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## The Moon Shot

~~Final cut could be~~  
~~made until next~~  
~~piece is over~~

(69)

## CHAPTER 2

## The Psychology of Astronauts

WELL, let us make an approach to the astronauts. Aquarius sees them for the first time on the fifth of July, eleven days before the launch. They are in a modern movie theater with orange seats and a dark furrowed ceiling overhead, much like marcelled waves in a head of hair, a plastic ceiling built doubtless to the plans of one of the best sound engineers in the country. Sound is considerably ahead of smell as a fit province for scientific work, but since the excellence of acoustics in large and small concert chambers seems to bear more relation to old wood and the blessings of monarchs and bishops than to the latest development of the technical art, the sound system in this movie theater (seats 600) is dependably intolerable most of the time. The public address system squeals and squeaks (it is apparently easier to have communication with men one quarter of a million miles away) and one never gets a fair test of the aural accommodations. The walls and overhead are of plastic composition, and so far as one can tell, the tone is a hint sepulchral, then brightened electronically, finally harsh and punishing to that unnamed fine nerve which runs from the anus to the eardrum. As the sound engineers became more developed, the plastic materials provided for their practice by corporations grew acoustically more precise and spiritually more flattening—it was the law of the century. One was forever adjusting to public voices through the subtlest vale of pain.

Still this movie theater was the nearest approach to a diadem in the Manned Spacecraft Center. The theater was part of the visitors' center, where tourists could go through the space museum, a relatively modest affair of satellites, capsules, dioramas, posters and relics, now closed and given over to the



installation of monitors and cables for the television networks, even as the gallery to the rear of the theater was now being converted into the Apollo News Center and would consist finally of endless aisles of desks, telephones and typewriters, plus one giant Buddha of a coffee urn. (Coffee is the closest the press ever comes to *satori*.)

In the theater, perhaps eight rows back of the front seats, was a raised platform on which television cameras and crews were mounted. From the stage they must have looked not unrelated to artillery pieces on the battlement of a fort—in the front row were fifty photographers, which is to say fifty sets of torsos and limbs each squeezed around its own large round glass eye. Little flares of lightning flashed out of bulbs near their heads. The astronauts did not really have to travel to the moon—life from another planet was before them already. In the middle ranks, between the front row and the barricade of television cameras, were seated several hundred newspaper men and women come to Houston for the conference this morning. They were a curious mixture of high competence and near imbecility; some assigned to Space for years seemed to know as much as NASA engineers; others, innocents in for the big play on the moon shot, still were not just certain where laxatives ended and physics began. It was as if research students from the Institute of Advanced Studies at Princeton had been put in with a group of fine young fellows from an Army class in remedial reading. Out of such a bag would questions come to the astronauts. Wait! There will be samples.

The astronauts entered from the wings wearing gas masks, gray snout-nosed covers which projected out from their mouths and gave their profiles the intent tusk-ready slouch of razorback hogs. They were aware of this—it was apparent in the good humor with which they came in. In fact, a joke of some dimensions had been flickering for a few days—the Press had talked of greeting them with white hospital masks. In the attempt to protect the astronauts as much as possible from preflight infection they were being kept in a species of limited quarantine—their contacts with non-essential personnel were restricted. Since journalists fit this category, today's press conference had installed Armstrong, Aldrin and Collins up on the stage in a plastic box about twelve feet wide, ten feet deep and ten feet high. Blowers within this three-walled plastic room blew air from behind them out into the

audience: thereby, the breath of the astronauts could enter the theater, but the airborne germs of journalists would not blow back. It made a kind of sense. Of course the cause of the common cold was still unknown, but gross studies of infection would surmise a partial quarantine might be effective partially. However, the instrumentation of this premise was not happy. The astronauts looked a bit absurd in their plastic box, and the few journalists who had actually fleshed their joke by putting on masks caused the astronauts to grin broadly as though to dissociate themselves from the pyramids of precaution they were in fact obeying.

Once they sat down, their manner changed. They were seated behind a walnut-brown desk on a pale blue base which displayed two painted medallions in circles—NASA and Apollo 11. Behind them at the rear of the plastic booth stood an American flag; the Press actually jeered when somebody brought it onstage in advance of the astronauts. Aquarius could not remember a press conference where Old Glory had ever been mocked before, but it had no great significance, suggesting rather a splash of derision at the thought that the show was already sufficiently American enough. In fact, between the steady reporters who worked out of Houston and the astronauts, there was that kind of easy needling humor which is the measure of professional respect to be found among teams and trainers.

So the entrance went well. The astronauts walked with the easy saunter of athletes. They were comfortable in motion. As men being scrutinized by other men they had little to worry about. Still, they did not strut. Like all good professional athletes, they had the modesty of knowing you could be good and still lose. Therefore they looked to enjoy the snouts they were wearing, they waved at reporter friends they recognized, they grinned. A reporter called back to Collins, "Now, you look good." It all had that characteristically American air which suggests that men who are successful in their profession do best to take their honors lightly.

Once they sat down, however, the mood shifted. Now they were there to answer questions about a phenomenon which even ten years ago would have been considered material unfit for serious discussion. Grown men, perfectly normal-looking, were now going to talk about their trip to the moon. It made everyone uncomfortable. For the relation of everyone to each other and to the event was not quite real. It was as if a man had died and



been brought back from death. What if on questioning he turned out to be an ordinary fellow? "Well, you see," he might say, "having visited death, I come back with the following conclusions . . ." What if he had a droning voice? There was something of this in the polite unreality of the questioning. The century was like a youth who made love to the loveliest courtesan in Cathay. Afterward he was asked what he thought and scratched his head and said, "I don't know. Sex is kind of over-rated." So now people were going to ask questions of three heroes about their oncoming voyage, which on its face must be in contention for the greatest adventure of man. Yet it all felt as if three young junior executives were announcing their corporation's newest subdivision.

Perhaps for this reason, the quiet gaiety of their entrance had deserted them as they sat behind the desk in the plastic booth. Now it was as if they did not know if they were athletes, test pilots, engineers, corporation executives, some new kind of priest, or sheepish American boys caught in a position of outlandish prominence—my God, how did they ever get into this? It was as if after months in simulators with knowing technicians geared to the same code languages, they were now debouched into the open intellectual void of this theater, obliged to look into the uncomprehending spirits of several hundred media tools (human) all perplexed and worried at their journalistic ability to grasp more than the bare narrative of what was coming up. Yaws abounded. Vacuums in the magnetism of the mood. Something close to boredom. The astronauts were going to the moon, but everybody was a little frustrated—the Press because the Press did not know how to push into nitty-gritty for the questions, the astronauts because they were not certain how to begin to explain the complexity of their technique. Worse, as if they did not really wish to explain, but were obliged out of duty to the program, even if their privacy was invaded.

So the conference dragged on. While the focus of attention was naturally on Armstrong for commanding the flight, he seemed in the beginning to be the least at ease. He spoke with long pauses, he searched for words. When the words came out, their ordinary content made the wait seem excessive. He minted no phrases. "We are here" . . . a pause . . . "to be able to talk about this attempt" . . . a real pause, as if the next experience were ineffable but with patience would yet be captured . . . "be-

cause of the success of four previous Apollo command flights" . . . pause, as if to pick up something he had left out . . . "and a number of unmanned flights." A shy smile. "Each of those flights"—he was more wooden than young Robert Taylor, young Don Ameche, young Randolph Scott—"contributed in a great way" . . . deprecatory smile . . . "to this flight." As a speaker he was all but limp—still it did not leave him unremarkable. Certainly the knowledge he was an astronaut restored his stature, yet even if he had been a junior executive accepting an award, Armstrong would have presented a quality which was arresting, for he was extraordinarily remote. He was simply not like other men. He would have been more extraordinary in fact if he had been just a salesman making a modest inept dull little speech, for then one would have been forced to wonder how he had ever gotten his job, how he could sell even one item, how in fact he got out of bed in the morning. Something particularly innocent or subtly sinister was in the gentle remote air. If he had been a young boy selling subscriptions at the door, one grandmother might have warned her granddaughter never to let him in the house; another would have commented, "That boy will go very far." He was apparently in communion with some string in the universe others did not think to play.

Collins and Aldrin followed with their opening remarks, and they had personalities which were more comfortable to grasp. Aldrin, all meat and stone, was a man of solid presentation, dependable as a tractor, but suggesting the strength of a tank, dull, almost ponderous, yet with the hint of unpredictability, as if, eighteen drinks in him, his eyes would turn red, he would arm-wrestle a gorilla or invite you to join him in jumping out a third-story window in order to see who could do the better somersault on the follow-through out of the landing. This streak was radium and encased within fifty psychical and institutional casings of lead, but it was there, Aquarius thought, perhaps a clue in the way he dressed—very dressy for an astronaut—a green luminous silk suit, a white shirt, a green luminous tie. It clashed with the stolid presentation of his language. Aldrin spoke in a deep slow comfortingly nasal tone—a mighty voice box—his face was strong and grim. The movie director in Aquarius would have cast him on the spot for Major in Tank Cavalry. He had big features and light brown hair, almost gold. His eyes took a turn down like samurai eyes, the corners of his lips took a right-angle turn down



—it gave him the expression of a serious man at home on a field of carnage, as if he were forever saying, "This is serious stuff, fellows, there's lots of blood around." So Aldrin also looked like the kind of jock who could be headmaster of a prep school. He had all the locker-room heartiness and solemnity of a team man. Although he had been a pole-vaulter at West Point, it would have been easy to mistake him for a shot-putter, a lacrosse player, or a baseball catcher. In football he would have probably been a linebacker. For this last, he was actually not big enough (since the astronauts were required to be no more than five feet eleven inches tall and could hardly be overweight), but he was one of those men who looked larger than his size for his condition was excellent—every discipline of his moves spoke of grim devoted unrelenting support given to all his body-world of muscle. From the back of the neck to the joints of the toes, from the pectorals to the hamstrings, the deltoids to the abdominals, he was a life given over to good physical condition, a form of grace, since the agony of the lungs when straining is not alien to the agony of the soul. Leave it that Aldrin was so strong he had a physical presence which was bigger than his bulk.

He talked like a hardworking drill. He had the reputation of being the best physicist and engineer among the astronauts—he had written a valuable thesis on Orbital Rendezvous Techniques at MIT, but he put no humor into his presentation, he was selling no soap. If you did not read technogese, you might as well forget every last remark for his words did not translate, not unless you were ready to jog along with him on technology road. Here is the way he gave himself to the Press: "We do have a few items on the Lem side of the house on this particular mission. We'll be picking up where Apollo 10 left off when they did their phasing maneuver. And at this point after departing the Command Module, coming down in the descent orbit, we'll be igniting the descent engine for the first time under a long burn condition when it is not docked with the Command Module. And executing this burn under control of a computer, being directed towards the various targets that are fed into the computer will be new on this flight. Also we'll be making use of the landing radar and its inputs into the computer. Inputs in terms of altitude and velocity updates which will bring us down in the prescribed conditions as we approach the surface of the moon. ~~Of course, the actual control of the touchdown itself will be a rather new item~~

in that it will be testing this man-machine interface to a very sophisticated degree. The touchdown itself will be the ultimate test on the landing gear and the various systems that are in the spacecraft. The environment of one-sixth G will be seen for the first time by crews and spacecraft. We'll also be exposed to thermal conditions that have not been experienced before. The two-man EVA is something that is a first in our program. Sleeping in the Lem on the lunar surface, which we hope to be able to do, will be another new item in that flight."

~~Feb~~

He went on to talk of star sightings and the powered ascent from the moon—that moment when, having landed successfully and reconnoitered the moon ground, they would be back in the Lem and ready to ascend—would the motor ignite or did the moon have a curse? Aldrin spoke of this as a "new item," then of rendezvous with the Command Module, which would return them to earth, of "various contingencies that can develop," of "a wider variety of trajectory conditions"—he was talking about not being able to join up, wandering through space, lost forever to life in that short eternity before they expired of hunger and thirst. Small hint of that in these verbal formulations. Even as the Nazis and the Communists had used to speak of mass murder as liquidation, so the astronauts spoke of possible personal disasters as "contingency." The heart of astronaut talk, like the heart of all bureaucratic talk, was a jargon which could be easily converted to computer programming, a language like Fortran or Cobol or Algol. Anti-dread formulations were the center of it, as if words like pills were there to suppress emotional symptoms. Yet Aldrin, powerful as a small bull, deep as his grasp of Celestial Mechanics, gave off in his air of unassailable solemnity some incommunicable speech about the depth of men's souls and that razor's edge between the hero's endeavor and vainglory. Vainglory looked real to him, one might assume, real as true peril—he had the deep gloomy clumsy dignity of a man who had been face to face in some stricken hour with the depths of his own nature, more complex than he had hitherto known.

~~Feb~~

Collins, in contrast, moved easily; Collins was cool. Collins was the man nearly everybody was glad to see at a party, for he was the living spirit of good and graceful manners. Where Armstrong referred to Wapakoneta, Ohio, as his hometown, and showed a faint but ineradicable suspicion of anyone from a burg larger than his own, where Aldrin protected himself from conversation



with the insulations of a suburban boyhood and encapsulment among his incommunicable fields of competency, Collins had been born in a well-set-up apartment off the Borghese Gardens in Rome. His father, General James L. Collins, was military attaché (and could conceivably have been having a drink around the corner in the bar at the Hassler to celebrate the birth of his son). Since the year was 1930, Dick Diver could have been getting his going-over from the Fascisti police in the basement of *Tender Is the Night*. No surprise then if Collins had a manner. It was in part the manner of Irish elegance—a man must be caught dead before he takes himself seriously. It was as if Collins were playing a fine woodwind which had the merriment and the sadness (now that the madness was gone) of those American expatriates for whom culture began in the Year One of *The Sun Also Rises*. Indeed, if Collins was later to grow a mustache on the trip back, an act which increased his slight but definite resemblance to the young Hemingway, he had a personal style which owed more to Fitzgerald. It was Fitzgerald, after all, who first suggested that you could become the nicest man in the world. So Collins had that friendliness which promises it would be sacrilege to give offense in a social situation. It was apparently as unnatural for him not to make a small joke as it would have been offensive to Aldrin not to take on a matter in its full seriousness. Yet Collins had little opportunity to show his humor. It existed mainly in the fine light smiling presence he bestowed on the interview while the others were asked all the questions. Collins was the only one of the three not landing on the moon. So he would obviously be the one whose remarks would go into the last paragraph, where the layout man would probably lop them off. Therefore nobody had bothered to direct a question to him through all the interview.

Toward the end of the press conference, somebody asked of the astronauts at large, "Two questions. Firstly, what precautions have been taken at your own homes to prevent you from catching germs from your own family? And secondly, is this the last period that you will spend at home here with your families?" The Public Affairs Officer, Brian Duff, was quick to say, "Take a crack at that, Mike."

It could not have been easy to have waited so long for so little. But Collins came up smiling, and said, "My wife and children have signed a statement that they have no germs and—and yes

this will be the last weekend that we will be home with our families." It was not much of a joke but the press conference had not been much of a joke either, and the Press brightened, they laughed. Collins, quick not to offend the man who had asked the question, now added, "Seriously, there are no special precautions being taken."

His conversational manner was easy. It was apparent that of the three, he was the only one you could drink with comfortably. Since the ability to drink with your material is as important to a journalist as the heft of his hammer to a carpenter, a sense of dismay passed through the press corps—why hadn't NASA had the simple sense of press relations to put Collins in command? What a joy it could have been to cover this moon landing with a man who gave neat quotes, instead of having to contend with Armstrong, who surrendered words about as happily as a hound allowed meat to be pulled out of his teeth. Collins would have been perfect. In combination with his manner, so obviously at ease with a martini, he had the trim build, the bald forehead, and economical features of a college boxer, or a shortstop, or a quarterback. (In fact he was the best handball player among the astronauts and had been captain of his wrestling team at St. Albans.) He looked like copy, he talked like copy, and Armstrong had the sad lonely mien of a cross-country runner. ~~Of course, since he also had the sly privacy of a man whose thoughts may never be read—what a vast boon was this to the Press!—one could, if picturing Armstrong as an athlete, see him playing end. He might, thus sly and private, be difficult to keep up with on pass patterns.~~ *PS*

The story resided, however, with the two men who would land on the moon—it could reside nowhere else—but since Collins with a few smiles and a remark or two had become the favorite, a question and then another came his way at the end of the interview. Finally, the real question came.

"Colonel Collins, to people who are not astronauts, you would appear to have the most frustrating job on the mission, not going all the way. How do you feel about that?" The contradiction implicit in being an astronaut was here on this point—it was skewered right here. If they were astronauts, they were men who worked for the team, but no man became an astronaut who was not sufficiently exceptional to suspect at times that he might be



the best of all. Nobody wins at handball who is not determined to win.

He answered quickly. "I don't feel in the slightest bit frustrated. I'm going 99.9 percent of the way there, and that suits me just fine." Growing up in Rome, Puerto Rico, Baltimore and Washington, Texas and Oklahoma, son of one of the more cultivated purlieus of the military grace, the code would be to keep your cool. The only real guide to aristocracy in American life was to see who could keep his cool under the most searing conditions of unrest, envy, ambition, jealousy and heat. So not a quiver showed. "I couldn't be happier right where I am," he concluded and the voice was not hollow, it did not offer a cousin to a squeak. Still nobody believed him. Somewhere in the room was the leached-out air of a passion submitted to a discipline. For a moment Collins was damnably like an actor who plays a good guy.

