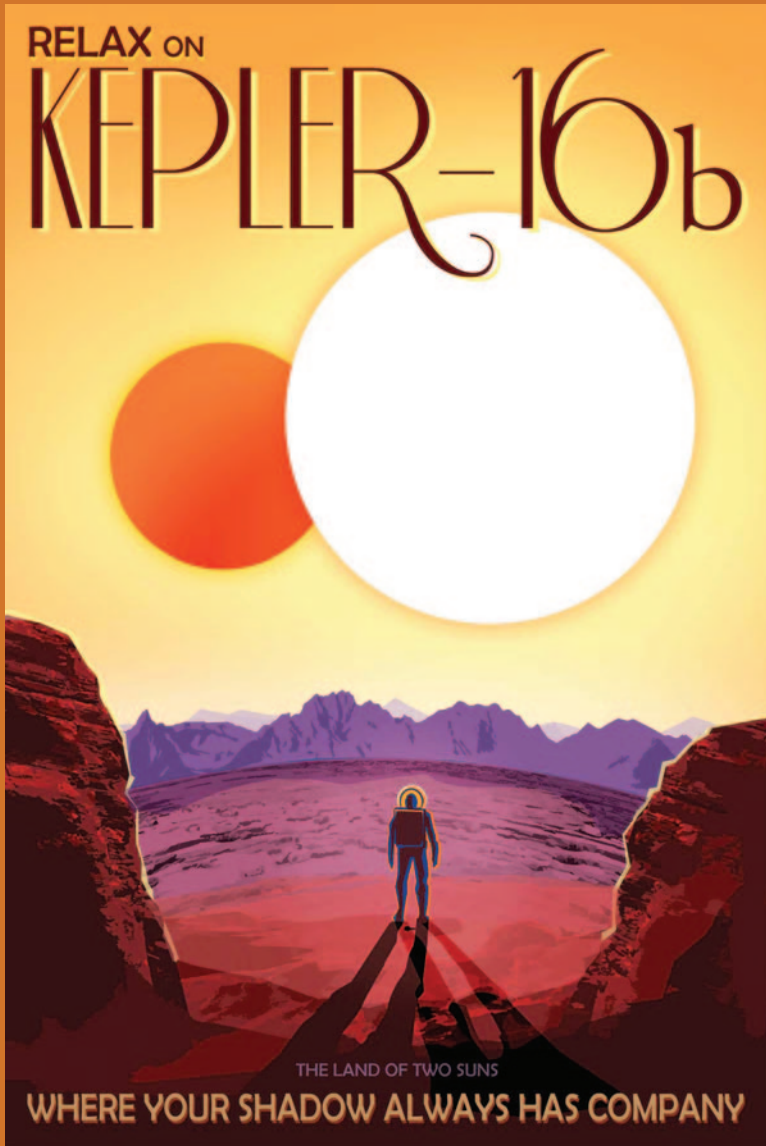


'Sky is Falling!' is one of a series of 16 fairy tale/fables wedded to the NASA/JPL 'Visions of the Future' space travel posters.



Sky Is Falling!

Susan diRende

“O w!”

Something hard smacked Penny Little on top of her head. She looked up. The planet, Sky, hung directly over her head as always. Her mind leapt to the only conclusion possible: that Sky was falling to pieces above her.

If she'd had a bit more education, she might have concluded that the shriekbird flying off to the east had dropped a nut or a berry on her pate. However, knowing nothing of parabolic trajectories, Penny looked straight up when she got hit and all she saw was doom.

To be fair, most people found the sight of Sky overhead oppressive. It loomed above them day and night. The moon they lived on was tidally locked to the planet such that the gas giant never altered its position in the heavens. Not that Penny understood words like 'tidally locked'.

Education, you see, was no longer compulsory on her world. Most folks didn't see the point. They were a planet of farmers who had withdrawn from the Earth Confederation a hundred years before. They had been determined to keep things simple. They named the twin suns 'Big Orange' and 'Tiny Red' because they were. Likewise they chose 'Sky Ball' for the world above them, soon shortened to just 'Sky'. 'Here' for the moon where they lived was all the name it needed.

