone yell at us for reading it. Although they should’ve yelled at us for ruining it, because paper—especially *old* paper—just crumbles in your hands.

She had thirteen of them; we managed to ruin one. I’ll tell you about the others in a minute.

First, let me describe this thing with a bit of history. Back in that twentieth century, astronauts—that’s the name they gave spacers back then, back when it was all beginning—actually flew out of Earth’s atmosphere in a ship mounted on a rocket. A rocket that had explosives in it. It was dangerous and stupid and scary, and God, it sounds like fun.

The rockets, like so many things of that era, were shaped like giant penises, and fire came out the bottom (don't go there with the metaphor; just don't). The power of the rocket got the ships out of Earth's atmosphere and usually put the ships into orbit. The early ships didn't have any propellant as we understand it, so the orbit would eventually decay, and they'd fall back to Earth.

Later, things got more sophisticated, but, from my understanding of all this history, when *Rocket Girls* came out, these mighty weird ships existed only in some writer/artist's imagination. I'm pretty sure the things were penis-shaped to get young boys, believed to be the audience for this prurient fiction, to buy the books/magazines/paper products because—and here's the kicker—often the *Rocket Girls* covers had some scantily clad, big busted, beautiful woman clinging to the rocket (legs wrapped around it) without wearing any protective gear at all.

Sexual? Of course. But back in those days, you couldn't be *overtly* sexual. Just covertly. In other words, a drawing couldn't show a woman with a penis in her hand, but it could show a tiny woman hugging one.

Yeah, I don't understand it either.

And let's just say that twelve girls at an all-girls boarding school knew less about penises despite all the information at our fingertips than we did about beautiful art.

And that art was beautiful.

The girls were beautiful.

And we were at that impressionable girl-age when you wanted to be pretty as much as you wanted to be successful.

What could be more successful than a beautiful woman heading alone to the stars?

That's what we saw. All the penises, the analysis, the unreality of it, that came later, when we were older.

You can't help what you imprint on as a kid. It's whatever floats in front of you, whatever grabs your imagination and won't let you go.

These *Rocket Girls* magazines, they grabbed us. They held us. They spoke to our adventurous souls and our secret desire to be spacers. But they also spoke to our inner rebel.

The *Rocket Girls* of the magazine fame headed out alone, but did get rescued by men. We missed the subtext. We missed *a lot* of subtext. We saw the adventure. The heading out alone. The strong women in a strong profession where no one told them what to do.

It was the Wild West out there in *Rocket Girls* land, and we loved that.

Oh, crap. From the frown Fresh Face is giving me right now, I guess that means you don't even know what the Wild West is. Look it up: it's an Earth reference from United States history. Even now, I keep forgetting how far we are from Earth and how little everyone else knows about the place.

Yet it is not just the birthplace of our race. It's also where *Rocket Girls*—and the *Space Bimbos*—got their start.

* * *

I know the myths, I know the legends. The marauding band of women, little more than pirates, stepping outside the rules, unable to be called spacers because we didn't act like spacers. We used old ships, decommissioned ships, traveled on discontinued routes, went to forbidden areas of the sector.

You wouldn't have heard of us at all if we hadn't gotten rid of the *Manzanita Fleet* in the *Battle of Cascade Heavy*, the tipping point of the *Cascade Wars*. And that, my friends, was less about *Space Bimbos* than it was about luck.

We just got tired of being good girls. Straight "A"s, following rules, meeting regulations. We stole the first ship—but I get ahead of myself.

Or not. *Fresh Face* wants me to get to it, so I will:

School, inspiration, drawing our own Rocket Girls images, spacer training, even though our parents disapproved. But the parents lived far away, and the school they sent us to was supposed to encourage ambition—any kind of ambition—even if it was as mundane as spacing.

The *Rocket Girls* magazine was written before humans went into space. Imagined outer space—usually wrong—impossible missions, great clothing, fantastic art, and lots and lots of inspiration. We talked about Rocket Girls. We wanted to be Rocket Girls.

Didn't matter that we didn't look like them. I mean, no woman looks quite like them—the breasts the size of rockets all by themselves, waists so thin that they barely could contain a raspberry let alone stomach and organs and blood vessels and all the other parts.