Armstrong came in quickly. "I'd like to say in that regard that the man in the Command Module" . . . pause . . . "of course by himself" . . . another pause . . . "has a giant-sized job." When Armstrong paused and looked for the next phrase he sometimes made a sound like the open crackling of static on a pilot's voice band with the control tower. One did not have the impression that the static came from him so much as that he had listened to so much static in his life, suffered so much of it, that his flesh, his cells, like it or not, were impregnated with the very cracklings of static. "He has to run Buzz's job and my job" . . . static . . . "along with his own job simultaneously" . . . static . . . "in addition act as relay to the ground" . . . pause and static. . . "It's at least a three-man job and"—he murmured a few words—"Michael is certainly not lacking for something to do while he's circling around." Then Armstrong flashed a smile. One of his own jokes came. His humor was pleasant and small-town, not without a taste of the tart. "And if he can't think of anything else, he can always look out the window and admire the view."

Now came a question from a reporter who was new on the job: "From your previous experience in the two and a half hours or so that you're atop the rocket before actual blast-off, is this a period of maximum tension, rather like being in a dentist's waiting room?"

A temporary inability to understand the question was finally

replaced by this speech. "It's one of the phases that we have a very high confidence in," Armstrong answered with his characteristic mixture of modesty and technical arrogance, of apology and tight-lipped superiority. "It's nothing new. It's the thing that's been done before," now static while he searched for the appropriate addition, "and done very well on a number of occasions, and we're quite sure this girl will go," he said solemnly, pleasantly, lightly, carefully, sadly, sweetly. He was a presence in the room, as much a spirit as a man. One hardly knew if he were the spirit of the high thermal currents, or that spirit of neutrality which rises to the top in bureaucratic situations, or both, both of course—why should Armstrong have a soul less divided than the unruly world of some billions of men? Indeed contradictions lay subtly upon him—it was not unlike looking at a bewildering nest of leaves: some are autumn fallings, some the green of early spring. So Armstrong seemed of all the astronauts the man nearest to being saintly, yet there was something as hard, small-town and used in his face as the look of a cashier over pennies. When he stopped to think, six tired parallel lines stood out on his forehead, and his hair was very straight, small-town hair-colored humorless straight, his pupils were very small, hardly larger than buckshot, you could believe he flew seventy-eight combat missions off the *Essex* near Korea. He was very thin-mouthed, almost as thin and wide a mouth as Joe E. Brown, yet with no comic spirit, or better, or worse, the spirit of comedy gave orders to the mouth most of the time. Much like President Nixon, ~~or Werner von Braun (whom we are yet to meet)~~ he would smile on command. Then a very useful smile appeared—the smile of an enterprising small-town boy. He could be an angel, he could be the town's devil. Who knew? You could not penetrate the flash of the smile—all of America's bounty was in it. Readiness to serve, innocence, competence, modesty, sly humor, and ~~then a lopsided yawning slide of a dumb smile at the gulfs of one's own ignorance, like oops and I small town dumb!~~ that was also in it. ~~Aquarius decided it was not easy to trust him then—the smile was a vehicle to remove Armstrong from the scene. But when he spoke, all ambition was muzzled.~~ He spoke with the unendurably slow and triple caution of a responsibility-laden politician who was being desperately careful to make no error of fact, give no needless offense to enemies, and cross no conflicting zones of loyalty among friends. ~~Add the static, and he was no~~



~~happy public speaker.~~ At communicating he was as tight as a cramped muscle.

Perversely, it became his most impressive quality, as if what was best in the man was most removed from the surface, so valuable that it must be protected by a hundred reservations, a thousand cautions, as if finally he had such huge respect for words that they were like tangible omens and portents, zephyrs and beasts of psychic presence, as if finally something deep, delicate and primitive would restrain him from uttering a single word of fear for fear of materializing his dread. So, once, men had been afraid to utter the name of the Lord, or even to write it in such a way as to suggest the sound, for that might be enough to summon some genie of God's displeasure at so disrupting the heavens. Armstrong of course did not brandish an ego one could perceive on meeting; where Aldrin gave off the stolid confidence of the man who knows that problems can be solved if properly formulated and appropriately attacked (which is to say attacked in good condition!) and where Collins offered the wiry graceful tension of a man who will quietly die to maintain his style, Armstrong could seem more like a modest animal than a man—tracer hints of every forest apprehension from the puma to the deer to the miseries of the hyena seemed to stalk at the edge of that small-town clearing he had cut into his psyche so that he might offer the world a person. But his thoughts seemed to be looking for a way to drift clear of any room like this where he was trapped with psyche-eaters, psyche-gorgers, and the duty of responding to questions heard some hundreds of times.

On the other hand, he was a professional and had learned how to contend in a practical way with the necessary language. Indeed, how his choice of language protected him!

"Mr. Armstrong, at the time you are down on the moon, what will be your overriding consideration and what will be your main concern?"

"Well," said Armstrong, "immediately upon touchdown our concern is the integrity of the Lunar Module itself" . . . nnnnnnnhr went the sound of the static. . . . "For the first two hours after touchdown we have a very busy time verifying the integrity of the Lunar Module and all of its systems" . . . nnnnnhr. . . . "A great deal of technical discussion . . . between spacecraft and ground during a time period when most people will be wondering, well what does it look like out there? . . . We will be

eager to comment" . . . nnnnhr . . . "but reluctant to do so in the face of these more important considerations on which . . . the entire rest of the lunar mission depends."

Aldrin, the formalist, had said just previously, "I think the most critical portion of the EVA will be our ability to anticipate and to interpret things that appear not to be as we expected them to be, because if we don't interpret them correctly then they will become difficult." It was the credo of the rationalist. Phenomena are only possessed of menace when they do not accommodate themselves to language-controls. Or, better, to initial-controls. EVA stood for Extravehicular Activity, that is for action taken outside their vehicle, the Lem. EVA therefore referred to their walk on the moon; but the sound of the letters E, V, A might inspire less perturbation than the frank admission that men would now dare to walk on an ancient and alien terrain where no life breathed and beneath the ground no bodies were dead.

*ignore  
underline*

It was, of course, a style of language all the astronauts had learned. There were speeches where you could not tell who was putting the words together—the phrases were impersonal, interlocking. One man could have finished a sentence for another. "Our order of priorities was carefully integrated into the flight plan . . . there is no requirement on the specific objectives that we're meeting on the surface to go great distances from the spacecraft, and to do so would only utilize time that we now have programmed doing things in the specific mission objectives." Sell newspapers with that kind of stuff! The quote could belong to any one of a dozen astronauts. In this case it happened to be not Aldrin but Armstrong.

Only on occasion did the language reveal its inability to blanket all situations. Mainly on personal matters. There came a question from one of the remedial readers. "Tell us very briefly how your families have reacted to the fact that you're taking this historic mission."

"Well," Aldrin deliberated, "I think in my particular case, my family has had five years now to become accustomed to this eventuality, and over six months to face it very closely. I think they look on this as a tremendous challenge for me. They look upon it also as an invasion somewhat of their privacy and removing of my presence away from the family for a considerable period of time." He spoke glumly, probably thinking at this moment neither of his family nor himself—rather whether his ability to



anticipate and interpret had been correctly employed in the cathexis-loaded dynamic shift vector area of changed field domestic situations (which translates as: attractive wife and kids playing second fiddle to ~~him~~ astronaut number two sometimes blow group stack). Aldrin was a man of such powerful potentialities and iron disciplines that the dull weight of appropriately massed jargon was no mean gift to him. He obviously liked it to work. It kept explosives in their package. When his laboriously acquired speech failed to mop up the discharge of a question, he got as glum as a fastidious housewife who cannot keep the shine on her floor.

They could not, of course, restrain the questions <sup>that</sup> ~~which~~ looked for ultimate blood. "James Gunn, BBC. You had mentioned that your flight, like all others, contains very many risks. What, in view of that, will your plans be"—a British courtesy in passing—"in the extremely unlikely event that the Lunar Module does not come up off the lunar surface?"

Armstrong smiled. His detestation of answering questions in public had been given its justification. Journalists would even ask a man to comment on the emotions of his oncoming death. "Well," said Armstrong, "that's an unpleasant thing to think about." If, as was quite possible, he had been closer to death than anyone in the room, and more than once, more than once, that did not mean the chalice of such findings was there to be fingered by fifty. "We've chosen not to think about that up to the present time. We don't think that's at all a likely situation. It's simply a possible one." He had, however, not answered the question. If he put in twelve and more hours a day in simulators, if there were weeks when they worked seventy and eighty hours a week at the abrasive grind of laying in still more hierarchies of numbers and banks of ratio in their heads, well, they were accustomed to hard work. So the grind today of being interviewed in full press conference, then by the wire services, then by magazine writers and finally for the television networks, a fourteen-hour day before it would all be done, and of the worst sort of work for them—objects on display to be chipped at by some of the worst word-sculptors ever assembled in southeastern Texas—well, that would still be work they must perform to the best of their duty. Being an astronaut was a mission. Since the political and power transactions of the age on which NASA's future was—put no nice word on it—hung, were not in spirit religious, the astronauts did

not emphasize their sense of vocation. But being an astronaut was a mission and therefore you were obliged to perform every aspect of your work as well as you could. At a press conference you answered questions. So Armstrong now finally said in answer to what they would do if the Lunar Module did not come up off the lunar surface, "At the present time we're left without recourse should that occur."

~~When the conference was done, there was only a small pattering of applause from the Press. The atmosphere had been equal to any other dull press conference in which a company had unveiled a new and not very special product. Resentment in the Press was subtle but deep. An event of such dimensions and nothing to show for it. The American cool was becoming a narcotic. The horror of the Twentieth Century was the size of each new event, and the paucity of its reverberation.~~

~~But what if you're unable to get off the moon?~~

~~"Unpleasant thing to think about."~~

ii

It was the answer Aquarius thought about after the conference was done, for that was the nearest anyone had come to saying that a man could get killed in the pits of this venture. And yes, they did think about it. A man who was in training for six months to go to the moon would be obliged to think about his death. Yet, if to contemplate the failure of the ascent stage of the Lunar Module to rise off the moon was unpleasant for Armstrong to think about, did that derive automatically and simply because it would mean death, or was it, bottomless taint of the unpleasant, a derivation deep out of the incommensurable fact that the moon ground would be the place where his body must rest in death? People who had nearly died from wounds spoke of the near death as offering a sensation that one was rising out of one's body. So had spoken Hemingway long ago, writing in Paris, writing in Spain, probably writing in apartments off the Borghese Gardens near where Collins had been born. Now was there to be a future science of death, or did death (like smell and sound and time—like the theory of the dream) resist all scientists, navigators, nomenclature and charts and reside in the realm of such unanswerables as whether the cause of cancer was a malfunction



of the dream? *Did* the souls of the dead choose to rise? Was the thought of expiring on the moon an abyss of unpleasantness because the soul must rest in the tombless vacuums of a torso dead on the moon and therefore not able to voyage toward its star? A vertigo of impressions, but Aquarius had been living at the edge of such thoughts for years. It was possible there was nothing more important in a man's life than the hour and the route and the power of his death, yes, certainly if his death were to launch him into another kind of life. And the astronauts—of this he was convinced—would think this way, or at least would have that vein of imagination in some inviolate and noncommunicatory circuit of their brain; somewhere, far below the language of their communication, they must suspect that the gamble of a trip to the moon and back again, if carried off in all success, might give thrust for some transpostmortal insertion to the stars. Varoom! Last of all over the years had Aquarius learned how to control the rapid acceleration of his brain. Perhaps as a result, he was almost—in these first few days of covering the astronauts in Houston—fond of the banality of their speech and the anodyne of technogese, *yes, from their conscious mind* → p56

~~But that press conference reserved exclusively for the magazine writers was about to begin—the writers would be working at least half as hard as the astronauts this day—and Aquarius on his way over to the Lunar Receiving Laboratory, where the interview was to be staged (for reasons soon explained) was wondering if the glints and notes of these cosmic, if barely sketched, hypotheses about earth, moon, life, death, the dream and the psychology of astronauts would be offered the ghost of a correlative. Aquarius was contemplating again the little fact that man had not done so very much with Freud's theory of the dream—had the theory of wish fulfillment shown a poor ability "to anticipate and interpret things that appear to be not as we expected them to be"? Did that old Freudian theory of the dream bear the same relation to the veritable dimensions of the dream that a Fourth of July rocket could present to Saturn V?~~

~~III~~

~~Since the astronauts were being guarded against infection, they were seen next behind the protection of a glass wall in the visi-~~

Armstrong's recurrent dream. It was a beautiful dream—to hold one's breath and to levitate; not to fly and not to fall, but to hover. It was beautiful because it might soon prove to be prophetic, beautiful because it was profound and it was mysterious, beautiful because it was appropriate to a man who would land on the moon. It was therefore a dream on which one might found a new theory of the dream, for any theory incapable of explaining this visitor of the night would have to be inadequate, unless it were ready to declare that levitation, breath, and the moon were not proper provinces of the dream.

Because it was, however, awesome, prophetic, profound, mysterious and appropriate, Aquarius hated to loose the vigors of his imagination onto the meaning of this dream unless he could believe it had actually happened. It was too perfect to his needs to accept it when he read it. But after studying Armstrong this day, listening to his near-humorous admission that yes, he had had that dream when he was a boy, there was a quietness at the center of his reply which gave balm to the sore of Aquarius' doubt. He knew he had now chosen to believe the dream had occurred.

And this conviction was not without the most direct kind of intellectual intoxication, for it dramatized how much at odds might be the extremes of Armstrong's personality or for that matter the personality of astronauts. ~~From their conscious mind~~ to their unconscious depth, what a spectrum could be covered! Yes, Aquarius thought, astronauts have learned not only to live with opposites, but it was conceivable that the contradictions in their nature were so located in the very impetus of the age that their personality might begin to speak, for better or worse, of some new psychological constitution to man. For it was true—astronauts had come to live with adventures in space so vast one thought of the infinities of a dream, yet their time on the ground was conventional, practical, technical, hardworking, and in the center of the suburban middle class. If they engaged the deepest primitive taboos, they all but parodied the conventional in public manner; they embarked on odysseys whose success or failure was so far from being entirely in their own control that they must be therefore fatalistic, yet the effort was enterprising beyond the limits of the imagination. They were patriots, but they were moonmen. They lived with absolute lack of privacy, their obvious pleasure was to be alone in the sky. They were sufficiently

Brian P. 11



selfless to be prepared to die for their mission, their team, their corporate NASA, their nation; yet they were willy-nilly narcissistic as movie stars. "Sugar, I tried and couldn't make doo-doo," says Lulu Meyers in *The Deer Park*. The heart pressure, the brain waves, the bowel movements of astronauts were of national interest. They were virile men, but they were prodded, probed, tapped into, poked, flexed, tested, subjected to a pharmacology of stimulants, depressants, diuretics, laxatives, retentives, tranquilizers, motion sickness pills, antibiotics, vitamins and food which was designed to control the character of their feces. They were virile, but they were done to, they were done to like no healthy man alive. So again their activity was hazardous, far-flung, bold, demanding of considerable physical strength, yet the work and physical condition called for the ability to live in cramped conditions with passive bodies, the patience to remain mentally alert and physically inactive for days. They lived, it was evident, with no ordinary opposites in their mind and brain. On the one hand to dwell in the very center of technological reality (which is to say that world where every question must have answers and procedures, or technique cannot itself progress) yet to inhabit—if only in one's dreams—that other world where death, metaphysics and the unanswerable questions of eternity must reside, was to suggest natures so divided that they could have been the most miserable and unbalanced of men if they did not contain in their huge contradictions some of the profound and accelerating opposites of the century itself. The century would seek to dominate nature as it had never been dominated, would attack the idea of war, poverty and natural catastrophe as never before. The century would create death, devastation and pollution as never before. Yet the century was now attached to the idea that man must take his conception of life out to the stars. It was the most soul-destroying and apocalyptic of centuries. So in their turn the astronauts had personalities of unequaled banality and apocalyptic dignity. So they suggested in their contradictions the power of the century to live with its own incredible contradictions and yet release some of the untold energies of the earth. A century devoted to the rationality of technique was also a century so irrational as to open in every mind the real possibility of global destruction. It was the first century in history which presented to sane and sober minds the fair chance that the century might not reach the end of its span. It was a world half

convinced of the future death of our species yet half aroused by the apocalyptic notion that an exceptional future still lay before us. So it was a century which moved with the most magnificent display of power into directions it could not comprehend. The itch was to accelerate—the metaphysical direction unknown. *Cud*

