

Blue Pluto.

By Sean. F. Stevens.

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BLUE PLUTO

Strains of Robert Palmer's "HEAVY NOVA" album quietly echoed through the corridors of Blue Pluto. Though the music was approximately fifty seven hundred million kilometres from its planet of origin and over two hundred years old to boot Bill "Nipper" Grahams still found it soothing. Half wearing his grimy pressure suit, Nipper lay back in his sleeping palette & reflected that life couldn't be better.

This "morning" (Blue Pluto time) Nipper had morosely scanned the readout of his Telefax and had (as usual) fast-forwarded to the "back page" to see if the billion dollar lottery had been drawn yet, it had. Nipper had bought a ticket almost 2 months ago at moon station Epsilon during his last holiday, it had only been short as he'd spent most of his break travelling from Blue Pluto to the Moon and back again. His one vice while on the moon was to buy a lottery ticket, it was his one hope for a better life.

With this in mind, Nipper had removed the now somewhat dog-eared lottery ticket from a tool pouch in his suit and had tried to find his number amongst the green neon columns on his Telefax screen. He at first couldn't see his number anywhere, but he hadn't yet considered looking at the grand prize... Within seconds of realizing that he had won a cool billion dollars Nipper had transmitted his resignation to Earth Control, specifically to his boss, Central Foreman Gus Meeker. Gus had accepted Nipper's resignation without question, after all men in Nipper's position resign all the time.

The very next thing that Nipper did was to notify the lottery office on Moon Station Epsilon of his winning ticket number, the receptionist there congratulated him and said that the Earth Prime lottery office would be in touch with him later that day. Nipper lay back and quietly revelled in the thought of his new direction in life, calmly he looked around him and hoped that he would never even hear the word "Blue Pluto" again, Nipper giggled slightly in anticipation.

The mass of steel and ceramic alloys known as Blue Pluto was to most people (apart from Nipper) just a name, it was one of a string of similar Hyperwave communications relay capsules dotted throughout the solar system and beyond. Their sole function was to boost Hyperwave signals on their journey to and from the Earth and other planetary colonies. For those not in the know (which had included Nipper before he took the job) Hyperwave transmissions are high energy slightly faster than light communications signals that enable real time conversations between the planets of the solar system and the research stations beyond without almost any delay. The physics is mind bursting and Nipper was extremely glad that he hadn't needed to study it to get the job; he tried to avoid making his brain jump out of his cranium if he could help it!

The communications system was automated, but a single crewmember was required to service each satellite to ensure that the machinery ran smoothly.

To Nipper, who had been a holoscreen repairman, it had seemed like a challenging career move, but after 16 months on Blue Pluto (where days and sometimes weeks would pass without doing anything) the job had quickly become a grinding bore. The last repair job Nipper had undertaken was a five-minute

space walk to replace a cracked wing nut. These days Nipper only stayed on for the money, so his lottery win had thus removed his last excuse to stay.

Nipper sighed, reaching over to a stereo unit built into the wall (which was the source of the music), he turned up the volume slightly. He hadn't showered since he'd begun his latest shift on Blue Pluto (even though limited shower facilities were available) but he wasn't particularly concerned, the smell wasn't noticeable after the first month even if the auto deodorizing systems hadn't given up trying to counteract the increasing odour levels.

Apart from the palette Nipper was lying on the only other features of his small environment cubicle was a small desk and a recessed bookshelf where his Telefax sat when not in use, next to his Telefax was a camera of shiny unpainted (slightly pitted) metal, it was a Hasselblad 500 EL Data, one of those used during the American Moon landings of 200 years ago, Nipper had found it while on holiday at Moon Station Omega several holidays previously, it had been only partially buried in the Moon dust and its film cartridge had been removed but it was still in working order. Nipper's brother was an antique dealer and had assured him that he could get a "fair" price for it: "the camera would be worth more if NASA hadn't left so many of 'em up here. Now on the other hand, if you find me a Lunik in good shape, we'll talk money." Nipper had thus decided to keep the camera for himself; it had been a simple matter of replacing the missing film cartridge with a holo-imaging unit.

Nipper had every intention of using the camera to holograph some of the planets in the solar system but as yet hadn't had the opportunity, not even to holograph Pluto, the planet whose orbit he shared (it would be another 150 years before the planets orbit brought it back into Blue Pluto's vicinity, but such were the breaks in life), so the camera for the moment lay unused on the shelf, patiently waiting.

Nipper shifted his position slightly and continued his reflections on the past 16 months, he'd had two full six month shifts with six weeks of R&R between each shift during which time a temp would do the job (and quite often stuff everything up in Nipper's view) and was now a month into his third tour, far more time than any sane person should spend on their own out near the orbit of the ninth planet he decided, certainly if they wanted to remain sane, that is.