The people who had settled Here wanted a natural and simple existence as the Beloveds intended. Granted, the colonists had to first travel over 200 light years from mankind's birthplace, a feat accomplished thanks to not-so-simple-or-natural technology. Nor were they so foolish as to discard the automata that made farming on a planetary scale possible with a population of under a million souls. They traded for technology with the Confederation and lived in purity and simplicity.

So Penny can be forgiven for jumping to the wrong conclusion. It was a wonder she could conclude anything at all. But once she managed to put a thought together, though, she would act. Her neighbours came to her when they found themselves in a muddle, saying to each other, "Penny will know what to do."

So the moment she reckoned that Sky was about to fall on her and her farm, she set her animals loose, all except for the horse, Fish. She saddled Fish to go to the spaceport to warn the AI that handled the off-world traffic coming and going.

Fish was a good horse, but it would still take weeks to reach the port. So she rode as fast as Fish could gallop to her nearest neighbour, Cokie Lockie. Cokie had a motorised tractor that went five times faster than a horse.

“Cokie Lockie! It’s Penny Little! Come quick. Sky is falling!”

“What? What? Falling, you say? Falling! Oh dear, dear.” Cokie had trouble taking in new information. She had to repeat things until the meaning got through. Fortunately, once she grasped an idea, a limpet couldn’t be more tenacious in clinging to it.

Cokie looked up. “It is right on top of us. Oh dear. Is it over your farm too, Penny?”

“Not only over it, but a piece of Sky already fell on my head. Feel the bump!”

Cokie did and clucked in sympathy. “We must run. Run, Penny.” She took a few steps and stopped. “But where? Where can we go? How can we escape being crushed by Sky when it falls?” She was looking around wildly, ready to bolt as soon as she decided on a direction.

Penny took charge. “We must go to the space port. They will be able to save us. But we have to hurry.”

“Space port? The space port is far. Very far. It will take weeks on horseback.”

“Your tractor is faster.”

“Tractor? You want to go by tractor? I have a tractor. It is faster than a horse. Especially for two people. A horse can’t gallop with two people. But ... even with the tractor, it will take days. Do we have days?”

Penny did not think they had days. She did some quick thinking. “Lucky Daddles has a truck. The truck is faster than a tractor.”

“Truck? Lucky’s truck? Yes, yes. Let’s go. Lucky will take us in his truck. Unless Sky falls before we get there.”

“It has a long way to fall. They say Sky is so far you’d have to go around our world ten times to get there.”

“Nonsense, Penny. You could throw a stone and hit it if you were strong enough. It’s right there,” she pointed. “Besides, if you went around the world ten times, you’d only be right back where you started. Some of the things they say in those books are just wrong. It’s not so far as the Breakwind Pass, I’d wager.”

“All the more reason to hurry. You start the tractor while I unsaddle Fish. I hope he has the sense to run somewhere safe.”

“I’m sure Fish will be okay. Animals are smarter than us because they’re more natural!”

It would be an exaggeration of the tractor’s abilities to say that Penny and Cokie sped to their neighbour’s farm. The tractor was built for reliability, not speed. The two bounced and rattled as fast as the machine would take them. They committed the unforgivable sin of driving straight through the fields in their hurry. They reasoned that the falling planet would destroy it all anyway. No point in wasting time and risk being caught in the destruction.

Farmer Daddles was not pleased to see Penny and Cokie come ploughing through his nearly ripe grain field. He rushed toward them, shaking his hoe as they trundled up

through his vegetable garden. But, before he could shout one word of outrage, Penny and Cokie started hollering.

"Lucky, we have escaped. Start your truck. Sky is falling and we need to get to the space port before it lands on our heads."

Cokie repeated exactly the same words, phrase by phrase, a second or two behind Penny, sounding like a very bad echo. Thus, Lucky didn't understand a word of it.

"What? What's so bad you have to ruin my crops?"

Penny shushed Cokie. "Sky is falling, Lucky. Some of it already came down on my farm. We have to go as fast as we can before it squashes us flat."

Cokie added, "Sky is falling down!"

Lucky looked up. "I don't see anything falling!"

"By the time you see it, it will be too late. I felt it, I tell you. On my head. A piece of Sky hit me."

He looked up again and squinted at the planet. "It is getting closer, isn't it? Ducky!" he hollered to his wife. "Ducky, come out here! We have to go!"