Aquarius, aware of the profundity of his natural bent for error, aware of the ineradicably romantic inclination of his mind to believe all those tales and legends he desired to believe, nonetheless came to a conclusion on this hot Saturday evening, July 5, on the southeastern rim of Houston, that Armstrong when a boy had indeed had a recurring dream in which he would hold his breath and rise from the ground and hover, and on this dream Aquarius, who had been reconnoitering for months through many a new thought (new at the very least to him) on the architecture and function and presence of the dream, would build his theory, on Armstrong's dream would Aquarius commit himself. Any notes toward a new psychology could take their departure from here, from this *fact*. And as this evening went on, and he continued to the party at Pete Conrad's house and talked to the future commander of Apollo 12 over the steaks at charcoal grill, and Conrad made his confession of dreaming for years of going to the moon, and now concluded somberly, manfully—one had to be manful when contemplating the cost of desire—"now the moon is nothing but facts to me," Aquarius felt confirmation building in his mood, his happiness and his senses, that this grim tough job of writing for enough money to pay his debts and buy his little plot of time, was going to be possibly, all passions directed, all disciplines flexed, a work whose size might relieve the chore. And as he thought of the little details he had picked up in the biographies of Collins, of Aldrin, of Armstrong, he thought that yes, the invasion of the moon was signal direct to commence his new psychology—he could call it, yes, beneath this Texas moon, full near the Fourth of July, he would call it The Psychology of Astronauts, for they were either the end of the old or the first of the new men, and one would have nothing to measure them by until the lines of the new psychology had begun to be drawn.



the Royal Oak County, St. Louis, will be full occasion. Werner von Braun has spoken there earlier. Werner von Braun has in fact arrived and left by helicopter. Von Braun is the *deus ex machina* of the big boosters! He is of course a legend. If you ask the man on the street: Who is the head of NASA, he will probably not quite know what NASA is. If you ask: Well, who heads the Space Program, he is not likely to tell you James E. Webb was Administrator of NASA from 1961 to 1968, nor does he figure to know that in the summer of 1969 it is Dr. Thomas O. Paine who is ultimately responsible for all the NASA installations. Headquarters in Washington; Ames Research Center for space flight research at Moffet Field, California; Electronic Research Center at Cambridge; Flight Research Center at Edwards, California; Goddard Space Flight Center for unmanned satellites at Greenbelt, Maryland; Jet Propulsion Laboratory at Pasadena; Langley Research Center at Hampton, Virginia; Lewis Research Center at Cleveland; Nuclear Rocket Development Station at Jackass Flats, Nevada; KSC Western Test Range Operations Division at Lompoc, California; Wallops Station Wallops Island, Virginia; NASA Pasadena Office; and of course the Manned Spacecraft Center at Houston; the George C. Marshall Space Flight Center at Huntsville, Alabama; and Kennedy Space Center itself on Cape Kennedy and Merritt Island. No, he will not have heard of Dr. Paine, nor of Dr. George E. Mueller, who heads the Manned Spacecraft Program, which is to say is in charge of everything to do with men in rockets as opposed to unmanned rockets, and so has authority over the directors of the space center and laboratory concerned with manned flight. Nor is anyone too likely to have heard of Dr. Gilruth, nor necessarily of Dr. Kurt H. Debus at Kennedy Space Center where he is Director and so in charge of every mammoth launching as well as planning, designing, developing and utilizing the launching facilities. **Start**

Since his formal title is Center Director of George C. Marshall Space Center at Huntsville, Alabama,

he is the one who is responsible for the organization and operation of the space program. He is the one who is responsible for the organization and operation of the space program. He is the one who is responsible for the organization and operation of the space program.

he can hardly be the Boss, but to the public sense of these affairs, to the Press, and to a corps of space workers, he is the real engineer, the spiritual leader,

the  
of  
Werner  
von Braun

of NASA,

the inventor, the force, the philosopher, the genius! of America's Space Program. Such is his legend in the street. That is the positive side of his reputation; it is enormous; say, rather it is immense. Yet he has that variety of glamor usually described as fascinating, which is to say, the evocation of his name is attractive and repellent at once, because no one forgets for an instant that he worked on the V-2 rockets at the German Rocket Research Center at Peenemünde, second only to General Dornberger, and so was implicated on one occasion by giving an orientation lecture to the Leader himself, who stood and stared and did not say a word when rockets were later fired for him on test stands. It was expected that Hitler with his love of the cosmic, the primitive, the apocalyptic, and the more audible wars of Hell and Heaven would be enthusiastic about the extraordinary sound of rocket motors. The future of the rocket program at Peenemünde was indeed even dependent in 1939 upon just such hopes as Hitler's ecstatic reaction. But the Fuehrer did not say a word until lunch, when he stated, "*Es war doch gevaltig*," which may be translated as, "That was sensational." (Göring, who visited a week later, was openly enchanted. Rocket propulsion for railroad and passenger cars, airplanes, airships! and ocean liners! was what he saw next.)

Then in 1943, after an audience with Hitler, Von Braun was granted the very high honor of a titular professorship. That much was ineradicable from Von Braun's record, but he had also had the opposite honor of being arrested and jailed for two weeks in an SS prison by Heinrich Himmler himself. One of the accusations: Von Braun was not really interested in rockets for war so much as for space exploration. It took General Dornberger's intercession with Hitler to spring Von Braun from Stettin Prison. Without Von Braun, said Dornberger to Hitler, there would be no V-2. Then in 1945 Von Braun had managed with considerable skill to move about five thousand employees and their families, and some of their papers, documents and drawings, to the Harz Mountains in the south of Germany where they could be captured by Americans rather than Russians.

Von Braun had not been out of higher headquarters since. While the U.S. Army test-fired V-2's at the White Sands Proving Grounds in New Mexico, he served as adviser. Five years later, still working for the Army, he directed the development of the Redstone and Jupiter missiles. For NASA he had created the



launch vehicle for the Apollo program, the famous, the monumental, the incomparable three-stage Saturn V, that launch vehicle we have already glimpsed at the VAB, a booster the size and weight of a full Navy destroyer, a rocket to deliver seven and a half million pounds of thrust at blast-off, Saturn V, 281 feet long, 33 feet wide, designed to put—we may be Germanic in metaphor here—designed to put its *little brother*, the 82-foot Apollo spacecraft implanted on top of it, into Trans-Lunar Injection, which is to say: on its way to the moon. In terms of size, the Apollo spacecraft was no more than a witch's hat perched on Saturn V's Instrument Unit of a head!

Yet since this launch vehicle in all its three stages did not have fuel to burn for even eighteen minutes, all six million pounds of fuel consumed in bursts of two and a half minutes and six and a half minutes, then two minutes and six minutes, near to five million pounds of fuel being burned in the first 150 seconds, whereas, in contrast, the Command Module would be in flight for eight days; since Saturn V in relation to the complexity of the electronic vitals and conceptions on the Command Module was relatively simple in design, Saturn V hardly more by the severest measure than a mighty mortar of a firework to blast an electric brain into space, why then was Von Braun so worshiped, why, if the true technology, the vertiginous complexity of the engineering feat of putting a man on the moon and back belonged rather in sum of work and intimate invention to echelons of electronic engineers out at MSC, North American and Grumman and too many other places to name? Well, the brute but inescapable answer if one studies the morphology of rockets is that man worships his phallus in preference to a drop of his seed. Yeah and yea. Saturn V was guts and grease, plumbing and superpipes, Lucifer or the Archangel grinding the valves. Saturn V was a furnace, a chariot of fire. One could witness some incandescent entrance to the heavens. But Apollo 11 was Command Module and therefore not to be seen. It spoke out of a crackling of static, or rolled like a soup can, a commercial in a sea of television, a cootie in a zoo of oscillating dots.

We may, then, absorb the lesson: Electricity is an avatar of hate which gives pain to the senses, emits static, electronic hum, neon flicker, light glare, shock, heat radiation. Whereas thoughts of the sun and royal spectacle are in the mystery of a flame. So Von Braun was the heat in rocketry, the animal in the program.

By public estimate he had been a Nazi—that was glamor enough. Who could begin to measure the secret appeal of the Nazis by now? It was a fit subject for Aquarius to begin to brood upon: America was this day mighty but headless, America was torn by the specter of civil war, and many a patriot and many a big industrialist—they were so often the same!—saw the cities and the universities as a collective pit of Black heathen, Jewish revolutionaries, a minority polyglot hirsute scum of nihilists, hippies, sex maniacs, drug addicts, liberal apologists and freaks. Crime pushed the American public to give birth to dreams of order. Fantasies of order had to give way to lusts for new order. Order was restraint, but new order would call for a mighty vault, an exceptional effort, a unifying dream. Was the conquest of space then a potential chariot of Satan, the unique and grand avenue for the new totalitarian? Aquarius was not certain. It was possible that neo-Nazism and technology were finally inimical to each other, but it was all to be considered again and again. It was complex. At this instant, he would not have minded the return of his ego.

Meanwhile, here was Von Braun for study. Yes, he had come in by helicopter to the Royal Oak Country Club in Titusville. The roads were crowded and it was incontestable that on this night, this night above all, hours before the mightiest launching of his life, Von Braun's hours were of value to him and to others. Still, the impression had to arise that he would have arrived by helicopter in any case. The helicopter had become the vehicle of status of that Praetorian Guard now forming of generals, state troopers, admirals, Republican congressmen with wives-on-junket, governors from he-man states, he-man senators, law-and-order mayors, traffic-crisis monitors, and VIPs on state visits to troublesome cities. The helicopter was there to signify: a man engaged in *flag* activity was dropping in on the *spot*. So the helicopter was a status symbol as special as a Junior League Ball. Not everybody who was moderately rich and powerful in American life would necessarily want to go to the ball or ride in the bubble, but for that matter not everybody who was thus rich and powerful was welcome at either.

Under whose auspices then had Von Braun descended? We can pretend to investigate. A large publishing corporation long associated with the Space Program had invited corporation presidents of important firms to voyage out for a few days on a trip to



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Houston to meet astronauts, then on to Kennedy to see the launching. A private speech by Von Braun was one of the features of the junket, and they waited for him now in a hexagonal banquet room finished in varieties of walnut-colored wood, a fit meeting place for American gods and cousins of the gods, since the shape of the chamber gave an echo of clans meeting in a wooded glen. Talismans in the form of intricate hex signs were inlaid in the wood of the walls around the room below the ceiling. Yet the walls, as though aware the gods were American, their powers corporate, were finished pale in stain, and therefore not excitative to the bottled emotions of business leaders. In any case, the golf course abutted the premises, and some of the guests left the bar and waited for the helicopter outside, standing in the steamy air of evening on that stiff rubbery thick-bladed Florida grass so much an overnight product of hyperfertilizer, turf-planting, and the tropics that it felt like plastic underfoot.

It was a not untypical American gathering. Doubtless, equivalent Soviet meetings were similar. It did not matter how high or prominent these people had become, how far some of them had traveled from their beginnings. There was still the same awkward, embarrassed, well-scrubbed air of a church social. Americans might yet run the world, they were certainly first on the way to the stars, and yet they had never filled the spaces between. Americans were still as raw as an unboiled potato. It hardly mattered if Americans were rich or poor. When they got together, they did not know what to say to each other. It is part of the double life of Americans, the unequal development of the lobes in the national schizophrenia. Men whose minds worked with an admirable depth of reference and experience in their business or occupation were less interesting in a social gathering, at least in this social gathering where they were plucked up from a more familiar core of small talk and deposited on the rubber-mat turf of the Royal Oak. It was almost a reflection of the national belief that a man who worked thoroughly at his job was given dispensation from the obligation to have a good time. So conversation took overloaded steps over successive hills, and that was all right, the point of the evening was that they would hear Von Braun and be able to refer to it afterward. The American family travels to strange states and places in order to take their photographs and bring them back, as if the photographs will serve in future years as data-points, crystals of memory to give

emotional resonance to experience ~~which~~ <sup>that</sup> was originally without any. The data-point will give warmth in old age. So Von Braun would be a data-point tonight. It would not matter if a good time was not otherwise had. Aquarius' mind, brooding through these familiar thoughts, was brought up short with the radically new idea that perhaps some instinct in American life had been working all these decades to keep the country innocent, keep it raw, keep it crude as a lout, have it indeed ready to govern the universe without an agreeable culture to call its own—for then, virgin ore, steadfastly undeveloped in all the hinterworld of the national psyche, a single idea could still electrify the land. Culture was insulation against a single idea, and America was like a rawboned lover gangling into middle age, still looking for his mission.

Since Aquarius on evenings like this would look for the nutrient in liquor the way a hound needles out marrow from a bone, he was nose-deep into his second drink, and hardly saw the helicopter come in. A sense of presence overhead, fore and aft lights whirruping like crickets in the dusk, a beating of rotors in a wheat-flattened gust, and it was down, a creature. Nothing inspired so fine a patriotic cocktail of mild awe, mild respect, and uncorrupted envy as the sight of Praetorians emerging from an insect the size of an elephant which *they* commanded.

The guests immediately made their way inside. Von Braun, dressed in a silver-gray suit, white shirt, and black tie looked more impressive tonight than the day before at a press conference. That had taken place in front of several hundred correspondents with movie cameras, television, and ushers in the audience holding portable microphones to amplify and record all questions the Press might ask for posterity. Von Braun had been on a panel with Dr. Mueller, Dr. Debus, Dr. Gilruth, and a director from Langley, but half the questions had gone to Von Braun. He seemed sensitive to the fact that the Press made jokes about his past. There was one tale every reporter had heard—"Tell me, Dr. von Braun," a correspondent said, "what is there to keep Saturn V from landing on London?" Von Braun walked out of the room. But the story was doubtless apocryphal; it smacked of reporters' bile. Journalists were often vicious in their prior comments about VIPs they were going to interview, as if to compensate for the uxorious tone of the restrained questions they would finally ask. Aquarius had been with a small pack



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who had gone to talk to Dr. Debus, director of all launching operations at Kennedy and a former colleague of Von Braun's. "Just give the Nazi salute and he'll holler 'Heil Hitler!'" they all promised each other, but Debus to their consternation proved out a pleasant Junker gentleman with dueling scars on his mouth and bags under his eyes—the sort of aristocratic face and gracious if saturnine manner which belongs to an unhappy German prince from a small principality. The questions of the Press were predictably unctuous, and trading notes afterward, they quoted Debus respectfully. He had given them the best of lines; when asked if he were planning a celebration while the astronauts were on the moon surface he had smiled and cleared his throat with a cultivated sound. "No," he had said, "no champagne in the refrigerator." Debus was not afraid of the Press.

But Von Braun was too prominent, and had—although his official position was nominally no more elevated than his countryman's—much too much to lose. A press conference, no matter how many he had had, was a putative den of menace. So his eyes flew left and right as he answered a question, flicking back and forth in their attention with the speed of eyes watching a Ping-Pong game, and his mouth moved from a straight line to a smile, but the smile was no more than a signifier, a tooth-filled rectangle. Words were being mouthed like signal flags.

Since he had, in contrast to his delivery, a big burly squared-off bulk of a body which gave hint of ~~the~~ methodical ruthlessness *while his* ~~of more than one Russian bureaucrat, Von Braun's~~ relatively small voice, darting eyes, and semaphoric presentations of lip made it obvious he was a man of opposites. He revealed a confusing aura of strength and vulnerability, of calm and agitation, cruelty and concern, phlegm and sensitivity, which would have given fine play to the talents of so virtuoso an actor as Mr. Rod Steiger. Von Braun had in fact something of Steiger's soft voice, that play of force and weakness which speaks of consecration and vanity, dedication and indulgence, steel and fat.

Still he did not do badly at his press conference. If he had started nervously, there was an exchange where he encountered his opposition. A correspondent from East Berlin asked him in German to answer a question. There had been a silence. For an instant Von Braun had not known exactly what to do, had in fact stolen a look at Mueller. NASA was sensitive about origins. Two of the three directors in the center of the Manned Spacecraft

Program were, after all, German. And there was no joy in emphasizing this, since those few liberal congressmen who were sympathetic to the needs of the space budget would only find their way harder if Von Braun and Debus were too prominent.

Von Braun fielded the difficulty as follows: He translated the question into English. Then he gave a long detailed answer in English (which succeeded in boring the Press). Then, taking an equally long time, he translated his answer back to German. Finally, he took a nimble step away from this now somnolent situation by remarking, "I must warn the hundred and thirty-four Japanese correspondents here at Cape Kennedy that I cannot do the same in Japanese." The remark drew the largest laugh of the afternoon, and thereby enabled him to prosper. The contest in press conferences is to utter the remark ~~which~~ <sup>that</sup> will be used as the lead quotation in wire-service stories, and Dr. George Mueller, anxious to establish his centrality on this panel, and his eminence over his directors, answered every question helpfully, giving facts, figures, prognostications of future activity. He was a one-man mine of pieces of one-line information with follow-up suitable for heads, leads, paragraph leads, and bottom-of-the-page slugs, but Von Braun picked up the marbles. In fact he had the subtle look of a fat boy who has gathered the shooters in many a game.

When asked how he evaluated the importance of the act of putting a man on the moon, Von Braun answered, "I think it is equal in importance to that moment in evolution when aquatic life came crawling up on the land." It drew a hand of applause. It would get the headline. Some of the Press literally stood up.

Thus, he was sound, sensible, and quick as mercury. Yet his appearance had been not as impressive then as now tonight at the Royal Oak. Then he had been somehow not forceful enough for the public image, small-voiced, almost squeaky for a man with so massive a frame. Whereas, here at the Country Club, shaking hands, he had obvious funds of charisma. "You must help us give a shove to the program," he said to Aquarius on greeting. (This was virtually what Debus had said on parting.)

