

RECURSION

A SHORT STORY BY **John Mavin**

Recursion

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```
INT ITERATION(I)
{
    IF (I= 1)
        BREAK;
    ELSE
        RETURN ITERATION(I-1);
}
```

I=9

A UNIFORMED SHIP'S STEWARD comes to your women's resistance training class and tells you your nine-year-old son, Charley, is not registered with Child Services today. You give him a smile and thank him. You unstrap yourself from the double-grav bike and wipe it down with a towel. You leave the Fitness Centre and take the lift to the port gangway on deck sixteen.

You think Charley is probably in the aft airlock, looking out the eyeport again. A cargo handler you slept with your first week out gave you the access code. He said it was the only porthole with real glass in the public section of the ship. Sometimes you take Charley there to look at the stars. While the electronic flat-panel in your stateroom has zoom features and ultra-high definition resolutions, Charley says he'd rather look with his own eyes. He isn't interested in how the constellations are changing the farther you get—he just wants to know where Earth is.

As you approach the airlock, you see Charley inside, his hand hovering over the control console.

He sees you and pauses, "This is all your fault, Mom." He presses a red button and the outer hatch opens.

You collapse on the deck as your son is sucked into space.

I=8

A UNIFORMED SHIP'S STEWARD comes to your resistance training class and tells you your nine-year-old son, Charley, is not with Child Services today. You leave the Fitness Centre without bothering to wipe down the double-grav bike and hurry to the aft airlock.

This stupid move was your husband's idea: Thomas was the one who came home with the glossy brochures for the newly terraformed Antares III; Thomas was the one who submitted your names to the Colonist Application Committee; Thomas was the one who failed the physical exam and had to stay behind. And now all Charley wants to do is look back at Earth through the eyeport.

Sure enough, you find Charley in the airlock: he's pacing back and forth like he's been waiting for you.

"Charley, how many times have I told you—don't go in the airlock alone?" You open the inner hatch and reach for your son.

He slips away and presses a red button on the control console.

The inner hatch closes and you manage to grab the sleeve of his jumpsuit before the outer hatch opens. As you're propelled into space with him, you wonder why you don't feel cold.

I=7

A UNIFORMED SHIP'S STEWARD tells you your nine-year-old son, Charley, is not with Child Services today.

You leave the Fitness Centre and run down the gangway as fast as you can.

You should have withdrawn your application and stayed with your husband, but you couldn't; not after Thomas found out about your affair too. You slap the wall switch and the airlock's inner hatch flies open.

"Charley!" You rush into the airlock and the inner hatch closes behind you.

He turns and slaps you. "That's for leaving Dad." Charley wipes back a tear and pushes the red button on the control console.

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You hear the whoosh of escaping air as the outer hatch opens and you fly into space. For the first time since you left Earth, you see the ship's outer hull, where her name, the *S/V Île-Saint-Croix*, is painted boldly in black.

I=6

A UNIFORMED STEWARD TELLS YOU your nine-year-old son, Charley, is not with Child Services. You leave the Fitness Centre and run down the gangway to the airlock.

A boy, older than Charley, but not quite a teenager, is blocking your access to the inner hatch. You duck around him and slap the wall switch.

Charley is looking out the eyeport.

“Get out of the airlock!” you scream. You grab his jumpsuit.

Charley starts to cry.

You push him to the safety of the gangway just before the inner hatch closes, sealing you inside. A yellow light turns red and you hear the whoosh of air as the outer hatch opens. You're sucked off the ship like blue waste down a vacuum toilet.

I=5

A UNIFORMED STEWARD TELLS YOU your son, Charley, is not with Child Services. You run to the aft airlock.

A young teenager is standing in front of the inner hatch. You move to the left to go around him, but he moves to block you. You dodge to the right.

He does too.

You reach through the teenager and slap the wall switch. The inner hatch flies open and you duck inside.

You run your fingers through Charley's hair.

He laughs and walks out of the airlock.

You turn to follow but the inner hatch closes between you. The yellow light turns red and the outer hatch opens.

I=4

A UNIFORMED STEWARD TELLS YOU Charley is not with Child Services.

You leave your class, the same as you did last time.