"Go?" she called from the doorway, wiping her hands on her apron. "I'm not going anywhere. I just put a pie in the oven."

"Don't start with me, woman. Every time I say one thing, you say the other. Well, Sky is falling, I tell you. And right on top of us!"

"I'm not leaving the pie to burn."

"I will go without you," he warned.

"Go where? Where can you go if the world up there is falling down on us here?"

Lucky did not have an answer to that. He turned to Penny, who did.

"We're going to the space port. They will be able to keep us safe."

Lucky did not see how. "How?"

Penny explained. "If we tell them what's happening, they can fix it before it falls. Push it back or blow it up!"

"Blow it up, I say. I'm tired of it hanging over our heads all the time."

"Your truck," cried Cokie. "We need your truck to get there faster!"

Lucky shook his head. "That will take all day. Do we have time?" He squinted up at Sky.

Penny had a brainstorm. "There's an aircar at the hub."

The hub clearinghouse was where farmers took their harvests to be shuttled to the space port for shipment off-world.

Lucky nodded in agreement. "An aircar can get us to space port in a couple of hours."

It took Cokie a few tries to wrap her head around the possibility. "Aircar. An aircar. Aircars go up in the air! I can't drive an aircar."

Lucky, who had ridden in an aircar once and never lost an opportunity to talk about it, explained. "No one drives. They drive themselves."

Penny nodded. "The aircars will surely get us there in time. And if the AI can't stop the world falling, we'll still have time to come back for Ducky before they take us away to safety."

"And if the AI can stop it, we'll have time for pie."

The three of them piled into Lucky's truck and sped – finally the word was appropriate – to the clearinghouse hub compound.

They arrived at the gate and drove up to the registration window. The message on the screen said, "Touch screen or activate voice control to begin."

"Activate voice control," Lucky called out.

"Cancel that!" Penny yelled over Lucky's shoulder. She turned to him. "Machines speaking with human voices ... It's unnatural!"

"Well, I don't read so good, Penny. If we're in a hurry, better go with the voice."

She sat back with an "Oh, alright."

"Activate voice control," Lucky repeated.

A smooth voice right on the cusp of male and female said, "Welcome to clearinghouse hub number 1878. Please identify yourselves and the nature of your visit."

"We need an aircar to take us to the space port. It's an emergency."

"Please state your name and the nature of your emergency."

"I will not explain myself to a machine. Just let us in."

"You must state your name for identification to enter."

"Identification!"

Cokie spoke up from the back. "It makes sense, Lucky. People could steal your grain or make off with some equipment if anybody could wander in and out. Not everybody is honest."

"It's the locks that make crooks, Cokie, not the other way around."

"Lucky, we have to hurry." Cokie leaned forward so she could call out the window. "Machine! My name is Cokie Lockie."

"Voice recognised."

"Penny Little."

"Voice recognised."

"Lucky Daddles."

"Voice recognised. You may enter. Follow the lights to the garage. The aircar will require authorisation." The gate dissolved and a series of lights brightened in the pavement.

"No aircar is going to boss me around. You don't see my truck telling me where I can go."

They followed the lights past the giant storehouses that rose five storeys high until they came to a small, round two-storey building with a domed roof. Doors opened as they approached and they drove inside.

Six aircars sat in a semicircle. They had tubes running from them to the wall behind, which was lined with blinking machinery, waldos, and spare parts. The doors to the aircars were all closed except one. A man stood underneath watching them, his head cocked to the side, a measuring gleam in his eye.

"Oh, a man!" cried Penny. "Or is he a machine made to look like a man?"

"A man? A machine? A machine man. He can take us to the space port," decided Cokie.

"I'm a man, right enough. My name is 'Foxy' Tod."

"Well, Mr Tod, Sky is falling. We need to get to the space port to tell them. It's right over my farm, and if they can't do something, I'll lose everything."

"I'll lose everything," echoed Cokie.

"And my wife. What will happen to her if it falls before we can warn them?"

Foxy pursed his lips. "Falling, you say?"

"We don't have time to chatter. Every time I look up, it's closer. Let us by if you're not using that aircar so we can go before it's too late."

Now a sensible person might wonder why folks who kept track of comings and goings in space wouldn't have noticed a planet falling on its moon. You'd think they'd be the first to know, not the last. But Foxy understood enough about his fellow humans to know that panicky people can't be reached with reason or facts.

