# No Place to Go

# C. M. Kornbluth

Gallacher was no doctor of Philosophy or Science, no more than a humble “mister,” and as such could not hope to rise beyond the modest university readership which he had held for some score of years. He was in the Department of Physics, and his job was little more than the especially dirty one of correcting examinations and reading the hardy perennial themes submitted by generation after generation of students. He was also the man who punched calculating machines late into the afternoon, tabulating work of men higher up and preparing their further ground.

He left the university grounds as the sun was setting over the Hudson, jammed a dark green, crumpled felt hat on his head and walked briskly home to the five-room bungalow where he had lived since his marriage.

Entering through the kitchen door, he was greeted by no more than a curt nod from his wife and his buoyant gait reduced to a hesitant shuffle. For Mrs. Gallacher, with her bitter tongue, endless ills and higgling economy, was the terror of her husband.

Dinner was, as always, a grim affair punctuated by little bitter queries from the distaff side—money, always. Why didn’t he stand up to Professor Van Bergen for a raise? Then he’d be able to get a little car and not have to walk two miles from home and back on the highway like a common tramp. And why didn’t he see her cousin, the Realtor, about another place near here but where those terrible Palisades wouldn’t arouse her acrophobia. Gallacher had shuddered when his wife, seven years ago, first proudly told him that she “had” acrophobia. He knew then that it would not be the last said on the subject.

Vaguely he wiped his mouth with a napkin and said: “’M going down for a little tinkering…”

“Tinkering!” spat Mrs. Gallacher poisonously. “You in that cellar where I can’t keep my washing machine because it’s cluttered up with—”

He heard her out, smiling deprecatingly, and without answering went into the tiny foyer and opened the cellar door with two keys. His wife did not have copies of either.

Down the steps he snapped a switch, and the plot-sized basement sprang into sharp being under the glareless brilliance of the most modern refractory glow-tube installation. He smiled proudly on the place and its furnishings. This, he thought, is my real life, and I can deny it nothing.

From the shelf of black-bound, imperishable notebooks, through great racks of reagents, turning lathe, forge, reference library, glassware and balances to the electronics and radioactivity outfits, nothing was lacking to make up an almost complete experimental set-up for advanced work in physics, chemistry or practical mechanics.

Gallacher, sitting there among his tools, had a spark of something in his eyes that would have baffled his wife. He opened a notebook and stared almost feverishly down at the half-written page. The last words had been: “—to dry set in 12 hrs. This cmpnd to be xmnd tomorrow.”

Swallowing gingerly, he turned the book face down and lifted a tray from a drying rack cunningly placed in the cool draft of a window high up in the wall. Removing a tiny speck of the marble-sized, flinty mass that rested on the glass surface he inserted it into a spectroscope’s field chamber, then snapped on the current that sent his electric bills soaring higher month by month. The speck glowed a vivid white; he squinted through a series of colored filters at the incandescent particle. Then, sighing inaudibly, he lit the projector’s bulb. On the calibrated ground-glass screen appeared the banded spectrum of the compound.

Gallacher ticked off the bands with a pencil. Thoughtfully he turned up his notebook and wrote: “Spctrscpe confirms 100%.”

Mrs. Gallacher was in bed, a magazine flung irritably on the floor beside her. As she heard the steps of her husband coming slowly up the cellar stairs she settled her hair and scowled.

He came through the door and blinked dazedly. “Still up?” he asked. “I had some special work to do—finishing my tinkering…” He smiled feebly.

“Tinkering!” She crowded into his own word all the vitriolic indignation of which her small, mean soul was capable. Then, seeing his face, she paused, frightened and almost terrified. For it was white and giddy with triumph. “Andrew,” she said sharply, “what have you done?”

“My series of experiments,” he said mildly. “Tonight I closed my notebooks. My work is finished—and successful.” Then, astonishingly, he blazed forth: “Edith! What I have done, no man has done before me—in this house I have synthesized the perfect rocket fuel.” He smiled as he saw her face pale. “The fumbling adventurers who tried three times to reach the Moon and finally blew themselves up—their mistake was not to wait for me. Their fuel was not only dangerous but too weak for the job; any adding machine could have told them that. I have been working with explosive propellants for seventeen years, and have you ever heard one of my thousands of tests? No, for I worked calmly and with small quantities. And yet through me the universe has been opened to man! Venus, Luna, Mars—”

“Mars,” whispered Mrs. Gallacher inaudibly. Then for the first time in many years she addressed her husband sweetly: “Andrew, what are you going to do now?”

“Publish my facts,” he rapped. “Take my place among the immortals of science.”

“Just—have them printed in some magazine?” she asked, bewildered.