Yes, Von Braun most definitely was not like other ~~men~~ <sup>men</sup>. Curiously shifty, as if to show his eyes in full would give away much too much, he offered the impression of a man who wheeled whole complexes of caution into every gesture—he was after all an engineer who put massive explosives into adjoining tanks and



then was obliged to worry about leaks. Indeed, what is plumbing but the prevention of treachery in closed systems? So he would never give anything away he did not have to, but the secrets he held, the tensions he held, the very philosophical explosives he contained under such supercompression gave him an air of magic. He was a rocketeer. He had lived his life with the obsession of reaching other planets. It is no small impulse. Immediate reflection must tell you that a man who wishes to reach heavenly bodies is an agent of the Lord or Mephisto. In fact, Von Braun, with his handsome spoiled face, massive chin, and long and highly articulated nose, had a fair resemblance to Goethe. (Albeit none of the fine weatherings of the Old Master's head.) But brood on it: the impulse to explore the universe seems all but to suppose a divine will or a divine displeasure, or—our impurities matched only by our corruptions—some mixture of the two. What went on in Von Braun's mind during a dream? "Yes," he said with a smile, "we are in trouble. You must help us <sup>give a shove to the program.</sup>

"Who are you kidding?" said Aquarius, the good American. "You're going to get everything you want."

Whether the intimacy was too abrupt, or Von Braun's reaction disclosed too much—his eyes gleamed with sudden funds of pleasure at the remark—he quickly looked discomposed, and as quickly left the conversation by failing to forward a remark in return. Then he waved some ambiguous good-by and moved quickly across the room. If his sense of friend and foe was good—a reasonable assumption to make about a man like Von Braun—it was obvious he did not think Aquarius would make such a good friend.

The banquet was roast beef. Ice creams and sauces for dessert. Coffee. The spoon on the glass. ~~The publisher of the publishing corporation was talking. "We are signally honored tonight to have with us," he began, "one of the true fathers of space, Dr. Hermann Oberth, who, with Dr. Goddard and a Russian named Tsiolkovsky, is really and truly one of the originators of the whole concept of the exploration of space." An old man, seventy-five at least, with white hair and a white bushy mustache stood up. He had the birdlike self-sufficiency of the old, a vain sly white old bird, as if he were not only cousin to an old condor but had bought the nest as well. There was a smattering of applause. His name meant little outside of rocketry circles, but the speaker had used his presence for a joke. "I heard earlier tonight that at~~

to Aquarius

at least two men in this room, one of whom you'll hear from later, are students of his. They said in response to his comment that he was a very good teacher that at least they weren't dropouts: one of them is Dr. von Braun." The laugh came on that. Of all the nations in the world, America had possessed the firmest patriotic firmament; the common culture had never been rich enough to corrode it. Not till recently. Now dropouts were pits in the shining surface. This then offered the suggestion that Von Braun was a regenerator of the shining surface. Therefore, the audience was not to be at ease during his introduction, for the new speaker, who described himself as a "backup publisher," went into a little too much historical detail. "During the Thirties he was employed by the Ordnance Department of the German government developing liquid fuel rockets. During World War I he made very significant developments in rocketry for his government."

A tension spread in this audience of corporation presidents and high executives, of astronauts, a few at any rate, and their families. There was an uneasy silence, an embarrassed still at the unmentioned word of Nazi—it was the only word that did not drop to the floor. So no more than a pitter-patter of tapping was heard when the speaker said that he had been in the U.S. since 1955.

He became an American citizen in 1955. Only when Von Braun stood up at the end of the next felt secure enough to shift. A particularly hearty and enthusiastic hand of applause swelled into a standing ovation. Nearly everybody stood up. Aquarius, who finally cast his vote by remaining seated, felt pressure not unrelated to refusing to stand for *The Star-Spangled Banner*. It was as if the crowd with true American enthusiasm had finally declared, "Ah don' care if he is some kind of ex-Nazi, he's a good loyal patriotic American."

Von Braun was. If patriotism is the ability to improve a nation's morale, then Von Braun was a patriot. It was plain that some of these corporation executives loved him. In fact, they revered him. He was the high priest of their precise art-manufacture. If many too many an American product was accelerating into shoddy these years since the war, if planned obsolescence had often become a euphemism for sloppy workmanship, cynical cost-cutting, swollen advertising budgets, inefficiency and general indifference, then in one place at least, and



for certain, America could be proud of a product. It was high as a castle and tooled more finely than an exquisite watch.

Now the real and true tasty beef of capitalism got up to speak, the grease and guts of it, the veritable brawn, and spoke with fulsome language in his small and well-considered voice. He was with friends this occasion, and so a savory, a gravy of redolence came into his tone, his voice was not unmusical, it had overtones which hinted of angelic superpossibilities one could not otherwise lay on the line. He was when all was said like the head waiter of the largest hofbrau house in Heaven. "Honored guests, ladies and gentlemen," Von Braun began, "it is with a great deal of respect tonight that I meet you, the leaders and the captains of the mainstream of American industry and life. Without your success in building and maintaining the economic foundations of this nation, the resources for mounting tomorrow's expedition to the moon would never have been committed. . . . Tomorrow's historic launch belongs to you and to the men and women who sit behind the desks and administer your companies' activities, to the men who sweep the floors in your office buildings and to every American who walks the street of this productive land. It is an American triumph. Many times I have thanked God for allowing me to be a part of the history that will be made here today and tomorrow and in the next few days. Tonight I want to offer my gratitude to you and all Americans who have created the most fantastically progressive nation yet conceived and developed." He went on to talk of space as "the key to our future on earth," and echoes of his vision drifted through the stale tropical air of a banquet room after coffee—perhaps he was hinting at the discords and nihilism traveling in bands of brigands across the earth. "The key to our future on earth. I think we should see clearly from this statement that the Apollo 11 moon trip even from its inception was not intended as a one-time trip that would rest alone on the merits of a single journey. If our intention had been merely to bring back a handful of soil and rocks from the lunar gravel pit and then forget the whole thing"—he spoke almost with contempt of the meager resources of the moon—"we would certainly be history's biggest fools. But that is not our intention now—it never will be. What we are seeking in tomorrow's trip is indeed that key to our future on earth. We are expanding the mind of man. We are extending this God-given brain and these God-given hands to their outermost limits and

in so doing all mankind will benefit. All mankind will reap the harvest. . . . What we will have attained when Neil Armstrong steps down upon the moon is a completely new step in the evolution of man. ~~"(Which would lead Aquarius days later to wonder at the origin of Armstrong's first speech on the moon.)" "It will cause a new element to sweep across the face of this good earth and to invade the thoughts of all men."~~

He was almost done with his formal remarks. Out of his big bulk and his small voice he would offer miracles. That was his knowledge of America, no mean knowledge. Prosperity satisfies those who are rich in culture. But in lands where the geography like the people is filled with empty space, then faith in miracles is the staple of the future.

"Every man achieves his own greatness by reaching out beyond himself, and so it is with nations. When a nation believes in itself as Athenians did in their Golden Age, as Italians did in the Renaissance, that nation can perform miracles. Only when a nation means something to itself can it mean something to others. We are truly faced with the brightest prospects of any age of man. Knowing this, we can watch the launch tomorrow with a new dimension of hope. We can cheer the beginning of a new age of discovery and the new attainment that spans the space distances and brings us nearer to the heavens."

His speech while quietly apocalyptic was not without gloom for the audience. They were heavy with food, and a band or a jukebox was blasting in some big room next to the hexagonal room. The country club couples of Titusville and Brevard County were having a good time next door. But it seemed to Aquarius that Von Braun's remarks had plunged the collective intelligence of these corporation men back into some of their problems.

Yes, Aquarius was thinking, ideas were what Americans cared about, and the biggest ideas were doubtless the best, but what a price had been paid. For now manufacturers and consumers chased frantically after fashion. It did not matter how cheap and shameful the execution. The bargain stereo could not last a month, the washing machine with the plastic console would break in a week—all that had been purchased was the idea. Something was happening to Americans. They were a guilty crew, guilty of new ideas, new license, sacrilege, cynicism, bad faith. As a result, they were always in a rush to purchase a new idea. When people were not willing to die for an old idea, they would rush



to a new one. Guilty to the nose, guilty to the ears, they were even apathetic about blaming the fabricators, for they were guilty themselves. Everybody had been cheated so many times; everybody had cheated others so often. It was hard to remain angry that one had been defrauded. It was even hard to get angry. So food and ruminating drink lowered the audience from the excellence of Von Braun's achievement to the shoddy dimensions of their own.

The question period cheered this same audience however. Then Von Braun could speak of lunar jeeps, and space costs reduced by flying stages which could be used over and over in travel from earth to manned laboratories in earth orbit. He would be eloquent a little later about nuclear rockets the size of battleships which might be assembled in earth orbit and then voyage to Mars. While he talked of other planets, the audience grew warm again. It was the moon which was cold.

When applause subsided, the publisher cried out in his cheerful voice, "I have a question. Will you be fired if you don't get on that helicopter and greet the senators and Cabinet members who are waiting?" Von Braun made a point of staying for two more full questions, then took his departure. The sound of helicopters rose over the room.

Aquarius would have thought the evening concluded, but as he was learning again, he would never understand Americans. Another speaker, a representative of American business, rose and gave a humorous introduction to a man as massive and slow-speaking as Lyndon Johnson who proceeded to get up and tell jokes in an absolutely assured drawl. The audience seemed happy with them. "I was in an airport not long ago and sitting next to a woman smoking a cigar. I asked her how long she'd been smoking cigars. And she said ever since her husband had come home and found one in her ashtray in the bedroom."

The couple in front of Aquarius, young, stingy, ambitious, and very respectable, were laughing. The husband scowled at the wife and said with existential humor, "I wouldn't laugh at that joke if I was you."

"Why not?" responded the wife with the serenity of total practicality. "I've never done it."

Yes, they were all good Americans and they would listen to jokes and be a little relieved Von Braun was gone (although they would treasure the experience), and as new jokes came along,

Aquarius began to look again into his drink and brood on Von Braun's remarks. He had declared that reaching the moon would be the greatest event in history since aquatic life had moved up onto land, and that was a remark for it passed without pause over the birth and death of Christ. Indeed Von Braun had said even more in a newspaper interview. "Through a closer look at Creation, we ought to gain a better knowledge of the Creator." Man was voyaging to the planets in order to look for God. Or was it to destroy Him?

Of course, in the interview, Von Braun had been careful to add, "It could very well be that the Lord would . . . send His Son to the other worlds to bring the gospel to them—I believe the good Lord is full of such tremendous compassion that He will take whatever steps are necessary to bring the truth to His Creation." While Aquarius had always assumed that compassion did not move by steps but seemed rather to bathe the wounded with its grace, this was after all no ordinary piety. It was possible Von Braun was sincere. Still what a grip he had on the jugular of the closet missionary in every Wasp. If he had dumped his private finds on American religious opinion into a computer and cranked it up for response, the words could not have come back better. On the other hand, Aquarius had believed for years in ideas not altogether dissimilar. Once, tentatively, he too had undertaken the doubtful liberty to state in an interview what he thought of God. God, he had presumed to suggest, was an embattled vision: God had created man in order that man might fulfill God's vision, but His vision of the future was at war with other visions of existence in the universe. Some of those other visions were not only out in the stars, and in the galaxies, but were right here, intimate, on earth. God was, for instance, at war with the Devil. Certainly the Devil had a most detailed vision of existence very much opposed to His own. In any case, war had gone on for so long that nearly everything human was inextricably tangled. Heroism cohabited with technology. Was the Space Program admirable or abominable? Did God voyage out for NASA, or was the Devil our line of sight to the stars?

NASA. The word had derived from NACA—National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, which became the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, or NASA. It was an unhappy sound. Just think of NASA-ism. NASA would have no deliberate relation whatsoever to Nazi. But we are not a schizophrenic land



for nothing. Deep in the unconscious where each sound leaves first its murmur and then its roar at a combustion of hitherto unconnected meanings, NASA had to stand for something. You bet.

Listening to the jokes, Aquarius was still brooding about Nazism. For the philosophy of the Folk, detesting civilization, claiming to be in love with the primitive, had nonetheless killed millions of men in the most orderly technological fashion yet devised. Nazism had been not one philosophy, but two—and each philosophy was utterly opposed to the other. It was primitive, it was vertiginously advanced. It gave brave men a sense of nobility in their hearts—it had been utterly heartless. It spoke of clean futures and buried Germany (for a time!) in vomit and slime and swill. Now its ghosts were pacing on every battlement of every surviving palace, now its ghosts were bubbling in the tubes of every laboratory, burning in the wires. Nazism had been an assault upon the cosmos—why think of it as less? That is why it moved as the specter behind every civilized transaction. For it had said: civilization will stifle man unless man is delivered onto a new plane. Was space its amputated limb, its philosophy in orbit?

Now the speaker was telling a joke about a Texan in Alaska who had mixed up his respective missions with a woman and a bear. Big was the laugh from the audience. And out on the beaches and the causeways and riverbanks, another audience was waiting for the launch. America like a lazy beast in the hot dark was waiting for a hint in the ringing of the night, ~~Questions~~ END  
~~answered Aquarius. In the morning, the meeting would be~~  
~~up by four. An early start was necessary, for traffic on the road to~~  
~~the Press Site would be heavy.~~

iv

The two hours of sleep were more worthy of Atlas than Aquarius, for in his dreams he held up a portion of the State of Florida. Aquarius had been covering the moon shot from July first to this morning of the sixteenth. The mildest form of purgatory was to spend two weeks in a motel.

Everybody complained that the tension accompanying the preparations for Apollo 11 had been less than launchings in the

~~Check against the Property~~

*[Handwritten signature]*

Red & Mollie

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On the night before the launch of Apollo 11, in the heart of Brevard County, in that stretch which runs from Melbourne through Eau Gallie, and Cocoa, to Titusville, on the coastal strip from Patrick Air Force Base through Cocoa Beach and Cape Canaveral to the Cape Kennedy Air Force Station and above to



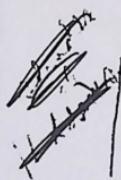
the Space Center and Launch Pad 39, through all that several hundred square miles of town and water and flat swampy waste of wilderness, through cultivated tropical gardens, and back roads by rivers lined with palms, through all the evening din of crickets, cicadas, beetles, bees, mosquitoes, grasshoppers and wasps some portion of a million people began to foregather on all the beaches and available islands and causeways and bridges and promontories which would give clear view of the flight from six miles and ten miles and fifteen miles away. Tomorrow most of them would need field glasses to follow the flight up from the pad and out of sight over the sea down a chain of Caribbean isles, but they would have a view—they knew tonight that if the skies were clear they would have their view because they were encamped only where the line of sight was unimpeded to Launch Pad 39 on the horizon. There one could certainly see Apollo 11 on her Saturn V, see her for seven, nine, eleven miles away; she was lit up. A play of giant arc lights, as voluminous in candlepower as the lights for an old-fashioned Hollywood premiere, was directed on the spaceship from every side. On U.S. 1 in Titusville, eleven miles from Cape Kennedy across Merritt Island and the Banana and Indian rivers, all that clear shot across the evening waters, at an artillery range of twenty thousand yards, two hundred football fields away, by an encampment of tourists up from southern Florida, Everglades, Miami, and the Keys; in from Tampa, and Orlando; down from Daytona, St. Augustine, Gainesville, and Jacksonville; come from Fort Myers and Fort Lauderdale, from Sarasota, St. Petersburg, Lakeland, Ocala and Tallahassee, come from all the towns of Georgia and points farther north and west as well as every itinerant camper in the area from all of the ambulatory camping-out families of the fifty states, and tourists down on economy flights for a week in cheap hot summer Florida and now slung out in the back seats of rented cars, on U.S. 1 in Titusville, in an encampment of every variety of camper, was a view of the spaceship across flat land and waters, and she looked like a shrine with the lights upon her. In the distance she glowed for all the world like some white stone Madonna in the mountains, welcoming footsore travelers at dusk. Perhaps it was an unforeseen game of the lighting, but America had not had its movie premieres for nothing, nor its Rockettes in Radio City and fifty million squares tooling the tourist miles over the years to Big Town to buy a ticket to spectacle and back home

again. If you were going to have a Hollywood premiere and arc lights, a million out to watch and a spaceship which looked across the evening flutter like the light on the Shrine of Our Lady outside any church in South Brooklyn or Bay Ridge, then by God you might just as well have this spectacle on the premiere trip to the moon. That deserved a searchlight or two! And the campers stared across the waters in their bivouac off Route 1 in Titusville, campers sat on the banks of the Indian River at twilight and waited for the tropical night to pass its hold on the hours.

There were new industries in America these years. After five decades of suspense movies, and movies of the Wild West, after the adventures of several generations of men in two world wars and Korea and Vietnam, after sixteen years of *Playboy* and American iconization of the gravity-defying breast and the sun-ripened buttock, after ten years of the greatest professional football, after a hundred years and more of a tradition that the frontier was open and would never close, and after twenty more perplexing technological years when prosperity came to nearly every White pocket, and technology put out its plastic, its superhighways, its supermarkets, its appliances, its suburbs, its smog, and its intimation that the frontier was damn shut, shut like a boulder on a rabbit burrow, America had erupted from this pressure between its love of adventure and its fear that adventure was not completely shut down; America had spewed out on the road. The country had become a nation of campers, of cars toting trailers, of cars pulling tent-trailers, of truck-campers, top-of-car tent packs, Volkswagen buses converted to ambulatory bedrooms, jeeps with Chic Sale houses built on the back, Land-Rovers with bunks, Broncos with more bunks—any way a man could get out of the house with his buddies or his family or his grandmother, and take to the road and find some ten by twenty feet of parking grass not posted, not tenanted, and not too muddy, he would camp. All over America in the summer the night fields were now filled with Americans sleeping on air mattresses which reposed on plastic cloth floors of plastic cloth tents—what a sweet smell of Corporate Chemical, what a vat and void to mix with all the balmy ferny chlorophylls and pollens of nature! America the Sanitary, and America the Wild, went out to sleep in the woods, Sanitary-Lobe and Wild-Lobe nesting together neatly, schizophrenic twins in the skull case of the good family American.