A pimple-scarred teenager blocks the airlock. He looks familiar, but you don't know his name. He looks older than the boy who was here before.

"Stop doing this," the teenager says.

"Where's Charley?" you ask.

"I'm right here," the teen says.

You look over his shoulder and see nine-year-old Charley peeking out the eyeport. You rush through the teen and gather him in a hug.

"What do you think Dad's doing right now?" Charley asks, pointing through the eyeport.

"How am I supposed to know?" You pull him close and smell his hair. It has no odour, which is odd, because you make him wash his hair almost every night with eucalyptus-scented shampoo.

"You've got to stop," the teen says, turning toward you from the gangway.

You look at the teen and young Charley disappears from your arms, fading into the air.

"Charley!" you scream.

The inner hatch crashes down. You look at the control console and see a blinking yellow light. It turns red. The outer hatch opens.

I=3

A STEWARD TELLS YOU CHARLEY is not with Child Services. You rush through him and run down the gangway.

The teenager is waiting at the aft airlock. He has the same blond hair Charley does, and the same green eyes. His pimples have gotten worse since last time.

"Please, stop," he says to you.

"I can't," you say. "I've got to save Charley. He's in the airlock." You see Charley looking through the eyeport.

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The teen steps in front of you. “There’s no one in there.”

“There is too, you idiot!” you scream. “Charley, get out of there!”

“Mom, I’m not in there,” the teen says.

Nine-year-old Charley starts to fade.

You push through the teen. You slap the wall switch and manage to catch your son’s arm before he fades completely.

“No!” you scream. You turn and your hand brushes a red button on the control console. The yellow light turns red. The outer hatch opens.

I = 2

CHARLEY IS NOT WITH CHILD SERVICES. You leave your fitness class and run to the aft airlock.

The teen is waiting for you. Now, he looks a bit like Thomas, except he’s taller and his stomach doesn’t bulge over his belt.

“Stop,” he says.

You shake your head and rush through him, slapping the wall switch.

“Listen to me,” the teen says.

The airlock is empty.

You shake your head again. “Where’s Charley? What have you done with him?”

“I’m right here,” the teen says.

You hold your hand over the control console. “Tell me what you’ve done with my little boy or I’ll call Security,” you say.

The inner hatch crashes down.

The teen looks at you through the transparent wall of the inner hatch. He wipes back a tear.

“Mom, you’ve been dead for eight years. I’ve grown up.”

“What?”

“This isn’t what happened.” The teen presses his palm to the transparent wall.

You look away from him and press a red button on the control console.

The yellow blinking light turns red. The outer hatch whooshes open.

I = 1

CHARLEY IS WITH CHILD SERVICES. You know he'll be there until seventeen hundred. You also know the stewards will take good care of him. You beg off your resistance training class with a feigned injury.

You walk down the port gangway on deck sixteen to the aft airlock. You're crying. All Charley does is ask questions about Thomas. *Does Dad still love me? Will he forget about me? Will I ever see him again?* You can't take it anymore.

The older Charley is waiting for you at the airlock.

You reach out to touch his cheek, but your hand slides through his skin. You notice his acne has cleared up.

He leans close to you and you can smell the eucalyptus in his hair.

You step back and slap the wall switch. The inner hatch opens.

"I don't want to do this again," Charley says.

"I don't either," you say as the inner hatch slams shut.

"I'm not sure I can ever forgive you," Charley says.

"I understand," you say.

You watch your grown son through the transparent wall. He holds his palm up.

You do the same, matching your fingers to his. "I'm sorry," you say. A tear slides down your cheek. You watch as your hand presses a red button and the yellow light begins to flash.

"Me too," Charley says. "I needed you."

The yellow light turns red and the outer hatch whooshes open.

THE END.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



John Mavin has taught creative writing at Capilano University, Simon Fraser University, the University of British Columbia, with New Shoots (through the Vancouver School Board), and at the Learning Exchange in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. He is a graduate of SFU's The Writer's Studio and also holds an MFA in Creative Writing from UBC. A past nominee for both the Aurora Award and the Journey Prize, his short fiction has been translated, studied, and published internationally. If you'd like to learn more, he invites you to visit www.johnmavin.com.