Don't know raspberries? Oh, jeez. Missing one of nature's most glorious creations. And seriously, Fresh Face, who runs the hydroponics around here? There should be fresh fruits and veggies of *all* kinds, not just some regionally prescribed crap.

Then there was the Rocket Girl hair, and the eyes, so big that they took up half the face, and skin that was an unnatural white—which, we learned in our Earth history classes, was a *thing*. Skin color, that is. Important for reasons that make absolutely no sense to me now. Yeah, I didn't do well with it in school either.

Since we didn't understand it, we ignored it.

So . . . like all other teenagers on a mission, we started with the clothing—when we weren't in spacer training, of course. Honestly, you can't show up in thigh-high boots, form-fitting cutaway teddies, and whip bands around your wrists and expect to be taken seriously at spacer camp.

Kids always start at spacer camp, even now. At least on Earth. Where you can sit out under the stars and imagine great things. My research tells me that spacer camp comes from that twentieth century stuff, astronaut camp turned into physics camp, turned into computer camp, if you can believe it, and then split off where all the little round-headed brainiacs went to one camp and the athletic muscle went to the other.

We were round-headed brainiacs who wanted to do athletic muscle jobs the way they were done Way Back When.

That's why we stole the ship.

That's how we all got in trouble.

And that's why we ran away.

* * *

Spacer camp. Sounds cool, but is totally stupid.

Starts in Florida, goes into space.

How do I describe Florida to those of you who've never been to Earth? If I compare Florida to some other galaxy hot spot, then I only reach those of you who've been to that place. And some of you might disagree. So, let me set the scene as best I can.

Florida—a narrow peninsula between two oceans. It used to be wider and flatter, or so the histories show, but Earth went through a dark period of rising seas and massive storms. Parts of Florida broke off or vanished underwater. A massive financial campaign started to save what was left, although for the love of God, I have no idea why.

We were on the "Space Coast," all of its treasures surviving the great cataclysm due to a confluence of out-of-work engineers (from when a government-operated space program ended) and a sense of history that seems to strike Earthers every generation or two.

The twelve of us went on a tour of the actual place where rockets launched, hundreds of years ago. We even saw some of the rockets, which just looked old and rusty and rickety.

We got the history of humankind's space exploration, designed to impart respect, and we got instruction in mundane things, like how to start a standard engine, how to stop an energy leak, and how to evaluate a spaceship's quality.

That's the thing about going to spacer camp on the Space Coast. There are lots of old spaceships lying about—or at least there were back then. Can't tell you what's going on now, since it's been decades since I've been back.

But then, the idea was that the old ships would *inspire*. We could sit in the cockpit or on the bridge and imagine ourselves lifting off, imagine ourselves wrapped around those rockets and riding that metal penis into space.

We talked about it a lot, that second summer of spacer camp—after we saw the *Rocket Girls* magazine. And we decided we couldn't really understand anything until we tried it.

So our spacer camp was different from everyone else's spacer camp.

Very different.

Don't believe everything you've heard. We didn't steal a derelict ship, not really. We rebuilt a derelict ship, or as I later told the authorities, we *built* a derelict ship.

You see, the derelicts all over the Space Coast were in various states of repair. It was kind of like a junkyard for spaceships.

Oh, jeez (yes, jeez. Yes, I know I said it twice now. It's a word I picked up from *Rocket Girls*. Deal with it). Those of you who can see me can see me shaking my head. Junk. Stuff no longer needed. Yard—well, that's a bit of ground used for various purposes. If you're going to ask me to define every word you do not know, Fresh Face, then we're all screwed here. So just listen, and look this crap up later. You only have me for a limited time, you know.

But to be clear, since you're not getting it, there were a lot of broken ships and ship parts all over that area of the Space Coast. Some of them were there because of that great cataclysm. Seems big trauma like that gets in the way of people cleaning stuff up.

So here we are, twelve girls itching for adventure, lying on our backs in the humid night, looking at the Moon over the Atlantic Ocean. The Moon reflects off that ocean, the light beautiful and rich. It's hard to believe anyone lives on the Moon or that the Moon is considered (in space terms) not very far away.