So they were out tonight, some portion of a million, all drawn on the lines of sight in Brevard County, and on every highway and causeway in the area the ground was covered with cars and campers, the shelter-roof extension of one family's tent near to topping the picnic blanket spread out behind the tailgate of the next station wagon, and the open trunk lid of a twelve- or fifteen-year-old Dodge convertible (rusty, top all rent, peeling friction tape and dirty white adhesive tape chasing a flap of a patch) stood next to both, part of the family sleeping in the trunk, the others with their good dirty feet out the windows. It was hardly just middle-class America here tonight, rather every echo of hard trade-union beer-binge paunch-gut-and-muscle, and lean whippy redneck honky-tonk clans out to bird-watch in the morning with redeye in the shot glass. There were tourists and not inelegant campers which spoke of peanut butter and jelly, watercress, and cucumber—suburban campers—but there was also the raw gasoline of expectation in the air, and families of poor Okies. One felt the whole South stirring on this night. Quiet pious Baptists, out somewhere on their porches (kin to some of the redneck and Okie—Okie for Okeechobee!—and working class here) seemed to be waiting over an arc of a thousand miles, certainly all the way from Cape Kennedy across Florida along the Gulf of Mexico to Houston and the Manned Spacecraft Center and back again, all across that belt of Fundamentalist piety, hot dry tempers burning like closed-up balefire against the humidity of the swamps, religion and lust to work their combat in the tropical nights, yes all over the South they had to be praying, yes even more than everywhere for the safety of this shot, the astronauts part of that family of concern which White Southerners could share with each other out of the sweet deep wells of their Christian hearts, what was left of them. It was not hard to have a vision of mothers and grandmothers looking like spinsters, silver-rimmed glasses to shield your skin from their eyes of burning faith, predictable turkey wattles on the neck: they would be praying for America tonight—thoughts of America served to replace the tender sense of the Virgin in Protestant hearts. And out here on the campgrounds of Brevard County, out on all the scorched shoulders and oil-coated grass of the available highway, were men getting ready to drink with their wives, middle-aged, green-eyed Southern mill workers with sunburned freckled skin, reddish hair, hard mechanic's muscles in their forearms, wife a



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trinity of worrying mother, fattening slattern, and give-me-a-drink-and-I'll-holler-happy sort of bitch. Dutiful work, devotion to family and property, their sloven property! mingy propriety, real raucous bust-outs—that sort of South, married out of high school, oats half-sown like three quarters of all America over thirty, and their boys on the hunt through the encampment looking for opposite numbers, other boys or—Gods of fornication with them!—girls without bank locks on their bloomers. You can expect nothing less on a night so filled with heat, human meat, bubbles of fear, prayer soft as love, and tropical sex in every sauce. And that mill worker with red hair and gray-green eyes, red sunburn, red peeling skin on his knotty forearms—he could be an astronaut in another life. He looks like an older version of Neil Armstrong, maybe, he looks like some of them, like Gordon Cooper for sure, or Deke Slayton, or Walt Cunningham of Apollo 7, yeah, the mill worker is tonight an American all drenched in pride and fear and sorrow—his wild rebel yell guaranteed to diminish each year, is riding the range with awe tonight. He has worked with machines all his life, he has tooled cars to the point where he has felt them respond to his care, he has known them and slept beside them as trustingly as if they were hunting dogs, he knows a thousand things about the collaboration between a man and a machine, and he knows what can go wrong. Machines—all the old machines he has known—are as unreasonable as people. And here, tomorrow, going up three men of whom he could have been one if he had a) not been a drunken fool half his life b) not married young c) had an education d) had twice as many guts and e) been full of real luck rather than cursed family luck, could have been going up with them in a machine with millions of parts, eighty percent electronics which he does not put his hand to, no grease, nut, wrench and arm in electronics. Yes, could have been going up in a machine no man could ever sleep next to, or trust, not a machine with millions of parts, and ten million fingers worked on them—how much evil, error and deception in millions of fingers?—he is thinking of his wife, why she alone when drunk and in full lunatic cohabitation with the all-out rays of the full moon was a hundred thousand fingers of evil herself! and his bowels come near to dropping out of him with awe at the daring of the act in the morning. He has spent his life with machines, they are all he has ever trusted with affectionate trust for he has had a nose for their treacheries (more than he can



say for women), and now, twelve hours from now, in the full light of nine-thirty in the morning, that Apollo-Saturn is going to go up. He will see a world begin where machines are king and he does not know whether to cry from pride or the all-out ache that he does not really comprehend the new machinery.

And the wife sipping the booze, hot and much too funky is her flesh on this hot night, listening to transistor radio Red has bought her, is moony and full of tears at the heroism of male craziness tomorrow. She wishes—floodgates of middle-age sorrow—some crack of that holy lightning in her womb: too late now! and trying to love up a warmth for Red, married all these nineteen years, she rears up on the very pinpoint of spite. She has powers, her family has powers, there's Indian blood in both her grandmas, and bruises, sorrows, slights, and nights of the loveliest now lost in the disappearing wahoo of studs she will never see again, our redneck Molly abloom in this encampment, she thinks on that pinpoint of spite of a curse she could put and will not on the launch tomorrow. For if Saturn were ever to burst and explode—she sees the flames across the sky: All witch and bitch on a holiday, such pictures encourage the lapping of gentle waters in her. Whereas putting wax on the tip of the needle, and capping the curse, leaves dull lead in her chest. Not to mention the future woman troubles of her gut. She stoppers the bottle and looks on a slant at Red—there'll be an angle soon by which to pick a fight.

And men and women, tired from work and travel, sat in their cars and sat outside their cars on aluminum pipe and plastic-webbing folding chairs, and fanned themselves, and looked across the miles at the shrine. Out a car window projected the sole of a dirty foot. The big toe pointed straight up to Heaven in parallel to Saturn V.

## iii

Aquarius passes these sights like a stranger. He feels in such surroundings a foreigner equally as much as he feels American. It is his country, but he merely traverses it. His feet do not take root.

Studying the encampments on the roadside this plump and burgeoning night, he is thinking of the party he has attended at

*Action*

Some Origins of the Fire

Of a Fire on the Moon

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He remembered the questions he had asked in the VAB. How would they destroy the rocket if something went wrong? Why a longitudinal set of explosives lined up, as if in the seam of a tin can, would burst the stages. The belly of the rocket would open like a Caesarian. A flood of burning fuel would burst into the sky.

*This is Apollo-Saturn Launch Control. We've passed the eleven-minute mark. Now T minus 10 minutes 54 seconds on our countdown for Apollo 11.*

*Aquarius*

He began to look for a place from which to watch. The grandstand had a roof which would obstruct the view once the rocket was high in the air. But, standing on the field, he felt a hint too low. Finally he took up a careful position a few steps from the ground in a wing of additional bleachers. He was still not properly ready for the spectacle. Yes, the future spoke of a human species which would live on diets and occasional feasts, and would travel to spectacles to feel extraordinary sensations. They might even look at photographs of starving Black faces in order to generate some of their deepest thoughts.

But he knew now why he was so irritated with everything and why he could not feel a thing. It was simple masculine envy. He too wanted to go up in the bird.

~~This is Apollo-Saturn Launch Control. We've passed the six-minute mark in our countdown for Apollo 11. Now 5 minutes 52 seconds and counting. Spacecraft Test Conductor Skip Chauvin now has completed the status check of his personnel in the control room. All report they are GO for the mission. Launch Operations Manager Paul Donnelly reports GO for launch. Launch Director Rocco Petrone gives a GO. We're 5 minutes 20 seconds and counting. We took a good look at Eagle, and it looks good. The Spacecraft Test Conductor for the Lunar Module reported that Eagle was GO. The swing-arm now coming back to its fully retracted position as our countdown continues. T minus 4 minutes 50 seconds and counting. Skip Chauvin informing the astronauts that the swing-arm now coming back.~~

Nobody was talking a great deal. If something went wrong, they would all be implicated. Who would know which evil had

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P.C.



entered the ripe oven of space technology? Aquarius took note of himself. Yes, his throat was dry.

We're now passing the four-minute 30-second mark in the countdown—still GO at this time. Four minutes 15 seconds—the Test Supervisor now has informed Launch-Vehicle Test Conductor Norm Carlson you are GO for launch. We're now hitting the four-minute mark. Four minutes and counting. ~~We are GO for Apollo 11. We'll go on an automatic sequence at 3 minutes and 7 seconds. Three minutes 45 seconds and counting. In the final abort checks between several key members of the crew here in the Control Center and the astronauts,~~ Launch Operations Manager Paul Donnelly wished the crew on behalf of the launch team "Good luck and God-speed." Three minutes 25 seconds and counting. We're still GO at this time. ~~We'll be coming up on the automatic sequence in about 10 or 15 seconds from this time.~~ All still GO at this time. Neil Armstrong reported back when he received the good wishes, "Thank you very much. We know it will be a good flight." Firing command coming in now. We are on the automatic sequence. We're approaching the three-minute mark in the count. T minus 3 minutes and counting. T minus 3—we are GO with all elements of the mission at this time.

He had his binoculars to his eyes. A tiny part of him was like a penitent who had prayed in the wilderness for sixteen days and was now expecting a sign. Would the sign reveal much or little?

~~... all is still GO as we monitor our status for it. Two minutes 10 seconds and counting. The target for the Apollo 11 astronauts, the moon. At lift-off we'll be at a distance of 218,096 miles away. Just passed the two-minute mark in the countdown. T minus 1 minute 54 seconds and counting. Our status board indicates that the oxidizer tanks in the second and third stages now have pressurized. We continue to build up pressure in all three stages here at the last minute to prepare for lift-off. T minus 1 minute 35 seconds on the Apollo mission, the flight that will land the first man on the moon. All indications coming in to the Control Center at this time indicate we are GO. One minute 25 seconds and counting. Our status board indicates the third stage completely pressurized.~~

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*Eighty-second mark has now been passed. We'll go on full internal power at the fifty-second mark in the countdown. Guidance system goes on internal at 17 seconds leading up to the ignition sequence at 8.9 seconds. We're approaching the sixty-second mark on the Apollo 11 mission. T minus 60 seconds and counting. We have passed T minus 60. Fifty-five seconds and counting. Neil Armstrong just reported back, "It's been a real smooth countdown." We have passed the fifty-second mark. Forty seconds away from the Apollo 11 lift-off. All the second-stage tanks now pressurized. Thirty-five seconds and counting. We are still GO with Apollo 11. Thirty seconds and counting. Astronauts reported, "Feels good." T minus 25 seconds. Twenty seconds and counting. T minus 15 seconds, guidance is internal, 12, 11, 10, 9, ignition sequence start, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, zero, all engines running, LIFT-OFF. We have a lift-off, 32 minutes past the hour. Lift-off on Apollo 11.*

But nobody watching the launch from the Press Site ever listened to the last few words. For at 8.9 seconds before lift-off, the motors of Apollo-Saturn leaped into ignition, and two horns of orange fire burst like genies from the base of the rocket. Aquarius never had to worry again about whether the experience would be appropriate to his measure. Because of the distance, no one at the Press Site was to hear the sound of the motors until fifteen seconds after they had started. Although the rocket was restrained on its pad for nine seconds in order for the motors to multiply up to full thrust, the result was still that the rocket began to rise a full six seconds before its motors could be heard. Therefore the lift-off itself seemed to partake more of a miracle than a mechanical phenomenon, as if all of huge Saturn itself had begun silently to levitate, and was then pursued by flames.

No, it was more dramatic than that. For the flames were enormous. No one could be prepared for that. Flames flew in cataract against the cusp of the flame shield, and then sluiced along the paved ground down two opposite channels in the concrete, two underground rivers of flame which poured into the air on either side a hundred feet away, then flew a hundred feet further. Two mighty torches of flame like the wings of a yellow bird of fire flew over a field, covered a field with brilliant yellow bloomings of flame, and in the midst of it, white as a ghost, white as the white of Melville's Moby Dick, white as the shrine of the



Madonna in half the churches of the world, this slim angelic mysterious ship of stages rose without sound out of its incarnation of flame and began to ascend slowly into the sky, slow as Melville's Leviathan might swim, slowly as we might swim upward in a dream looking for the air. And still no sound.

Then it came, like a crackling of wood twigs over the ridge, came with the sharp and furious bark of a million drops of oil crackling suddenly into combustion, a cacophony of barks louder and louder as Apollo-Saturn fifteen seconds ahead of its own sound cleared the lift tower to a cheer which could have been a cry of anguish from that near-audience watching; then came the earsplitting bark of a thousand machine guns firing at once, and Aquarius shook through his feet at the fury of this combat assault, and heard the thunderous murmur of Niagaras of flame roaring conceivably louder than the loudest thunders he had ever heard and the earth began to shake and would not stop, it quivered through his feet standing on the wood of the bleachers, an apocalyptic fury of sound equal to some conception of the sound of your death in the roar of a drowning hour, a nightmare of sound, and he heard himself saying, "Oh, my God! oh, my God! oh, my God! oh, my God! oh, my God! oh, my God! oh, my God!" ~~but not his voice, almost like the Italian girl saying "fenomenal,"~~ and the sound of the rocket beat with the true blood of fear in his ears, hot in all the intimacy of a forming of heat, as if one's ear were in the caldron of a vast burning of air, heavens of oxygen being born and consumed in this ascension of the rocket, and a poor moment of vertigo at the thought that man now had something with which to speak to God—the fire was white as a torch and long as the rocket itself, a tail of fire, a face, yes now the rocket looked like a thin and pointed witch's hat, and the flames from its base were the blazing eyes of the witch. Forked like saw teeth was the base of the flame which quivered through the lens of the binoculars. Upwards. As the rocket keened over and went up and out to sea, one could no longer watch its stage, only the flame from its base. Now it seemed to rise like a ball of fire, like a new sun mounting the sky, a flame elevating itself.

Many thousands of feet up it went through haze and the fire feathered the haze in a long trailing caress, intimate as the wake which follows the path of a fingerling in inches of water. Trailings of cloud parted like lips. Then a heavier cloud was punched

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through with sudden cruelty. Then two long spumes of wake, like two large fish following our first fish—one's heart took little falls at the changes. "Ahhh," the crowd went, "Ahhh," as at the most beautiful of fireworks, for the sky was alive, one instant a pond and at the next a womb of new turns: "Ahhh," went the crowd, "Ahhh!"

Now, through the public address system, came the sound of Armstrong talking to Launch Control. He was quieter than anyone else. "Inboard cutoff" he said with calm in his voice.

Far in the distance, almost out of sight, like an all-but-transparent fish suddenly breaking into head and tail, the first stage at the rear of the rocket fell off from the rest, fell off and was now like a man, like a sky diver suddenly small. A new burst of motors started up, some far-off glimpse of newborn fires which looked pale as streams of water, pale were the flames in the far distance. Then the abandoned empty stage of the booster began to fall away, a relay runner, baton just passed, who slips back, slips back. Then it began to tumble, but with the slow tender dignity of a thin slice of soap slicing and wavering, dipping and gliding on its way to the floor of the tub. Then mighty Saturn of the first stage, empty, fuel-voided, burned out, gave a puff, a whiff and was lost to sight behind a cloud. And the rocket with Apollo 11 and the last two stages of Saturn V was finally out of sight and on its way to an orbit about the earth. Like the others he stayed and listened to the voices of the astronauts and the Capcom through the P.A. system.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICER: *At 3 minutes, downrange 70 miles, 43 miles high, velocity 9,300 feet per second.*

ARMSTRONG: *We've got skirts up.*

CAPSULE COMMUNICATOR: *Roger, we confirm. Skirts up.*

ARMSTRONG: *Tower is gone.*

CAPCOM: *Roger, tower.*

PAO: *Neil Armstrong confirming separation and the launch escape tower separation.*

ARMSTRONG: *Houston be advised the visual is GO today.*

On the way back to Cocoa Beach there was a monumental traffic jam, and Aquarius had time to look at objects by the road. There was a parked trailer with a twelve-foot inflated rubber



rocket—it looked like a condom with a painted tip. Down its length ran a legend.

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The radio was playing in the car. Fred Something-or-other from the Titusville Chamber of Commerce was talking fast. "And when the folks who were visiting this launch here go home, I want them to tell everybody how beautiful it was from Titusville."

"Folks," said an announcer, "get in on the Apollo 11 Blast-off Sale." The radio had lost no time.

America—his country. An empty country filled with wonders. Aquarius did not know how he felt. He was happy all afternoon and went surfboarding for the first time, not even displeased that it was harder than he thought to stand up.

In the evening he left Cocoa Beach to fly back to Houston where he would cover the trip to the moon and back. On the flight, everybody was drunk, and the hostesses were flip and hippy and could have been drinking themselves. The Southern businessmen were beaming.