Sometimes, when he was in a more whimsical frame of mind, Nipper had presumed that the only reason that he had been accepted for the position in the first place was that he had fit the government regular issue pressure suit. When he had applied, two things had "got him in the door", his electronics knowledge (a certificate in general opto-electronics, mastering in holoscreen schematics) and his height. At five feet five inches Nipper was exactly at the midrange height allowed for booster station technicians, the pressure suit he had been given on his acceptance for the job had been "specifically tailored" for him they had said, but as it was tight in some areas and baggy in others Nipper was more than a little doubtful, especially when meeting several of his fellow techies he found that, height notwithstanding, they all wore suits of exactly the same size as his own.

A quietly insistent buzz broke Nipper out of his reverie; he turned off his stereo, sat up & rummaged under his sleeping palette. Buried under several copies of 3D Playboy and a slightly tarnished video-chip of "The day of the Triffids" was the source of the beeping, a small portable console which was Nipper's interface with all the systems of Blue Pluto, especially the communications network.

Nipper punched in a code to activate the console its small LCD readout

indicated an incoming transmission was the cause of the buzzing alarm, Nipper punched in another code and the alarm ceased, at the same time the wall above the desk (that contained a large though seldom used holoscreen) began to glow, a moment later the flat electronic monotone of the Hyperwave receiver stated: "Incoming communication from Earth Prime Lottery Office". This was no surprise to Nipper, who had already guessed this anyway. he almost never got personal phone calls and his supervisor called as little as he possibly could, (Nipper had a tendency to whinge).

The screen flickered into a perfect stereo reproduction (if less than life size) of what must have been the foyer of the Earth Prime Lottery Office, a long counter with a multitude of holophones and receptionists could be seen. Into the foreground stepped a neatly suited female of medium age, an obvious public servant type, radiating in equal parts an air of efficiency, smugness and calm bloody-minded pedantic stupidity.

"Good evening Mr Grahams," she said.

Nipper took her word for it, on Blue Pluto it was midday, not that day or night meant anything out here.

"Congratulations," she continued, in her official public servant tones. "You are the lucky winner of our thirteenth, billion dollar lottery grand prize."

Nipper grinned a particularly avaricious grin.

"Thank you, thank you very much indeed," he replied, it was about all he was capable of saying.

The Public servant continued: "I'm sure you're overwhelmed at the moment, Mr Grahams, so if you could come and see me soon we'll discuss the details of your prize and arrange for its transfer to your bank account." She concluded her set speech with an official broad smile.

"Wonderful ma'am, just great," replied Nipper. "I'll be leaving Blue Pluto in about a week, so you can expect me in your office in about three to four weeks time."

"Ah," said the Public Servant, her smile instantly fading. "I hadn't considered the time factor!"

Alarm bells were ringing in the back of Nipper's mind. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Yes I'm afraid there is." she replied. "There is a time limit, you see. Collection of prize must be at latest one week from time of prize draw, it must be claimed in person, no exceptions, we have very strict regulations on the matter I'm afraid."

"What!?" wailed Nipper, his dream fragmenting without hope of fulfilment. "I didn't know this, why don't you tell people these things!"

"You haven't read the fine print on your ticket," she said. "It's there for all to see, if you care to look, that is." Her voice once stiffly jovial had faded to the stern formality of a well-trained ratbag bureaucrat, she was getting into the swing of it now, obviously the type of person that got their jollies from this kind of work.

Nipper, like all people in his situation, began to clutch at straws. "But even if I was to get a transport right away It'd take at least two weeks using sub light drive to get to Earth, can't I fax the details to my solicitor, set up a

power of attorney or something?" Nipper was pleading desperately, the small stereoscopic image of the woman just stood there and slowly shook her head, but he plunged on regardless. "He could be my official representative, he's on Earth right here and now as we speak!" Nipper tailed off, his resolve crumbling, shattered against the impregnable wall of regulatory bureaucratic inflexibility.

The Public Servant smiled a cold unsympathetic smile. "I'm sorry," she lied. "Collection of prize is in one week, by you IN PERSON no exceptions, if you're not here in that time the competition is voided and the prize money transferred to public funds."

A nasty thought hit Nipper. "What kind of public funds?" he asked with an edge in his voice.

The public servant grinned slightly, stretching facial muscles that obviously didn't get that much of a workout. "The prize money will go to the Public Service Personnel Members annual picnic fund, goodbye Mr Grahams."

The screen flickered & went blank; she had cut him off...

The console dropped from Nipper's nerveless fingers, the impossibility of his situation weighed down on him, his shoulders sagged.

"I was nearly a billionaire," he muttered to himself hazily, he bent down and picked up the console with air of someone recently put through a wringer. Dazed he tapped a code into the console then lay back to wait.

Moments later his holoscreen flickered into life & Nipper sat up. Central Foreman Gus Meeker was sitting at his desk in Earth Control, he looked up at Nipper in surprise. "Hello Bill," he said. "Is there something wrong?"

"Ah hi Gus," mumbled Nipper. "No, nothing wrong. Er, about my resignation; I've changed my mind."

THE END