Particularly when you're trapped on Earth in Florida, of all places, imagining yourself going on adventures even though you've never had one. Not even the trip to Earth was an adventure in the Rocket-Girls sense of the word.

All of us (except Ruby) had gotten on long-haul passenger ships from our various homes and had cushy berths because all of us were trust-fund babies. We had more money than we should have, because our parents worried about us being so very far away without direct access to funds.

Fast forward to us, lying on the beach, looking at the Moon eleven of us had passed on our way to Florida, the Moon that twelve of us hadn't thought much of, which looked so tiny and so far away and so inaccessible. Its reflection shimmered on the water like an illusion, and I like to think that's when we decided to become actual Rocket Girls.

But I'm sure it wasn't that quick. I'm sure it happened slowly, as we were all kvetching (seriously? Kvetching. Jeez, Fresh Face. Time to start looking things up). We would sneak out of our dorms and sit on the beach. We didn't drink—not yet—because that part of Florida was “dry” (and I'll give you that one, since I didn't know it either when I first arrived. It meant that there was no easy access to alcohol or other drugs that were legal in most places).

I'm pretty sure that's when we divided ourselves up into the type of adventurers we wanted to be. We did it by skill set. A third of us had only one skill—shopping. So

they were in charge of the thigh-high boots, form-fitting cutaway teddies, and whip bands, as well as some other clothing that would be considered a tad more practical.

The fashionistas had to travel out of the region to get that stuff. Turns out that an area that is “dry” is also “repressed” and wasn’t interested in clothing that accentuated the female form.

A third of us learned weaponry, which was allowed in that part of Florida—which apparently had a long history of allowing weapons, but disallowing anything fun like sex and drinking.

We figured we would need weapons because *Rocket Girls* had shown us the perils of the universe. Monsters with gigantic bug eyes that would turn those bug eyes on human women and try to capture said women with tiny hands covered in too many fingers and lots of claws; men who had been “enchanted” by some alien overlord and who would try to capture women using blasters and ropes and hooks and other scary-looking items; and faceless creatures on impossible spaceships that would try to drag women across the vastness of space as if we could survive out in the open with nothing around us but a tiny bit of fabric over the “forbidden” parts.

(I see you, Fresh Face. “Forbidden” varies from culture to culture. *Rocket Girls* came out during a particularly repressed time. Look up the cultural norms, because I’m not doing it for you.)

And then there was the remaining third of us, which included me. The engineers. We were a lot more interested in the way the ships worked than in the way the weapons worked. We weren’t as adventurous as our weapons women, but we weren’t as interested in shopping as our fashionistas either.

In fact, we were probably the least interested in the fashion. We gave no fashion advice at all to our shopping compatriots. The weapons women asked the fashionistas to make sure there was some kind of holster for the blaster, which was what we called all of our weapons from laser guns to the five guns that shot actual bullets (and which we engineers locked up as soon as we saw them. It was a tad embarrassing to have to explain to our weapons-loving sisters what kind of danger bullets presented in a pressurized environment. I mean, really, they should have listened in class).

So the four of us who liked engineering and building stuff, well, we were the ones who found all the pieces of the spaceships. We found a hulk that loomed in the sand not far from our private plotting dune, and we pronounced that hulk space-worthy the first day we saw it.

We were wrong, of course. We had a lot of work to do, and by the time we finished the hulk looked like a ruined spaceship with all kinds of crap grafted to it.

We really didn’t know what we were doing. We knew the ship needed propulsion. We knew we had to control it from the cockpit. We knew that the ship had to have an airtight seal, and we figured it needed some kind of artificial gravity.

We forgot about the galley, so we had to cobble something together the night before our launch. We did remember chairs, though, and thought it would be better to have them attached to the floor than rolling around. But we figured we could Velcro our sleeping bags to that same floor, which was a decision we would come to regret.

Some of the team ended up regretting lots of things. I don’t. I don’t regret it at all, because the entire adventure set me on the right path . . . for me. And that’s all that matters—the right path for you.

* * *

Spacer camp ended on September 15, on the Earth calendar, with the twenty-four-hour days that mark Earth time. We planned our first (and only) flight for the night of September 1.