In the late edition he brought with him, Aquarius read that the Reverend Abernathy together with a few poor families had watched the launching from the VIP area, after making a request of Dr. Thomas O. Paine, Administrator of NASA, for special badges. "If it were possible for us not to push the button tomorrow and solve the problems with which you are concerned, we would not push the button," Dr. Paine said.

Answered the Reverend Abernathy after the launch, "This is really holy ground. And it will be more holy once we feed the hungry, care for the sick, and provide for those who do not have houses."

Aquarius thought more than once of how powerful the vision of Apollo-Saturn must have been for the leader of the Poor People's Crusade. Doubtless he too had discovered that his feet were forced to shake. However, Aquarius was not yet ready to call this hallowed ground. For all he knew, Apollo-Saturn was still a child of the Devil. Yet if it was, then all philosophers flaming in orbit, the Devil was beautiful indeed. Or rather, was the Devil so beautiful because all of them, Johnsons, Goldwaters, Paines, Abernathys, press grubs and grubby Aquarius, were nothing but devils themselves. For the notion that man voyaged out to fulfill the desire of God was either the heart of the vision, or anathema to that true angel in Heaven they would violate by the fires of their ascent. A ship of flames was on its way to the moon.



July '69

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## CHAPTER 4

# The Greatest Week

IF lift-off had just provided him with sensations not unlike the very mania of apocalypse, the ensuing flat heat of Houston on his return, the oppression of Nassau Bay off NASA Highway 1 ~~this night in July~~ came into his lungs with the smell of a burnt-out tire. He plummeted into a profound depression. Everything was wrong. ~~Having succored at the red velvet king sized bed in the snappy motel off the highway, he now discovered that he was not to have it again.~~ In the avalanche of reporters and corporation representatives who descended on the Texas plain near Manned Spacecraft Center to be near the collective brain which would pilot the flight, he, miserable sophisticate from the East, had somehow suffered a missed accommodation—as agreeable under the circumstances as a slipped disc—and was forced to camp out in the boondocks: in this case, a buried little basement apartment, one-room-with-kitchenette, furnished in convalescent spaced-out colors of dead gray, dull brown, dishwater white, and bargain-furniture green. ~~You may be certain he missed the motel! The apartment had dingy Venetian blinds, plastic of course. Each time he tilted the slats to a new angle of admission of light, the blinds gave an oooong of sound which went without pause into the Graves Registration Department of his depressed psyche. Still he kept working the slats. At least it gave him power over some dimension of his environment.~~

It was one thing to be without ego; quite another to indulge this new modesty in mean quarters. Like many men who lived comfortably for years, he had always taken it for granted that he was superior to his surroundings and could dwell anywhere. Well, maybe one could still dwell anywhere with love, but loveless this week he was obliged to recognize that his basement apartment installed in an interlocking layout of ranch-style apartments, inner patios

and underground garages was no place for him to thrive. Not on this job. If he had become a little obsessed with the meanings of a trip to the moon—going on now full attraction into its first night and second day and second night while he languished in his dun coop—if he had come to recognize that the more one brooded on this trip, the more fantastic it became, there was still the thundering and most depressing fact that it was a cancer bud for a journalist to cover. There were assignments <sup>which</sup> ~~that~~ could make a reporter happy—he sometimes thought it would be impossible for a good quick-working novelist to be unable to write a decent piece about a political convention or a well-organized anarchy of the modern young. Give Aquarius a great heavyweight championship fight, and he would give you a two-volume work. There was so much to say. One's senses threatened to sear one's brain with excess of perception. The people at the center of such events nourished you with the tragicomedy of the traps they entered and sometimes escaped. But in NASA-land, the only thing open was the technology—the participants were so overcome by the magnitude of their venture they seemed to consider personal motivation as somewhat obscene. He had never before encountered as many people whose modest purr of efficiency apparently derived from being cogs in a machine—was this the perspective of the century to come or was this the end of a long and insane road?

He did not know, and the fact that he did not know depressed him further. Usually when one did a journalistic piece, the events fit in advance into some part of one's picture of the world. Most interesting about such events was the way they obliged you to make modest or delightful adjustments in the picture. Or even grim adjustments. But you did not have to contemplate throwing the picture away. Aquarius, now plucked up from the circus bonanza and flaming cathedrals of lift-off, was in Houston dropped smack into the fact that the best way to do the rest of the damnable story was probably to go home and cover the works by television. He simply did not feel himself coming closer in Houston to the value or horror of the oncoming achievement; he did not see that there was any way to come closer. Occasionally, which is to say, five or six times a day, he would drive over to the Press Center at MSC on the other side of the highway, and skulk around the movie theater with the marcelled ceiling. When there



was)

(no press conference on—and usually there wasn't—he would look at a blank screen and listen to talk on the squawk box go back and forth between the Capcom and the spacecraft, the astronauts' voices wiped as clean of emotion as a corncob shucked of kernels. In the interim, distances increased. When he got back to Houston that first night, they were fourteen hours out, so their journey had already covered sixty-six thousand nautical miles! All that while he had been surf-boarding, celebrating, and then flying back from Melbourne, Florida, to Intercontinental Airport at Houston. Indeed the astronauts even covered another five thousand miles in the hour it took Aquarius to drive his rented car the fifty-odd miles from the airport through Houston, to Nassau Bay on the other side of town. Next afternoon, thirty hours into their flight, they were over one hundred and twenty thousand land miles out, and their speed had reduced to thirty-five hundred miles an hour. Their voices were of course the same. It did not matter whether they spoke from three miles away or one hundred and thirty-three thousand miles away, the hard peasant facts upon which Aquarius' education had been built, the consciousness that numbers were real units, hard as hours of work and miles one walked, now had to be discarded into some waste-nexus of the mind, some stink of the unusable like the Jersey flats. The real fact was that distance was now an abstract concept; men performing brave and heroic acts were communing over radio whatever the distance. The absence of simple human witness was the fact, not the distance. Sitting in the movie theater, he realized he would find out nothing he desired to know. Yet back of the movie theater was the Newsroom, now jammed with men, rows of desks fifty feet long, hundreds of typewriters, hundreds of phones, hundreds of soft-links in shirt-sleeves transmitting the information which came in at one end of the communication belt from all the publicity pipes in NASA and would soon go out on the other end after all the news-transmitters (human) had retyped the words. Milling through this matrix were forty or fifty men with portable tape recorders and microphones with radio call letters which looked like branding irons. They were always shoving these branding irons in your face, Australian blokes, Swiss blokes, Italian jokers, Japanese gentlemen, Norwegian asthma sufferers, French dudes, Swedish students, even Texas local radio station apprentices. They wanted to

interview Aquarius. Aquarius, three weeks habituated to his new uncomfortable racket! Aquarius, Doctor of Rocketry! He said no. He who had once thought he had only to get on all the radio and television available and he would be able to change the world, now wished only to flee this room with its hundreds of journalists, some so bored and aimless they even wished to interview him, he who now had nothing to say. The latest in the quintessential ironies of his life is that he had become a celebrity at precisely the hour when he ceased to desire it. Oh, what a depression!

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Events kept passing him by. ~~A number of future moon~~ had been written in anticipation of the moment when the astronauts would pass behind the moon. Having turned the spacecraft around to go tailfirst, they would then fire the propulsion motor on the Service Module. That would brake the speed of the flight, and put them in orbit. Since they would be out of radio communication when it happened, no one would know for the next half hour if the burn had been successful, not until they came around the invisible side of the lunar sphere and their antennae were in unobstructed line with the earth again. It promised to offer excitement. Would the motor start? Or were there lunar emanations no physicist had ever conceived?

Actually, Aquarius was bored. Sitting in the Manned Spacecraft Center movie theater, he noticed that the Fire was also bored, for few were listening to the squawk box. They all knew the burn would succeed and Apollo would go into proper orbit. There seemed no question of failure, and indeed the burn and the re-acquisition of radio communication went on schedule. Aquarius could detect surly traces in himself, as if he were annoyed at the moon—it should not be so simple to trespass its zones. He was, of course, no longer thinking in any way—what passed for thought were the dull whirring of his depression about as functional to real intellectual motion as the turning over of a starter when the battery is dead. In fact he could not forgive the astronauts their resolute avoidance of a heroic posture. It was

*Some* how improper for a hero to be without flamboyance *as if* such modesty deprived his supporters of any large pleasure



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*Pleasure*  
in his victories. What joy might be found in a world which would have no hope of a Hemingway? Or nearest matters first, of a Joe Namath, or Cassius Clay, Jimmy Dean, Dominguin?—it was as if the astronauts were there to demonstrate that heroism's previous relation to romance had been highly improper—it was technology and the absence of emotion which were the only fit mates for the brave. Yesterday, or one of the days which had already become interleaved in the passage of time at Dun Cove, he had read a newspaper story where Armstrong's wife, Jan, had been quoted: "What we can't understand, we fear." Even the ladies of brave men spoke like corporation executives on this job. His heart went dull at the thought of the total take-over implicit in the remark, so neat, so ambitious, so world-vaulting in its assumption that sooner or later everything would be understood—"I paid a trip to death, and death is a pleasant place and ready for us to come in and renovate it." Abruptly Aquarius realized that for years he had thought of death as located in the milieu of the moon, as if our souls, those of us who died with one, might lift and rise, be free of the law of gravity and on trajectory to the satellite of the craters. Yes, wouldn't it be in the purview of the Wasp, damn corporate Wasp, to disturb the purloins of the dead? He did not know. His thoughts were always furthest out when he was most depressed, as though like a bird half drowned, the only way to lift was by the wildest beating of wings.

The real heroism, he thought, was to understand, and because one understood, be even more full of fear at the enormity of what one understood, yet at that moment continue to be ready for the feat one had decided it was essential to perform. So Julien Sorel had been brave when he kissed Madame de Rênal, and Jimmy Dean been brave in *Rebel Without a Cause*, and Namath when he mocked the Baltimore Colts knowing the only visions he would arouse in his enemy were visions of murder. So had Cassius Clay been brave—to dare to be rude to Liston—and Floyd Patterson brave to come back to boxing after terrible humiliation, and Hemingway conceivably brave to continue to write in short sentences after being exposed to the lividities of the literary world.

But the astronauts, brave men, proceeded on the paradoxical principle that fear once deposed by knowledge would make bravery redundant. It was in the complacent assumption that the universe was no majestic mansion of architectonics out there between evil and nobility, or

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strife on a darkling plain, but rather an ultimately benign field of investigation which left Aquarius in the worst of his temper.

Next morning came the news of Teddy Kennedy's accident at Chappaquiddick. Dead was the young lady who had been driving with him. How subtle was the voice of the moon. Aquarius remembered a speech Kennedy had given two months earlier at Clark University in Worcester. Mrs. Robert H. Goddard, widow of the father of American rocketry, had been there, and Buzz Aldrin as well. Kennedy had urged that future space funds be moved over to such problems as poverty, hunger, pollution and housing. The chill which came back from NASA was as cold as the architecture at the Manned Spacecraft Center. "We won't be including this item in the daily news reports we send up to the Apollo 10 astronauts on their voyage to the moon," Thomas O. Paine, administrator of NASA had said. Now the reverberations of this accident at Chappaquiddick went off in Aquarius' brain. As happens so often when a motive is buried, Aquarius felt excitement around the hollows of his depression. For the blow to the fortunes of the Kennedys was also a blow to one hundred interesting possibilities in American life. The accident was of such benefit to Richard Nixon that the Devil himself if he had designed the mishap (which is what every liberal Democrat must secretly believe) could have awarded himself a medal for the artistry, yet there was at least a suggestion that the moon had thought to speak. Perhaps that was why there was still a trace of stimulation in the gloom—magic might not be altogether dead.

The day went by, a cloudy day in southeastern Texas. From time to time, Aquarius checked in at the Press Center. ~~Excitement was now divided between Kennedy and the moon. Or was Kennedy even more interesting?~~ The separate phases of the preparation for landing were mainly without high tension. Indeed the Lem was unlocked from the Command Module while both were behind the moon. When they came around and signals were picked up again, the voice of Armstrong came over the squawk box. "The Eagle has wings," he said, or was it Aldrin who said it? ~~there was discussion on this~~ ~~mark was universally quotable.~~ Yet the happy buzz of conversation among the reporters at the thought of the oncoming climax was dampened considerably by the dialogue which followed:



CAPCOM: . . . Coming at you with a DOI pad. 101361-407981 minus 00758 plus all balls plus 00098 plus corrections 00572 perigee plus 00085 00764 030000293 986 minus 00759 plus all balls plus 00090 rest of the pad is NA. Stand by on your read-back. If you are ready to copy the PDI data, I have it for you. Over.

ALDRIN: . . . Go ahead with the PDI.

CAPCOM: Roger. PDI pad, PIG 102330436 0950 minus 00021 182287000 plus 56919—

So one got ready for the climax of the greatest week since Christ was born. An hour and twenty minutes later, the Lem having flown around the moon and gone behind it again, the braking burn for the Descent Orbit Initiation would be begun in radio silence. An hour later the final ignition for the final descent would commence. Aquarius, bereft of personal radar or gyroscope, bereft even of the sniff-sensors of his poor journalistic nose, wandered from point to point in the Press Center, rushed back to Dun Cove to look at color television—there were no color sets in the Press Room—then, bored with listening to commentators, and finally incapable of witnessing the event alone, went back to the movie theater and settled in with about a hundred other reporters for the last half hour.

Phrases came through the general static of the public address system. "Eagle looking great. You're go," came through, and statements of altitude. "You're go for landing, over!" "Roger, understand. Go for landing. 3000 feet." "We're go, hang tight, we're go. 2000 feet." So the voices came out of the box. Somewhere a quarter of a million miles away, ten years of engineering and training, a thousand processes and a million parts, a huge swatch out of twenty-five billion dollars and a hovering of machinery were preparing to go through the funnel of a historical event whose significance might yet be next to death itself, and the reporters who would interpret this information for the newsprint readers of the world were now stirring in polite if mounting absorption with the calm cryptic technological voices which came droning out of the box. Was it like that as one was waiting to be born? Did one wait in a modern room with strangers while numbers were announced—"Soul 77-48-16—you are on call. Proceed to Staging Area CX—at 16:04 you will be conceived."

So the words came. And the moon came nearer. "3½ down, 220 feet, 13 forward, 11 forward, coming down

nicely. 200 feet,  $4\frac{1}{2}$  down.  $5\frac{1}{2}$  down. 160,  $6\frac{1}{2}$  down.  $5\frac{1}{2}$  down. 9 forward. 5 percent. Quantity light. 75 feet. Things looking good. Down a half. 6 forward."

"Sixty seconds," said another voice.

Was that a reference to fuel? Had that been the Capcom? Or was it Aldrin or Armstrong? Who was speaking now? The static was a presence. The voice was almost dreamy. Only the thinnest reed of excitement quivered in the voice.

"Lights on. Down  $2\frac{1}{2}$ . Forward. Forward. Good. 40 feet. Down  $2\frac{1}{2}$ . Picking up some dust. 30 feet,  $2\frac{1}{2}$  down. Faint shadow. 4 forward. 4 forward. Drifting to the right a little. 6 . . . down a half."

Another voice said, "Thirty seconds." Was that thirty seconds of fuel? A modest stirring of anticipation came up from the audience.

"Drifting right. Contact light. Okay," said the voice as even as before, "engine stop. ACA out of detente. Modes control both auto, descent engine command override, off. Engine arm, off. 413 is in."

A cry went up, half jubilant, half confused. Had they actually landed?

The Capcom spoke: "We copy you down, Eagle." But it was a question.

"Houston, Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed." It was Armstrong's voice, the quiet voice of the best boy in town, the one who pulls you drowning from the sea and walks off before you can offer a reward. The Eagle has landed—it reached the Press. They burst into applause. It was the kind of applause you used to hear in the packed film houses of the Thirties when the movie came over the hill of the last reel, and you heard the doctor say the star would live after the operation. Now, a small bedlam of actions began, some of the Press sprinting from the room—could they pretend it was necessary to phone the City Desk?—others talking to each other in babble, others still listening to the squawk box as technology took up again. A few minutes later: "Eagle. Houston. You loaded R2 wrong. We want 10254."

"Roger—that is V horizontal 5515.2."

"That's affirmative."

Aquarius discovered he was happy. There was a man on the moon. There were two men on the moon. It was a new feeling, absolutely without focus for him. If he felt a faint graveling on the surface of this sentiment, a curdle of emotional skin which formed from his effort to ad-



(advance)

heroes he could not find altogether admirable, still he knew he had been dislocated as profoundly by the experience as the moment he learned in the fathers' waiting room at the hospital that his first child had indeed and actually just been born. "Well, think of that," he had said. What a new fact! Real as the presence of immanence and yet not located at all, not yet, not in the comfortable quarters one afforded for the true and real facts of ~~the~~ life ~~of the~~ brain.

"Let's go interview the wives," someone suggested. And Aquarius, grateful for an opportunity to try a few journalistic tools, was happily off and away from the reign of the Capcom, the squawk box, and the abstract incubated existence of brand-new Tranquility Base.