“That would be sufficient,” he said. “I shall give my work to the world.” He turned into himself, smiling secretly at the thought of honorary degrees, banquets, plaques…

“Andrew,” snapped his wife, “if you think I’ll allow you to waste this stuff you’re mistaken. For your own sake, Andrew, for your own sake I ask you to come to your senses.” Her eyes grew hard as she mused, “We could be rich—richer than anyone!” A sudden purpose crystallized in her mind. “How big would one of your ships have to be?” she demanded.

“Thinking of that Lunar Rocket?” he asked. “Foolishness! All a ship powered with my propellant needs is living quarters, a hull, about a half-ton firing chamber with an infusible exhaust tube and tanks holding a few cubic feet. Foolproof firing apparatus weighs about two pounds. I could build a rocket myself.”

“Yes,” she said abstractedly. “I know that.” And in her mind the proud boast was spinning, “Wife of the first interplanetary traveller!” How she could lord it over the full professors’ wives who wouldn’t invite her to tea more than twice a year! She’d show them— “Andrew,” she began carefully…

And so it was that Gallacher found himself with a sick headache and groaning muscles roaring through space in the tiniest one-man rocket imaginable, following only his bare specifications, from end to end no larger than a light automobile. Far astern was Mars, red planet that he had not reached, and frustration bit into his vitals.

He had resigned his readership and raised money from relations, finance companies and every source he knew of to build this little space-scooter. His exultation as he plunged through the stratosphere of Earth and the sky went from violet to black had tempered and was now quite gone. The flaw—well, how could he have known? He had been a physicochemist, and this insane adventuring was none of his doing, he thought confusedly. Ahead he could plainly see North America. He wondered if he could land as quietly as he had taken off, not one person in the world knowing except himself and his wife. Then he would publish the incredible proofs of his journey and his fuel. Then he would patent his compound and possibly lease contracts for its manufacture.

Eras of progress incredible, to come from his mind alone! Huge ships of unemployed immigrants leaving for the fertile soil of Venus. Astronomers to establish observatories on airless asteroids and see with incredible clarity the answers to old, vexatious riddles—freighters winging their ways to icy worlds undreamed of for rare hauls of alien artisanry and produce, making Mother Earth a richer and fairer place to be on—

He laughed chatteringly. No; he had forgotten again. It was not to be so; it was not to be at all. Ahead there loomed New York State. He fired off his one braking rocket-tube and began to head south above the Hudson. Why not, he wondered, plunge beneath those waters—now? He shuddered. If he was to land it would be without photographs, without data, without a hope for the future of Mr. Gallacher except a slow, corroding old age.

The rocket passed low above Poughkeepsie, and he began to recognize landmarks. Ahead were the palisaded banks of the river, and above—East Side—was his cottage. He had taken off from a field near by, and there he was to have landed in triumph.

His headache was worse; the needles of pain lanced into his skull so savagely that he almost shot past the field without seeing it. But, not quite. Almost at the last moment possible, he slanted the ship downward and cut loose all his brakes. He hit Earth with a terrible shock, for all the safety devices aboard, and lay on his side in the canted pit of the rocket until he heard a vigorous clanging on the side. His wife’s face peered exultantly through the quartz porthole. He looked at her, struggling to recognize the woman, then reached out to open the heavy door of the little craft. His strength was not enough; he heaved himself to his feet and leaned on the sealing bar, bearing down heavily. It gave. With a sucking noise, the rubber-lipped door yielded and swung open. He lifted himself through the port and dropped onto the ground, resting against the warm side of the ship.

“I came over as soon as I heard the rockets,” said his wife. “Are you all right?”

“Sick,” he answered weakly, holding his head.

“Never mind that,” she said. “How did the ship behave? Did you have any trouble?”

“’M a scientist,” he replied plaintively, “not an adventurer. Shouldn’t have gone—my fuel—useless…” His voice trailed off incoherently.

“Useless!” she snapped, startled. “You got to Mars!”

“No!” he gasped. “I didn’t. Nobody can.”

“Andrew!” she cried, “what are you saying?”

With a terrible effort he fought his way through a haze of pain and confusion. He said, in lecturer style: “Now and then meteors hit Earth that do not behave as meteors should.” Someone had to know this, he thought bitterly, before he ran down. He could see figures far away, figures sprinting toward the ship.

“They drift down, observers say—Charles Fort tells of many instances—yet, as soon as they strike Earth, or rather, high ground, they fall normally—the rest of the way. Just heavy pieces of rock.”

The woman stared bespelled at his blank, lax face. “The reason—didn’t know. But now—know too well. I didn’t land on Mars. No one can. Gravity is just like magnetism. Likes repel each other. I was charged with Earth gravity; Mars charged with the same sort of stuff.” Gallacher laughed hysterically. “I couldn’t get near it,” he complained. “Nobody can—meteors that land the usual way have another kind of gravity—from outside the Solar System, must be.”

Suddenly, bitterly, he cried: “Shouldn’t have gone! Fuel, useless. No good for anything except rockets. Rockets useless. Nowhere to land. No place to go in rockets!”

And those were the last sane words that he uttered in his life.