What we really wanted to do was fly out of Earth’s atmosphere on a real rocket. A few of us hoped to cling to the outside of it, just like in the illustrations on *Rocket Girls*.

But we engineers explained what would happen to the human body if that was actually something we could have arranged (and I suppose we could have, with some kind of glued handhold or something—until the person burned to a crisp or fell off due to the velocity or passed out from lack of air—God knows what would have happened first).

The description so grossed out the others, particularly since we described everything as if the person clinging to the rocket was wearing thigh-high boots, form-fitting cutaway teddies, and exposing lots and lots and lots of bare skin.

A couple of the girls burst into tears and told me personally that they never could forgive me for that description.

I figured never being forgiven for a description was a lot better than watching your friend die in the most horrible manner possible, particularly when you were one of the people who enabled it.

We missed our September 1 deadline by two days, mostly because someone had forgotten that we needed food on the flight. We had no idea how to make a galley. Heck, most of us had no idea how to make food at all.

And yet, there we were, thinking we might make it to orbit, and actually orbit for a while, maybe even a day or two or three. And if that was the case, we needed to eat something.

I left it to the shoppers, after telling them that the food had to be some kind of ready to eat something, and it couldn't have a lot of fiddly little bits, particularly since I wasn't too sure that the artificial gravity we were putting into the spaceship would actually work.

I was fifteen, and even though I called myself an engineer, I wasn't. I didn't know, for example, that engineers theorized, then tested, then retested, then fixed, then had someone else test, then theorized some more, and tested, and retested, and maybe spent years perfecting everything, because real engineers believed in safety first.

Me, back then? I believed in making it work first, and everything else would resolve itself.

Oooooops.

Luckily, none of us died.

* * *

That night, we found the ancient launch pad that had sent some of the very first spacers—um, astronauts—into space. We weren't calling ourselves spacers then. We had imprinted hard on *Rocket Girls*, like I said, and so we were calling ourselves astronauts, even in regular conversation.

Our teachers at spacer camp thought it was cute. They thought we were honoring the history of the place. They thought we were really getting into the details of everything they taught.

We did the homework, such as it was, and saw all the relics, such as they were, and did all the camp things that every other camp on the shores of the warm Atlantic did, like swim in the mornings and learn how to play baseball (because organized sport, I guess, taught team-building, which was, I guess, necessary for space flight). We did some truly lame experiments that were called chemistry and a few less lame experiments that were called physics and some really cool observations in a nearby planetarium that also set our work back a few nights and almost lost us Chantel.

Chantel really liked the astronomy stuff and was willing to forgo our little experiment to spend more time gazing at the heavens. We reminded her that we would be in the heavens soon enough, and I actually had to clarify because Chantel looked terrified at that moment. I hadn't known that she was an old-fashioned Christian and old-fashioned Christianity taught that dead people (who were "good," whatever that meant) went to actual heaven.

It took Lupe to remind Chantel, using Spanish, which they were both fluent in as

well, that words sometimes shared meanings, like *cielo* and heaven. And sometimes metaphor is good. Chantel, back in them thar days, was a bit too literal for our own good. She got better, albeit not by much.

Anyway, we got her back in the fold with that promise, and then we went to work. We weren't getting much sleep, especially since reveille was at 6 A.M. sharp followed by the Polar Bear Swim at 6:15. But we were getting lots done.

We had our rebuilt relic ready by September 3, and our planned lift-off under the full Moon on September 4. Of course, we didn't check the weather report, and that could've been dicier than it was (we had twilight clouds, but they cleared by midnight).

It took two hours longer than we planned to get the relic onto the ancient launchpad. And we only managed to achieve that because we found an ancient winch attached to an ancient vehicle that Delilah figured out how to operate in the very nick of time.

The only reason our camp counselors, teachers, and chaperones did not figure out what we were doing was because of the vast distances.

Spacer camp was as far inland as possible on the Space Coast, and the launch pad was on rebuilt marshland that constantly went underwater in really bad storms. Like I said, Florida was not what it had been in the reveille century, and the Space Coast was only surviving because of some really good funding for important historic sites.