## iii

The Armstrong house was modest, with a high-pitched roof of brown shingles. It was a house like half a million other houses in suburbs combining modern and brand-new traditional style. It had hints of an English country inn, for it was a dark-colored warren with small windows and long eaves. Yet the house was situated on a street whose curve had come from no meandering cow but from favorable indices on graphs which showed the relation of income to cost for planned curved-development streets as opposed to planned straight-development streets. El Lago—the name of this suburb—like those others named Kingston and Timber Cove and Nassau Bay—was a soft checkerboard of carefully bent little avenues which ran at reasonable approximations of right angles into other paved prospects, a street occasionally dead-ending, a street just as occasionally completing a full circle. The realty layout-computer in its wisdom for random play in home-road curvature had designed the layout logic so comprehensively, so ready to take into account the variety of desire-factors expressed by consumer dweller-groups oriented in at these precise income-purchase levels, that the effect—what a blow to the goodwill of the progressive designer who had doubtless opted for just once let's have something better!—was as agreeable and sterile to the eye as a model department store living room for brides on a medium-high budget layaway.

What a curious scene then! This moderately undulated

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street of angled plots and recently constructed private homes, this curved asphalt bordered by trees of the same year of growth, with vista of cars parked in garages, air conditioners, lawn mowers, sprinklers and bicycles, a street in which five children and two adults on foot might be seen on any average hour of the day, what a shock down the block to the habituated eye to see that gaggle of Press all straining at a rope, TV men and still photographers in their customary war for position with word-men—the crush now fortified by the more curious neighbors, Texas grandmothers in the main with gray-greenish eyes, tight not unintelligent mouths, small-town grits in the anticipation, and a real Texas bone-and-leather use of elbows to fight their leading toe in for position against this invasion of hippie journalist gogglers and foreigners with cameras, beards, sideburns, Nehru jackets, turtlenecks, love beads, medallions, shades, tape recorders and foreign tongues, Japs talking to Japs, Germans to Germans, an Italian to other Italians and all the Scandinavians come to NASA-land in El Lago. "I'm an American!" cried out one full vigor of a gray-haired Texas female being pushed off the frontier by one ham-hock and handlebar of an English ruddy.

There would have been small mayhem, but Jan Armstrong came out then, escorted by an official who treated her with the kind of gravity reserved for the Pope's sister. She was laughing and smiling, she was obviously very happy as she stepped on a raised platform behind the rope. The platform was about a yard square and a foot high, set out for her probably by the television men, and it may have been the color of its candy-pink carpet reflecting pink and violet and delicate rose hues on her healthy skin, but she was an attractive sight on the overcast Sunday afternoon. She was a woman one would not normally have thought of as beautiful, her hair almost gray and close-cropped, her mouth while full of strong was without coquetry or that hint of duplicity

so attractive in a woman for the implicit suggestion that a real man could ever set her straight. No, her mouth spoke of the stubborn and the steadfast, and she was dressed in no remarkable fashion, she had on a white blouse buttoned at the neck and an orange-red skirt. She had a Scotch nose, strong, not small, not delicate in nostril, the wings cut with determination, ~~the tip of the nose showing a hint of two lobes~~, she had in all the sort of face one sees in the best of small-town schoolteachers or in



librarians

that complete statement in the features of deep and dedicated strength, so she possessed in this hour a beautiful face, it was radiant—the word could finally be employed—the face was utterly separated from the planned street and the media men surrounding her with their microphones, the face lifted up to that moment in the past when she had directed her strength and her will to one goal, and the goal was now fulfilled—few faces are more beautiful than the dedicated when their deepest hour is in, when the plan utters its first word aloud, and the word is “yes.” So no question could bother her at this instant. If she had a reputation for being shy, grim, a swimming instructor, a phys ed teacher, a churchgoer, a conformist, a humorless embodiment of the space frontier in female form, she was now on top of it all, she was in rollicking good humor from the release of that safe landing.

“Will you let the children stay up and watch the moon walk tonight?” asked a journalist.

A devil came into her eye. “I don’t care for what they do,” she said with happy idiom, a grammar from the universal interior of the nation, not Midwestern, not Texan, by now from anywhere in there.

The questions went on. She laughed happily at their absurdity. She could not make a mistake. “Is this the greatest moment of your life?” asked one of the voices.

“No, sir,” said her shining face, “when I was married, it was the greatest moment of my life.”

They had known each other for three years before they had their first date, they had lived soon after their marriage in a cabin in the mountains with no plumbing, he would wave the wings of the test planes he flew as he burned through the sky over their house. It was a marriage of piano duets and long solo flights in gliders; the death of their only daughter, age three, came from a tumor of the brain. Aquarius hated to comprehend marriages by such contradictory details picked up on the fly, but these details promised to fit, they spoke of the serious physician’s daughter from Illinois, and the dream-absorbed boy with the lonely face of early photographs, the boy whose family moved a dozen times when he was young in Ohio. He had worked for a pharmacy at forty cents an hour to earn the nine dollars an hour for flying lessons. Would the relation of husband and wife to each other be so very different from Armstrong’s relation to the sky? Everything about Armstrong suggested that he would be happiest in the sky, that surf of space where intimations of

a language few could speak might hover on the changing of a cloud.

"Are you pleased with the Sea of Tranquility as a place to land?" asked a questioner.

She liked Tranquility Base. It was obvious the word was agreeable. For those who have been living in dread, tranquility is grace, the very decency of ecstasy.

"What are you having for dinner tonight? Space food?"

She threw back her head like a mare so happy with the day she can support any rider, "No, sir," she said and left it there, proper for NASA and the team, but the glint in her eye had its own look, "We ain't quite so square as you think us, Mister Reporter," said the unvoiced look.

Another few questions and the NASA representative at her elbow returned her to the house. The Press was off to cars and TV vans, the ride was on to find the Collins home and the Aldrin house, each a block from the other, but back in Nassau Bay itself, back in another soft check-board of curves at right angles to the interesection of other curves, a suburb built even closer to men's occupations in buildings with windowless walls.

Pat Collins was another woman in another state. She was conventionally good-looking with the sort of attractive and competent features one finds in secretaries to important executives or in the woman who is supervisor of hostesses for an airline. She had black hair pinned up high and green-blue eyes bright as the lights in a valuable stone. Her arms and legs were very slim, and she smiled a lot as she talked to the Press. She seemed flustered, and not unravaged by the tension of the last few days. Her remarks were polite, enthusiastic, hardworking. She said that by the time they touched down on the moon, she was cheering, but in fact she had the glitter of an actress who is loyal to the company and loyal to the production, and so will mouth the lines clearly even if the theater is half-empty, the play is falling apart, and the cast will be given their notice in another night. She was loyal to what was demanded of her, but the strain was showing—of three wives she had had the most difficult relation to the event. She was obliged to suffer with the other wives and equal among equals, share the agonies and the jubilation of the landing with them, yet in fact her husband was on the landing, he was up in the air all alone, he would be there for another day or more, sometimes alone on the dark side of the moon while the others explored ground. The living man had stepped upon. She had a face which



was obviously not without ambition, one of those faces which exhibit no outrageous vice but nonetheless want the best for themselves, not ruthless so much as ready to commit oneself to the partner and work all the way to go all the way. Now her husband had gone 99.9 percent of the way. If it was secretly hard on him, it would have to be twice as hard on her. What a role to play! The interviewers asked her again and again, "Do you mind that your husband is not landing with the others?" And again and again in a voice which was using the reserves of her good looks she kept replying in a tone determinedly bright (and so bumped over to the edge of the haggard) that she didn't mind a bit and knew Mike didn't either. The laws of propriety at NASA went as deep as the regulations at a hospital—woe to any astronaut or wife who uttered in public any sentiment which would fail to bore the expectations of fifty million viewers. There was a true and proper standard of behavior for every public situation in which they might find themselves. A clear rule of measure: do not under any circumstance say anything more interesting than Richard Nixon would say in the same situation. That was the clubhouse rule; Pat Collins was obeying it. Since she also had the look of a woman who must have real flashes of Irish beauty when relaxed, the expostulations of complete happiness made her remarks so ordinary that Aquarius discovered afterward he had not worked to take a note.

Down the block was the Aldrin house, a structure of pale orange brick with another steep roof. There was a wait for Mrs. Aldrin. It had begun to rain out of an uneven lead-colored hesitant sky—a few drops would tattoo on the big Texas leaves of the modest suburban trees and then halt, then rain a little harder, stop again. It was thought at first that the delay was due to uncertainty whether to begin the interview under such conditions—after a while a rumor circulated that Mrs. Aldrin was primping for the Press. It made sense to Aquarius. She had wanted to be an actress—she had worked at having a career for a period, had made the rounds against the objections of her father. Having been married to three women who were actresses at one time or another, one of them even a modest movie star who had her career much interrupted for such marrying, Aquarius was able to make broken-hearted jokes about the woes of any man so foolish as to smash into the devotions of an acting career by an act of marriage. As a consequence he was naturally

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interested in Mrs. Aldrin. She, like Jan Armstrong, had had a long courtship. He was obliged to recognize on looking at a newspaper photo that she looked much like her husband, as indeed Jan Armstrong looked like her mate, and Pat Collins like Mike Collins. He did not understand these marriages of people who looked alike and courted each other for years—he did not know if the delay of proper people who looked alike came from deep respect for marriage, or was rather excessive caution to make certain one's narcissism would find the cleanest mirror. He did not know. It seemed to him he had always gotten married in a hurry to women who were remarkably different, except for his final inability to get along with them. Gloomy as the weather was Aquarius. From time to time, like the memory of a telegram whose news was so awful one kept circling the fact of it, came back the simple unalterable fact that Teddy Kennedy had been in a bad accident and a girl had drowned and ~~he~~ had not reported it until morning.

The Senator

Joan Aldrin had blond hair, she was a big woman with generous features, nose, teeth, mouth, there, all there, but finally she was all eyes. They were the large expressive soulful instruments of a woman who had a real and intense awareness of her stage, which is to say a sense of the air she offered, the way it was received, the space between. She made a good entrance beneath an umbrella thoughtfully held over her by the man who served as guide from the house to a roped-off space between the trees, she was a lady who transmitted palpable gratitude for courtesies rendered, she had the ability to exercise the air, but not as a flirt or a sexual provocation, rather as tragedienne one instant, a comedienne the next, she had the quick-changing vital bounce of a woman who might have made a reasonable career in musical comedy—~~she~~ had as she spoke the slightly slow withheld timing, the meaningless but tasty syncopation that women who ~~bel+~~ out a song <sup>can</sup> give to a dull line. So, as she spoke, it was ~~to~~ to listen.

"What were you doing when they landed?"

"Well, I was holding onto the wall. I was praying," ~~she~~ said in a loud and syncopated whisper.

She was at once utterly serious, and camping it up. A part of her had been in agonies of suspense which ~~went~~ right into the agonies and deepest attachments of ~~her~~ marriage—another part of her, droll as the humor of



her  
full nose had been obliged to see herself—"Here you are, big girl, holding onto the wall at a time like this!"

The interview went on. Aquarius monitored it with a mild part of his brain. There was talk about one activity, then another—what the plans were for watching the moon walk—would the children stay up, so forth. The mood was sluggish. The Press had interviewed two wives already.

She was too much of a performer to come in third in a three-horse race. "Listen," she cried out suddenly in a big voice, waking up the Press. "Aren't you all excited?" She looked around coquettishly, carefully, as if to measure what employment could be made of an audience as supersophisticated and sodden as this. Then it came over her, as it had come over everyone else from time to time. There were men on the moon.

"They did it!" she shrieked happily. "They did it!"

After she had gone back inside, there was a vacuum. Her vitality was gone. One wouldn't have minded more of her.

Aquarius was left with his gloom. It was finally a dubious male occupation to interview the wives of men who were heroes for the day. He was depressed as he walked away thinking of his own wife, and his own marriage, now deteriorating—what work to be obliged to look in on other marriages in their hour of triumph!

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That night, the walk on the moon had been scheduled to begin long after midnight, so plans had been laid for late moon-watching parties. But the astronauts, to no one's surprise, were in no mood to sleep, and the moon walk was rescheduled for eight in the evening. Yet, this once, the astronauts were not on time.

Waiting in the movie theater, the Press was in a curious state of mingled celebration and irritation. It was hard not to feel like a fool. They were journalists, not movie critics, and tonight they would be taking notes on the events which transpired upon a video screen. Of course, the climax of days of the most difficult kind of reporting was finally at hand, but it was a little as if one's nervous system had been appropriated and the final shake would take place in somebody else's room.

The psychology of journalists is not easy to compre-

hend—they scurry around like peons, they have the confidence of God. Over the years they develop an extraordinary sense of where the next victory is located. If a man gives a press conference and is not surrounded by reporters when it is over, he need not wonder how his fortunes are moving—the reporters have already told him. It is for this reason journalists pick up the confidence that they shape events—in fact they are only sensors in the currents of the churn, Venturi tubes to give you the speed of the history which passes. Nonetheless, there is no psychological reality like a man's idea of himself. Even if a writer has lost the best reaches of his talent by putting out facts for years which have been stripped of their nuance—writing newspaper stories in short—still he retains an idea of himself: it is that his eye on an event may be critical to correct reportage of it. Now put five hundred reporters in a room to report on the climax of an event “equal in importance to that moment in evolution when aquatic life came crawling up on the land,” and put a movie screen in front of them, and a television transmission on that screen which is not only a pioneer effort in communication from a satellite one good quarter of a million miles away, but is also, you may be sure, wildly out of focus. Reporters wear eyeglasses in order not to miss the small print—bad focus on the screen puts a new injury right inside the wound of the previous injury. Something in them reverted. Watching the mooncast, they were like college kids on Friday night in the town movie house—one never knew what would make their laughter stir next, but their sense of the absurd was quick and furious. Like college students who roar with disgust because by God they were being trained to run a supposedly reasonable world with highly reasonable skills, and yet the fools who made this movie had the real power, so the Press took the mooncast on its own literal terms of spectacle—where it was good as spectacle they loved it, where it was poor they mocked.

But let us take it from the start. The screen was dark when the voices began, and since it stayed without image for many minutes while one heard the voices of the astronauts working to get ready, a strain developed in the audience. Would the picture ever come on tonight, or had something gone wrong?

Then one learned from the Public Affairs Officer that the Portable Life Support Systems were working—the astronauts were now connected by umbilical tubes to the big white box on their back, that box which could



(Ceol)

them, clear the fog from their helmets, give them oxygen to breathe, and absorb the wastes of their exhalation. But the minutes went by. There was no image on the screen. Oxygen was being used. They had only a few hours of Life Support in the system—would they be obliged to use it overcoming the difficulties of opening the hatch? Hoots and a hum of restlessness worked through the theater. The journalists were nervous. That rare hysteria which is generated by an inability to distinguish between the apocalyptic and the absurd was generating. What if—assuming they could actually see something—what if Armstrong were to take a step on the moon and simply disappear? Whatever would one do in this theater? The event would be a horror to watch if tragedy occurred; yet it would be a humiliation if it all went on schedule.

A cheer not unmixed with mockery came at the announcement at 9:40 in the evening that the hatch was open. Still no image on the screen. Now followed long incomprehensible instructions back and forth, talk of wind-clanks and water valves, high-gain antenna and glycol pumps. Out of all this, quiet exhortations from Aldrin to Armstrong. Through the words emerged the realization that Armstrong, made twice bulky by his space suit and the Portable Life Support System on his back, was trying to push through the open hatch of the Lem out onto the small metal porch which led to the ladder which in turn he could descend to the moon ground. It was obviously a very tight fit to get through the hatch. As Aldrin gave instructions there was an inevitable suggestion of the kind of dialogue one hears between an obstetrician and a patient in the last minutes before birth.

ALDRIN: *Your back is up against the (garbled.) All right, now it's on top of the DSKY. Forward and up, now you've got them, over toward me, straight down, relax a little bit.*

ARMSTRONG: *(Garbled)*

ALDRIN: *Neil, you're lined up nicely. Toward me a little bit, okay down, okay, made it clear.*

ARMSTRONG: *To what edge?*

ALDRIN: *Move. Here roll to the left. Okay, now you're clear. You're lined up on the platform. Put your left foot to the right a little bit. Okay that's good. Roll left.*

The Press was giggling. Sanctimony at NASA was a tight seal. A new church, it had been born as a high

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church. No one took liberties. Now, two of the heroes of NASA were engaged in an inevitably comic dialogue—one big man giving minute adjustments of position to another. The Press giggled.

Armstrong spoke out suddenly. "Okay, Houston, I'm on the porch."

The audience broke into applause. There was mockery, as if the cavalry had just come galloping down the ridge.