He usually had to work a long time to get folks into just the right frenzy of fear so that they'd lose their good sense and self-preserving doubts. But here he was, minding his own business stealing a few items that hadn't been nailed down, when fortune handed him the chance of a lifetime. He would have said a little prayer of thanks to the Beloved of liars and thieves if he'd ever heard of one. As it was, he took a deep breath and blew it out in a long, low whistle.

"That's a pickle and more than you know. These machines, they won't take you anywhere without a good reason."

"Sky is falling!" Penny cried. Cokie echoed. Lucky nodded.

"Machines can't understand new problems, only old problems that somebody programmed into them."

"Surely they can understand the end of the world is coming unless we do something."

"Nope. Machines can't understand anything. They just do what they're told."

"So we tell it to take us to the spaceport."

"Won't happen unless you have authorisation or an override."

The three travellers groaned.

Foxy winked. "Which I just happen to have."

"Hooray! We're saved!"

"Well, not so fast. You see, it takes credits for an override. You have to guarantee the value of the aircar. In case you crash it!"

“Crash it! Why would it crash?”

“Well, the override means you fly it yourself.”

All three pulled back in horror. “It’s a machine. Machines corrupt humans, make them corrupt and unnatural and . . . and corrupt.”

“I’ve been studying the set-up inside here and I think it’d be easy enough to figure out. I’m willing to give it a try, but I don’t have enough credits for the guarantee.”

The three farmers looked at each other. “How much do we need?”

Foxy shrugged. “I don’t know. What say you join your accounts to mine and we see if it’s enough? Then, when the aircar is returned to the hangar, the money gets released back to my account and then I can put it back into yours. It costs nothing. It’s just a guarantee.”

“Why your account?” Lucky asked with a suspicious squint.

“I’m the one who’s going to fly it. We can put it all in your account if you want to fly it instead of me.”

Lucky was aghast at the idea. “Fly an aircar? No, no. Not me. Nossir!”

Penny smacked Lucky. “Hurry up. What if it falls while we stand here arguing?”

They entered the aircar, opened a commlink, and transferred their credit balances to Foxy’s account. All three were prosperous farmers and together their balances added up to a tidy sum.

Tidy enough, Foxy hoped, to buy a ticket off-world.

Fleeing farmers had gotten so easy for him that he was losing his edge. It wasn’t fun anymore. The rest of the galaxy was bound to be populated with sharper minds and slipperier characters. He might even get fleeced a time or two himself before he got the hang of things. Yes, a ticket to anywhere-but-here was the answer. And if there were any credits left over, a suit of fine clothes.

Foxy fiddled with the aircar console and the engine light flashed on. A low whine echoed through the garage.

“What’s happening? What’s happening?” cried Cokie.

“The iris in the ceiling is opening. We’re going to fly straight up through it.”

“Noooo, not up!”

“That’s what an aircar does. It goes up, way up, before it travels anywhere so it doesn’t crash into things like trees or mountains.”

“I’m afraid of heights.”

“Well, I suppose you could stay here. We don’t all need to go warn them about Sky falling.”

“Oh, would that be alright? You don’t mind?” Cokie was so happy she almost cried with relief.

Foxy shrugged. "I don't mind. As a matter of fact, the rest of you could stay as well. I mean, I have to go, since I'm the pilot. But there's no need for the rest of you to come along."

"Is it safe here with Sky falling right above us?"

"If I get there in time, you're safe as houses."

"I'd like to get back to Ducky," said Lucky. "I don't like the idea of her being alone and worried."

"And Fish," said Penny. "Fish is a sensible horse, but he might have gone home instead of running away to escape the falling world. He'll be expecting his oats. And I'd like to round up the animals I turned loose before it gets dark. So, if you don't mind . . ."

"You all go home. I'll take care of it. But I better hurry or I'll be too late."

"Yes, yes. We're going." They piled out of the airship and hurried to the truck.

"Thank you, thank you, Foxy," Cokie called, waving as they climbed inside.

Lucky turned to his friends. "You know, if we hurry, we'll be back at my place just as the pies are coming out of the oven."

"Too bad Foxy will miss out. Ducky makes a fine pie."



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