The promised rain at twilight didn't happen (although we hadn't known that those clouds were supposed to be rain clouds) so we were in the clear in more ways than one.

Before we got on the relic, we stood back and admired our handiwork. That's one of my best memories ever. Eleven of my closest friends and me, standing on ancient asphalt in our thigh high boots and form-fitting cutaway teddies, feeling the sweat drip down our backs from the incredible humidity, listening to the night bugs chirrup and threaten, and looking at the Moon providing light over the ocean that was almost as bright as day.

In front of that ocean and that Moon, on the ancient launchpad, was the relic. It wasn't quite a rocket ship—where would we have gotten a rocket? Even though ships were lying around discarded (for teaching purposes), rockets from the bygone rocket era were not. They were *dangerous*, after all.

There weren't any weapons either. The weapons crew had to buy some, usually with Mommy and Daddy's money.

But, because we were sticklers for what we considered to be accuracy, we chose the spaceship shell that was as close to penis-shaped as we could find.

One of us (Claudia?) suggested we paste some kind of statue on the side, dressed as we were that night, clinging to the ship and riding it into the stars (or at least, low orbit). We couldn't, of course. I didn't want to explain physics and balance and all kinds of other things, not counting what would happen to that statue if it weren't made of the right materials (just like humans weren't made of the right materials).

I thought, briefly, of painting a woman on the side—and yes, Fresh Face, I did that on almost every other ship I ever had, which is why you know about it—but we didn't have time or an artist in our midst who could actually *paint* and not do something computer generated.

Still, I can't tell you how magnificent that ship was, looming darkly against that brightly light night sky. To this day, I'm amazed the counselors, instructors, and chaperones didn't notice the ship, but they didn't. It wasn't so much that they trusted the kids at spacer camp as that they expected some kind of hijinks.

They just didn't expect *our* kind of hijinks.

We did a few things that the experts would have said were wrong (well, we did a lot wrong, actually), but we had no choice. We didn't have what the *Rocket Girls*

magazine called "Mission Control." We didn't have anyone on the ground who was going to monitor us.

Nor did we clamp the ship into the launch pad. We just balanced the ship *on* the pad and prayed for the best.

Looking back now, it's kind of a miracle that the ship didn't tumble one way or another. We didn't have the shell anchored properly, we had too much weight in the middle, and then we were climbing (yes, climbing) on board on the rickety internal ladder system that I had deemed good enough.

At least I remembered to put lighting inside that came on automatically.

Half of us changed our shoes on the launch pad, but half of us didn't. All of us put our suits on over our form-fitting cutaway teddies and the too-short shorts that we wore with the boots.

The suits weren't old. They were state-of-the-art, stolen (the camp later said) from its wardrobe, borrowed (we said) because we couldn't find anything else. I left my boots in a heap at the base of the launch pad. Those things looked great, but they *hurt*, particularly where they cut into my—shall we say "generous"?—thighs.

I let us into the ship and climbed up that ladder, followed by the rest of the engineers. Sadie peeled off to work in the bowels of the ship where we had placed a sort-of secondary control area, and Joanie and I climbed to the cockpit, much quicker than anyone else because our shoes were practical and our legs weren't being strangled by fashion.

A couple of the weapons women followed us, going to the third area of the ship that we had prepared—the lounge was what Sadie called it; the passenger area was what I called it, not wanting to hurt anyone's feelings.

It was maybe the most cramped area of the ship, and it didn't have any portals. The "passengers" got to watch the launch on a screen, rather than experience it through the wide-open clear portals that covered a goodly portion of the cockpit.

They were lucky. They never believed me about that, but they were.

The problem wasn't so much liftoff as—

Well, I get ahead of myself.

We thought we had all the safety protocols in place. We had straps to hold us into our seats. We had redundant systems. We had a plan and a way to execute it.

We had even done practice flights—on simulators, of course, because we didn't want the spacer camp folks to catch a single clue—but we figured all of that was enough.

We got into our places, and no one even suggested backing out.

Tells you how young we were.

