

Retirement Options for (Too) Successful Space Entrepreneurs

By Brent Baldwin

Butterscotch rocks dot the horizon beyond your windscreen. Cliffs of peanut brittle line the edge of the track you follow. The wheels of your rover slip and spin in the thin Martian soil, raising a cloud of powdered sugar. Your mouth waters with the nearly forgotten flavors.

Your withered hands grip the steering wheel and guide the rover to more solid ground. A dome emerges from a far-off dust cloud. Both mark progress. Humanity among the stars. An atmosphere thick enough to support dust storms. It's been the work of a lifetime, and you should be proud, but mostly you feel hungry.

A tilted sign announces the habitat of Liberty. Three dust-covered domes and their outlying algae ponds. A little Steinbeck town, here in the sky. A figure within the nearest dome points your direction.

A girl emerges, long limbed and bounding through the low gravity. Martian-born.

The breather wrapped over your face enhances the oxygen the atmosphere still can't provide.

A man follows her, moving more slowly and wearing a newer-model breather. "We don't have much worth trading." He eyes the rover, as if you might be some vigilante. "Don't have much at all, in truth."

"I'd just like some produce," you say. "I have money. And news from up north. You can have the news, either way."

He chews on that. "You paying in Zon scrip or X scrip?" He asks like it still matters here. Maybe it does.

“Whichever buys carrots and potatoes. And a little sage, if you have any.” You crave something sweet, but you’ve learned to settle for less.

“This is a Zon dome.” He leaves unsaid his payment preferences, in case you’re a company man in disguise. If he knew the truth, you might never leave this valley. “We can spare a kilo each of carrots and potatoes, and a few grams of herbs.”

You overpay in a mixture of scrips and don’t haggle over the price. You can afford it.

“What brings you this way?” he asks. It’s more suspicion than curiosity. You lie to him, anyway.

“Hauling fuel cells down to Jeff City.”

He nods, as if it’s important work. Maybe to his people, it is. “You mentioned some news?”

The launches are starting back up next year, you tell him. More indentures coming. More mouths to feed. Worry pinches the corners of his mouth. The town has a margin of error, but it can’t accommodate another load of soft off-worlders.

The girl watches you after the man turns his back, and you slip her a few Zon coins. Her eyes go wide, but she takes them, anyway.

Back in the rover, you set the produce on the little table in your kitchenette.

A boardroom table stretches out before you. Your presentation glows on the wall. A whiteboard stands ready. A version of you seventy years younger wields the markers like swords, sketching your vision of the future of the human species.

The Earth is failing. Wildfires ravage the forests. Floods inundate the coast. The air itself is turning toxic. You speak of eggs and baskets. The suits around the table nod.

A crewed rocket to launch within the year. More rockets in production, yes, but more rocket factories in production, too.

Three launches a day.

A thousand flights a year.

A hundred tons per flight.

Enough to carry a megaton per year to orbit. Enough to realize their dreams of profits and yours of living on another planet.

The nodding increases until the suits are Pez dispensers, their heads flapping fore and aft. Your presentation reaches a crescendo. The red planet, covered with domes like mushrooms. Asteroids brought down to provide water. A carpet of algae to provide both food and oxygen.

We can do this, you exclaim. Humanity will be a multi-planet species.

The older you settles into the rover's front seat. Your bones ache, even in the lighter gravity. You could go back to Earth. The stars know you can afford the trip. Physics doesn't care about your money, though. No amount of scrip, dollars, or euros can make a body adapted to a third of a g function again in full gravity.

The motors engage with a quiet hum. You're barely moving when someone raps on your door.

The girl stands outside, her face twisted in concentration. "Jeff City," she says. "Will you take me?"

"Depends on why you're going," you say. "You running from something or to something?"

The girl launches into a spiel about a dead-end habitat and a wide world. Maybe a chance to go to Earth, gravity be damned.

You haven't heard that many bad ideas in one speech in quite some time.

You ease out of your seat and pick your way to the back of the rover. It's jammed with decades' worth of mementos. All of it personal, some of it useful. The girl meets you by the back door, and she scowls when she sees you holding out a paper envelope.

"Seeds. Beets. Cocoa. Vanilla." You pass her a tattered cookbook. Priceless, though she doesn't realize it. Everything her habitat needs to setup a Martian chocolaterie. "There's not a better life out there, but there might be in here."

She trudges back to her dome, disappointed.

You're sorry, you don't tell her. For everything.

You put the rover back into gear and drive on to the next town, dreaming of chocolate.

THE END