I ended up at the controls, by default. All four of the engineers knew how to fly this thing, in theory, and all of us had had actual flight training long before we ever came to spacer camp, but let me tell you, most flying vehicles on Earth are simple things—and were then, too.

Yeah, you had to test and qualify, but essentially, those things drove themselves. I flew some more complicated things—my obsession with old started long before spacer camp and *Rocket Girls*—but old meant actual planes from thirty years before which (you guessed it) essentially flew themselves.

Our first ship, which we stupidly did not name (not knowing about that superstition), did not essentially fly itself. You had to actively engage with the control panel.

I thought I was ready. I was the one at the helm because I was the one who never had to dunk the ship in the water in simulation or watch helplessly as it tumbled through the air before it ever reached the atmosphere.

My simulated flights were fine. They went well, and we all figured that was enough.

Here's what I didn't expect: the helm actually vibrated in my hands. Hell, the ship vibrated around us. It felt like it was going to shake apart.

As I said, none of us discussed aborting the so-called mission, because we were young and dumb and we didn't know better.

I have never felt a ship shake like that before or since.

The shaking was so violent that Joanie bit through her lower lip, accidentally. I thought my head was going to wobble off. One of the badly assembled chairs actually came loose. Lupe was in it, and apparently, she climbed out of it, and somehow managed to hang on while reattaching it.

I missed that. It had happened in the lounge, not the cockpit.

That cockpit. I still see it in my dreams.

It was small, so tight that the two of us inside were shoulder to shoulder. There was clear something or other all the way around us so we could see. I say *something or other* because it wasn't glass and it wasn't plastic as we know it. Just some kind of material that we hoped—I hoped—was properly reinforced to withstand whatever was going to be thrown at us.

Every single discarded ship had an area like that. This particular relic had used the area as a cockpit before. Every bit of equipment that remained in the relic was either rusted or frozen in place. So we removed it, and replaced it with newer equipment from another relic.

That replacement was what took all the time. We had a state-of-the-art control panel . . . from fifty years before . . . that was the newest we could find. It had touch screens, which were/are notoriously unreliable, but we didn't care. Anything was better than the rusted frozen thing we had replaced.

Of course, replacing the panel meant replacing all the leads and connections all the way down to what we were calling the engineering room, which was really the engine room, which was really just an unused area—at least when we found it.

We managed to rejigger everything, and install some seats that were more comfortable than the broken ones in the cockpit, but they were a little too big.

We turned everything on before flying the ship, but we never did try to see if everything worked together properly.

Whoops.

Still, I was so proud of that cockpit and control board. It was probably the only thing on the entire ship that was sparkingly clean. It was set up to my specifications, everything spaced properly for my grip, my hands, my sightlines. I have not had anything since that was set up so perfectly, just for me.

We all strapped in. We settled back. Those of us in the cockpit could see the Moon illuminating the ocean—and the side of the ship. The girls below, well, I guess they could see the walls and little else, even though they were watching the ship itself on the screens we'd rigged up.

Only Ruby was watching everything from her seat in the lounge. She was the one who saw the vehicles driving through the gates of the old Space Center, moving faster than land vehicles ever should have. Someone had figured out what we were doing, and the vehicles were coming quickly. But they were on land, because they weren't sure what was going to happen with the ship. (I learned that later.)

Ruby reported their presence in a breathless voice over our comm system. That set the adrenaline going even more than it had been going earlier.

I went through the launch sequence faster than I had planned to. We had a checkpoint sequence, and we sped through it, me and the other engineers.

The ship's shaking grew steadily worse, and a part of my brain wondered if we would ever get off the ground. We did have our own escape gear built into our space-suits. If the ship disintegrated—a distinct possibility—we had parachutes for the lower elevations.

That was pretty much it.

We hadn't even gotten to the part of spacer camp where we learned that escape pods existed for a reason. There was no way to transform a true spacesuit into an escape pod that would last for anything longer than an hour or two.

But we were the Rocket Girls, at least in our heads. We were willing to risk it.

Maybe because we were teenagers and we didn't understand the notions of death and dying—particularly the notion about dying horribly.

The engines fired, the touch screen winked out for a half second, and I brought it back by muttering an expletive and slamming my fist against the screen, in true Rocket Girl fashion.

The ship vibrated sideways, and Ruby worried (out loud) that we would slide right off the launch pad. Instead, the ship lifted, just like it was designed to do, and then it headed into space.

At that moment, we were just along for the ride.

I had programmed the route into the automatic pilot. I was a dummy, but I wasn't completely stupid. I knew I couldn't handle the actual piloting and neither could the rest of us.

I just figured that automatic pilot was the sort of thing that was *better* than a human pilot, and maybe it was with Earth ships of that era, but our ship was a hybrid from previous eras, when automatic pilot (I later learned) required a very human back-up to deal with all of the problems.

Which showed up almost immediately.

Our trajectory was straight up, which I had not programmed. And the stupid ship was going faster than I wanted. As in four times as fast.

If everything continued the way it was going, we would exit the atmosphere half an hour before we were supposed to and overshoot the proposed orbit—the one that would keep us away from most space debris and existing ships.

There was an override. I remembered seeing it as I installed the touch screen. As I searched, the touch screen went out again.

And then the ship vibrated into big meaty pieces.

Apparently the lounge area separated first, and then the engines just fell through the exterior, pulling on the control panel, which took out part of one of our walls.

The suits did what they were supposed to, because they were state-of-the-art. The hoods came up and secured themselves around our faces. The entire suit sealed in less than five seconds, startling me, and getting in the way of my hands trying to work the very dead touch screen.

The cockpit fell away around us. We were still in the middle of the night sky. We hadn't left the atmosphere yet.

My friends in the lounge were plummeting away from us. I hoped they were smart enough to get out. The engineering section had disintegrated as thoroughly as our section, and I could already see the gigantic parachutes, open and catching the wind.

Which was when my parachute deployed, jerking me upward with such force that my neck felt like it was going to snap off.

The Moon was setting on the other side of the peninsula, but I could see it. I like to think I could also see high-heeled boots kicking their way out of the lounge, but I didn't see any of that. The lounge was too heavy and they were heading down too fast for me to see anything.

Plus, it was getting darker.

I swayed and searched for my friends. My stomach was in knots, and I was terrified.

Below me, the ocean glittered darkly, and I finally understood why the Space Coast was on the *coast*.

I hadn't set up any emergency beacons. I hadn't figured that we would need to contact the spacer camp or any authorities.

As I drifted downward, I thought I was going to float in the cool ocean for hours until I finally drowned.

The other Rocket Girls had similar thoughts, except those in the lounge. They really were kicking out the wall with booted feet—although a couple of those feet did not have high heels on. I suspect those were the ones that broke through.

They got out at the right altitude to deploy their chutes, just barely, they said.

We all landed in that choppy water in completely different places. I tucked as I hit, so I went deeper underwater than I had thought. The parachute helped me up and the suit's buoyancy bobbed me to the surface fast.

Above me, clouds and no other parachutes that I could see. Around me, only ocean.

I have no idea how long I floated there. Long enough to do some math on how long a human body could survive without drinking water. Long enough to figure out how to wrap my parachute to make it a kind of life raft.

Long enough to think that maybe the maxim *safety first* had a reason for existing.

* * *

You know the rest. They found us. They rounded us up as well as the debris of the ship we had designed.

They tried to expel us all from spacer camp, but saw no point since there was only a few days left. We were suspended though. And those fancy-schmancy schools we all attended—well, they were notified, but they chose to ignore the whole thing.

Except for the mandatory counseling. We were told to tone down our arrogance, and maybe learn how to do things in the proper order.

We were told to conform.

You see how well that worked out.

Because we had extremely rich parents, we didn't have to pay for anything. We had very few consequences, and yet it was so terrifying, and we all thought we were going to die, and we were all smart enough to know we had made mistakes, we became determined to do things right.

Which was why we didn't follow most of the Spacer's Dictums, and why we learned how to be better than they were and why we figured out how to live life our way, without sticking around for the consequences.

* * *

Those of you who are actually reading the transcript (and I'm so sorry. I'm beginning to think watching was a much better choice), you won't be able to see that the last bit was followed by an extremely long pause.

Almost none of you will note that Fresh Face here ended up with a sour expression. In fact, she's said damn near nothing since I finished, probably because I *am* finished, and I didn't tell the story she wanted me to tell, right, Fresh Face?

This wasn't the myth or legend you heard. You heard, what exactly? That we had taken the rocket—an actual penis-shaped bomb-powered rocket—into actual space, and it blew up there, jettisoning us like bits of confetti at a wedding?

Well, of course, were so brilliant that we managed to jury-rig the bits of the spaceship into some kind of device that kept us alive—and oh, yeah, we managed to contact the nearby Moon Base, who sent men to save us.

Those men arrived, and we stole their ship.

Is that the one you heard?

Or was it the one where the ship blew up on the launch pad and everyone died, and we weren't really the original Rocket Girls. They were our friends and siblings, and we stole their identities and built our ship as a tribute and managed to fly it all the way to the Moon, where we were then arrested, but no one cared because we were so ingenious, building the ship and all.

Ah, esteemed viewers—listeners—readers—whatever the hell you are, you'll note

(or not) that our hostess, Fresh Face here, is nodding. That's the story she heard. She wanted everyone dead on the launch pad, lots of girl heroics, and improbable flight to the Moon and kudos from everyone in charge.

Well, then, Fresh Face, I gift you that story. Sure, yes, it's true. Because we all need to believe the myths and legends that form us, right? We can't help what we imprint on, even if it's not true.

I try not to tell the truth, because really, who wants to hear it? Who wants to hear that spacer camp was actually inspiring and that we all bonded while we were there, and we really did find the *Rocket Girls* magazines, but we read them and were a bit appalled and thought we could do better.

So we learned, and attended more spacer camps, and then we transferred to some of the best physics and engineering schools in the world for our undergraduate—all together, even though (I will admit) some of us were better at shopping than engineering—and we got our doctorates and did a lot of practical work, and most of us even interned on some really rough scows just to learn the spacer craft, which we all ended up hating.

But, because our parents had money—and you'll see, this is a theme throughout—we were able to buy our first vessel, which, contrary to lies and myths and legends, we took years learning how to fly, and even more years getting commissions, and even more years developing a reputation, and yes, in those days, everyone called us Rocket Girls, because the ship really was *Rocket Girl Won*, which really did blow up just outside Earth's solar system, back when we were fighting the Cascade Wars, because like so many in our profession, wars made our names.

Sometimes it was just enough to survive the wars.

But we lost some of our number—Ruby and Lupe and Chantel and Claudia and Sadie and Joanie—in the wars, and we never really could replace them and we didn't want to, but we didn't feel like Rocket Girls without them, so we got drunk one night and figured only the bimbos were left, which was one-third true, because most of the women who died—daredevils all—were our engineers. Hell, I wasn't even one of the engineers, not at first.

We figured we were the dumb subset of the Rocket Girls, so we called ourselves the Space Bimbos and the new ship was going to be called *Space Bimbos Lost*, but we figured that would be a bad omen, so we called it *Space Bimbos* instead, and this time, we painted bimbos all over the ship, in thigh-high boots and short shorts and bustiers, because we were older, and all of those women, who looked like Joanie and Sadie and Claudia and Chantel and Lupe and Ruby, were *gorgeous*, just like we wanted to be, and the art could handle the extremes of space, and people noticed, and they wanted the story, and frankly, Fresh Face, the story is too damn painful to tell, so you get whatever story I feel like telling today.

Yeah, yeah, you don't like it much, and yeah, you guessed right when you figured out that I don't really care what you think of my storytelling.

Because some of what I told you is true, and most of it isn't, and the real story of the Rocket Girls and the Space Bimbos won't get told in a setting like this.

It'll be told in late-night campfires at spacer camps all over the system, from girls who got inspired by bits and pieces of the history—or really, her-story—that someone told.

The inspiration is what matters, Fresh Face, not the accuracy.

Accuracy is for the survivors, and we won't be around a hell of a lot longer. When we're gone there will be no one to correct the record, and then you too can make it up as you go.

Until then, don't get too wrapped up in your heroes. We all have clay feet.

Some of us just choose to stuff them in thigh-high boots.