A few minutes went by. Impatience hung in the air. Then a loud bright cheer as a picture came on the screen. It was a picture upside-down, blinding in contrast, and incomprehensible, perhaps just such a kaleidoscope of shadow and light as a baby might see in the first instants before silver nitrate goes into its eyes. Then, twists and turns of image followed, a huge black cloud resolved itself into the bulk of Armstrong descending the ladder, a view of confusions of objects, some roughhewn vision of a troglodyte with a huge hump on his back and voices—Armstrong, Aldrin and Capcom—details were being offered of the descent down the ladder. Armstrong stepped off the pad. No one quite heard him say, "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind," nor did anyone quite see him take the step—the TV image on the movie screen was beautiful, but still as marvelously abstract as the branches of a tree, or a painting by Franz Kline of black beams on a white background. Nonetheless, a cheer went up, and a ripple of extraordinary awareness. It was as if the audience felt an unexpected empathy with the sepulchral, as if a man were descending step by step, heartbeat by diminishing heartbeat into the reign of the kingdom of death itself and he was reporting, inch by inch, what his senses disclosed. Everybody listened in profound silence. Irritation was now gone as Armstrong described the fine and powdery substance of the surface. "I can see the footprints of my boots and the treads in the fine sandy particles." Every disclosure for these first few minutes would be a wonder. If it would have been more extraordinary to hear that the moon had taken no imprint in soft powder, or the powder was phosphorescent, still it was also a wonder that the powder of the moon reacted like powder on earth. A question was at least being answered. If the answer was ordinary, still there was one less question in the lonely spaces of the human mind. Aquarius had an instant when he glimpsed space expanding like the widening pool of an unanswered question. Was that the power behind the force which made technology



triumphant in this century?—that technology was at least a force which attempted to bring back answers from questions which had been considered to be without answers?

The image was becoming more decipherable. As Armstrong moved away from the ladder in a hesitant loping gait, not unlike the first staggering steps of a just-born calf, he called back to Mission Control, "No trouble to walk around," but as if that were too great a liberty to take with the feelings of the moon, he came loping back to the ladder.

Activities went on. There were photographs to take, descriptions of the appearance of the rocks, of the character of the sun glare. One of Armstrong's first jobs was to pick up a sample of rock and put it in his pocket. Thus if something unforeseen were to occur, if the unmentionable yak or the Abominable Snowman were to emerge from a crater, if the ground began to rumble, if for any reason they had to reenter the Lem and take off abruptly, they would then have the chance to return to earth with at least one rock. This first scoop of moon stone and moon dust was called the contingency sample, and it was one of Armstrong's first tasks, but he seemed to have forgotten it. The Capcom reminded him subtly, so did Aldrin. The Capcom came back again: "Neil, this is Houston. Did you copy about the contingency sample? Over?"

"Rog," said Armstrong, "I'm going to get to that just as soon as I finish this picture series."

Aldrin had probably not heard. "Okay," he asked, "going to get the contingency sample now, Neil?"

"Right!" Armstrong snapped. The irritability was so evident that the audience roared with laughter—don't we laugh when we glimpse a fine truth and immediately conceal it? What a truth! Nagging was nagging, even on the moon.

The television image was improving. It was never clear, never did it look any better in quality than a print of the earliest silent movies, but it was eloquent. Ghosts beckoned to ghosts, and the surface of the moon looked like a ski slope at night. Fields of a dazzling pale ran into caverns of black, and through this field moved the ghost of Armstrong. There were moments when one had the impression it was possible to see through him. His image was transparent.

Aldrin descended the ladder, then jumped back on the lowest rung to test his ability to return to the Lem. The

abruptness of the action broke the audience into guffaws again, the superior guffaw a sophisticate gives to a chair creaking too crudely in a horror movie. Now two ghosts paraded about, jogging forward and back, exchanging happy comments on the new nature of hopping and walking, moving faster than a walk but like much-padded toddlers, or overswathed beginners on skis. Sometimes they looked like heavy elderly gentlemen dancing with verve, sometimes the sight of their boots or their gloves, the bend of their backs setting up equipment or reaching for more rocks gave them the look of beasts on hindquarters learning to think, sometimes the image went over into negative so that they looked black in their suits on a black moon with white hollows, sometimes the image was solarized and became positive and negative at once, images yawing in and out of focus, so the figures seemed to squirt about like one-celled animals beneath a slide—all the while, images of the Lem would appear in the background, an odd battered object like some Tartar cooking pot left on a trivet in a Siberian field. It all had the look of the oldest photographs of expeditions to the North Pole—there was something bizarre, touching, splendid, and ridiculous all at once, for the feat was immense, but the astronauts looked silly, and their functional conversations seemed farcical in the circumstances.

"What did you say, Buzz?"

"I say the rocks are rather slippery."

Huge guffaws from the audience. When the flag was set up on the moon, the Press applauded. The applause continued, grew larger—soon they would be giving the image of the flag a standing ovation. It was perhaps a way of apologizing for the laughter before, and the laughter they knew would come again, but the experience was still out of register. A reductive society was witnessing the irreducible. But the irreducible was being presented with faulty technique. At that they could laugh. And did again and again. There were moments when Armstrong and Aldrin might just as well have been Laurel and Hardy in space suits.

The voice of Collins came into the public address system. He had been out of radio contact for almost an hour during his trip around the back of the moon, so he did not know how the Extra Vehicular Activity was proceeding. He had left communication before Armstrong had reached the lunar surface. Now he asked, "How's it going?"



CAPCOM: *Roger. The EVA is progressing beautifully. I believe they are setting up the flag now.*

COLLINS: *Great.*

The audience laughed at this hard pea of envy beneath twenty mattresses of NASA manners.

CAPCOM: *I guess you're about the only person around that doesn't have TV coverage of the scene.*

COLLINS: *That's right. That's all right. I don't mind a bit.*

Now, the Press roared.

COLLINS: *How is the quality of the TV?*

CAPCOM: *Oh, it's beautiful, Mike. Really is.*

COLLINS: *Oh, gee, that's great.*

The video continued, the astronauts worked on styles of gait, ordinary walking, half-run, kangaroo hops. There was a sense of the astronauts' happiness as they loped about, and now a delicate envy, almost tender in its sensibility, went to them from the crowd. There was finally something marvelous. This old-fashioned indistinct movie of comedians in old-fashioned suits was in fact but a cover upon the curious happiness everyone was feeling. It was the happiness which comes from a wound. For with the pain, and there was pain in the thought of the moon—so private a body to the poet buried in every ~~poke of a~~ head—the moon being now invaded, there was also the happiness that accompanies the pain, for the landing was a straight-out wound to every stable disposition of the mind. ~~Yet a wound in that period when we do not know which flesh is severed forever and what is recuperable is an hour of curious happiness. Change may give life.~~ So the world was watching the loping bumbling skittering low-gravity movements of these men with the kind of concentration we offer to the study of our own wound. Something in the firmament was being operated upon.

Well, the flag was up. The Capcom spoke. He asked the astronauts to stand in view of the camera, then announced that the President of the United States wanted to say a few words.

ARMSTRONG: *That would be an honor.*

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CAPCOM: *Go ahead, Mr. President, this is Houston. Out.*

It had been announced in advance that the President would speak to the astronauts, but the liberal portion of the Press groaned, to be answered by a pattering of stiff hands from the patriots in the room.

PRESIDENT NIXON: *Neil and Buzz, I am talking to you by telephone from the Oval Room at the White House. And this certainly has to be the most historic telephone call ever made.*

Large jeers from the audience. The most expensive telephone call ever made! Stentorian hand clapping.

PRESIDENT NIXON: *I just can't tell you how proud we all are of you. For every American this has to be the proudest day of our lives. And for people all over the world, I am sure they too join with Americans in recognizing what a feat this is. Because of what you have done, the heavens have become a part of man's world. And as you talk to us from the Sea of Tranquility, it inspires us to double our efforts to bring peace and tranquility to earth. For one priceless moment in the whole history of man, all the people on this earth are truly one. One in their pride in what you have done. And one in our prayers that you will return safely to earth.*

~~Every word had its function. It could be said that the psychology of machines begins where humans are more machine-like in their actions than the machines they employ.~~

"Thank you, Mr. President," answered Armstrong in a voice not altogether in control. What a moment for Richard Nixon if the first tears shed on the moon flowed on the consequence of his words! "It's a great honor and privilege," Armstrong went on, "to be representing not only the United States, but men of peace of all nations. When he finished, he saluted.

Some of the crowd jeered again. The image of Nixon faded on home TV screens, his voice was gone from the theater. The moon walk continued. In fact, it was not done, but the early excitement had ebbed in this last outburst of rhetoric—the minds of the Press had gone on to the question of whether Nixon was considering it political.



advantageous to support a future program of space. As the astronauts continued to walk, to hop, to flit and to skip from one vale of moon ground to another, as the experiments were set out and the rocks picked up, so the temper of the audience shifted. It was a Twentieth Century audience when all was said, ~~and quick in its sense of fashion~~. By an hour and a half of the moon walk they were bored—some were actually slipping out. All over the room was felt the ubiquitous desire of journalists for the rescue of a drink. Boredom deepened. Now the mood was equal to the fourth quarter of a much anticipated football game whose result had proved lopsided. Now it looked as if rookies were out on the chill field running fumbles back and forth. More and more reporters departed. Even Aquarius left before the end.

V

It was the event of his lifetime, and yet it had been a dull event. The language which now would sing of this extraordinary vault promised to be as flat as an unstrung harp. The century had unstrung any melody of words. Besides—the event was obdurate on the surface and a mystery beneath. It was not at all easy to comprehend. Like an adolescent married before he could vote, the congratulation, "You're a married man," had no reality to the brand-new groom. So America and the world would be in a round of congratulations—we had landed a man on the moon. The event was so removed, however, so unreal, that no objective correlative existed to prove it had not conceivably been an event staged in a television studio—the greatest con of the century—and indeed a good mind, product of the iniquities, treacheries, gold, passion, invention, deception, and rich worldly stink of the Renaissance could hardly deny that the event if bogus was as great a creation in mass hoodwinking, deception, and legerdemain as the true ascent was in discipline and technology. Indeed, conceive of the genius of such a conspiracy. It would take criminals and confidence men mightier, more trustworthy and more resourceful than anything in this century or the ones before. Merely to conceive of such men was the surest way to know the event was not staged. Yes, the century was a giant and a cretin. Man had become a Herculean embodiment of the Vision, but the

brain on top of the head was as small as a transistorized fist, and the chambers of the heart had shrunk to the dry hard seeds of some hybrid future.

To make sense of Apollo 11 on the moon, to rise above the verbiage (like extinguishers of foam) which covered the event, was to embark on a project which could not satisfy his own eye unless it could reduce a conceptual city of technologese to one simplicity—was the venture worthwhile or unappeased in its evil?

If Marx had done his best to gut the past of every attachment to the primitive, the sacramental, and the magical, if the Marxian formula that history was a reflection of the state of productive relations had thereby elevated reason to that vertiginous even insane eminence out of which technology had been born, then the task now appeared in reverse: one was obliged to make a first reconnaissance into the possibility of restoring magic, psyche, and the spirits of the underworld to the spookiest venture in history, a landing on the moon, an event whose technologese had been so complete that the word "spook" probably did not appear in twenty million words of NASA prose.



July 69

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## CHAPTER 5

# A Dream of the Future's Face

EARLY on the afternoon of July 21, the Lunar Module fired its ascent motor, lifted off Tranquility Base, and in a few hours docked with Columbia. Shortly after, the astronauts passed back into the Command Module and Eagle was jettisoned. It would drift off on a trajectory to the sun. A little before midnight, out of communication for the last time with Mission Control, traveling for the final orbit around the back of the moon, Apollo 11 ignited the Service Module engine and accelerated its speed from 3,600 miles to 5,900 miles per hour. Its momentum was now great enough to lift it out of the moon's pull of gravity and back into the attractions of the earth—the spacecraft was therefore on its way home. Since the trip would take sixty hours, a quiet two and a half days were in store and Aquarius decided to get out of Nassau Bay and visit some friends.

His host and hostess were wealthy Europeans with activities which kept them very much of the time in Texas. Since they were art collectors of distinction, invariably served a good meal, and had always been kind to him, the invitation was welcome. To go from the arid tablelands of NASA Highway 1 to these forested grounds now damp after the rain of a summer evening was like encountering a taste of French ice in the flats of the desert. Even the trees about the house were very high, taller than the tallest elms he had seen in New England—"Wild pigs used to forage in this part of Houston," said his host, as if in explanation, and on the lawn, now twice-green in the luminous golden green of a murky twilight, smaller tropical trees with rubbery trunks twisted about a large sculpture by Jean Tinguely which waved metal scarecrow arms when a switch was thrown and blew spinning faucets of water through wild stuttering sweeps, a piece of sculpture

reminiscent of the flying machines of La Belle Epoque, a hybrid of dragon and hornet which offered a shade of the time when technology had been belts and clanking gears, and culture was a fruit to be picked from a favored tree.

The mansion was modern, it had been one of the first modern homes in Houston and was designed by one of the more ascetic modern architects. With the best will, how could Aquarius like it? But the severity of the design was concealed by the variety of the furniture, the intensity of the art, the presence of the sculpture, and the happy design in fact of a portion of the house: the living room shared a wall with a glassed-in atrium of exotics in bloom. So the surgical intent of the architect was partially overcome by the wealth of the art and by the tropical pressure of the garden whose plants and interior tree, illumined with spotlights, possessed something of that same silence which comes over audience and cast when there is a moment of theater and everything ceases, everything depends on—one cannot say—it is just that no one thinks to cough.

There had been another such moment when he entered the house. In the foyer was a painting by Magritte, a startling image of a room with an immense rock situated in the center of the floor. The instant of time suggested by the canvas was comparable to the mood of a landscape in the instant just before something awful is about to happen, or just after, one could not tell. The silences of the canvas spoke of Apollo 11 still circling the moon: the painting could have been photographed for the front page—it hung from the wall like a severed head. As Aquarius met the other guests, gave greetings, took a drink, his thoughts were not free of the painting. He did not know when it had been done—he assumed it was finished many years ago—he was certain without even thinking about it that there had been no intention by the artist to talk of the moon or projects in space, no, Aquarius would assume the painter had awakened with a vision of the canvas and that vision had he delineated. Something in the very breath of the city he inhabited, some avidity emitted by a passing machine, some tar in the residue of a nightmarish some ash from the memory of a cremation had gone into the painting of that gray stone—it was as if Magritte had listened to the ending of one world with its comfortable chairs in the parlor, and heard the intrusion of another world, silent as the windowless stone which grew in the room, and knowing not quite what he had painted.



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painted his warning nonetheless. Now the world of the future was a dead rock, and the rock was in the room.

There was also a Negro in his host's living room, a man perhaps thirty-five, a big and handsome Black man with an Afro haircut of short length, the moderation of the cut there to hint that he still lived in a White man's clearing, even if it was on the very edge of the clearing. He was not undistinguished, this Negro, he was a professor at an Ivy League college; Aquarius had met him one night the previous year after visiting the campus. The Negro had been much admired in the college. He had an impressive voice and the deliberate manner of a leader. How could the admiration of faculty wives be restrained? But this Black professor was also a focus of definition for Black students in the college—they took some of the measure of their militancy from his advice. It was a responsible position. The students were in the college on one of those specific programs which had begun in many a university that year—students from slum backgrounds, students without full qualification were being accepted on the reasonable if much embattled assumption that boys from slums were easily bright enough to be salvaged for academic life if special pains were taken. Aquarius had met enough of such students to think the program was modest. The education of the streets gave substantial polish in Black ghettos—some of the boys had knowledge at seventeen Aquarius would not be certain of acquiring by seventy. They had the toughness of fiber of the twenty-times tested. This night on the campus, having a simple discussion back and forth, needling back and forth, even to even—so Aquarius had thought—a Black student suddenly said to him, "You're an old man. Your hair is gray. An old man like you wants to keep talking like that, you may have to go outside with me." The student gave an evil smile. "You're too old to keep up with me. I'll whomp your ass."

It had been a glum moment for Aquarius. It was late at night, he was tired, he had been drinking with students for hours. As usual he was overweight. The boy was smaller than him, but not at all overweight, fast. Over the years Aquarius had lost more standards than he cared to remember. But he still held on to the medieval stricture that one should never back out of a direct invitation to fight. So he said with no happiness, "Well, there are so many waiting on line, it might as well be you," and he stood up.

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The Black boy had been playing with him. The Black boy grinned. He assured Aquarius there was no need to go outside. They could talk now. And did. But what actors were the Blacks! What a sense of honor! What a sense of the gulch! Seeing the Black professor in this living room in Houston brought back the memory of the student who had decided to run a simulation through the character of Aquarius' nerve. It was in the handshake of both men as they looked at each other now, Aquarius still feeling the rash of the encounter, the other still amused at the memory. God knows how the student had imitated his rise from the chair. There had been a sly curl in the Black man's voice whenever they came across each other at a New York party.

Tonight, however, was different. He almost did not recognize the professor. The large eyes were bloodshot, and his slow deliberate speech had become twice-heavy, almost sluggish. Aquarius realized the man had been drinking. It was a matter of a few shots before this evening, no, there was a sense of somebody pickling himself through three days of booze, four days of booze, five, not even drunk, just the heavy taking of the heaviest medicine, a direct search for thickening, as if he were looking to coagulate some floor between the pit of his feelings at boil and the grave courtesies of his heavy Black manner. By now it showed. He was normally so elegant a man that it was impossible to conceive of how he would make a crude move—now, you could know. Something raucous and jeering was still withheld, but the sourness of his stomach had gotten into the sourness of his face. His collar was a hint wilted.

He had a woman with him, a sweet and wispy blond half plain, still half attractive, for she emitted a distant echo of Marilyn Monroe long gone. But she was not equal, not in size, presence, qualifications—by the old European measure of this richly endowed room, she was simply not an adequate woman for a man of his ambitions. At least that was the measure Aquarius took. It was hard not to recognize that whatever had brought them together, very little was now sustaining the project. The Black man was obviously tired of her, and she was obviously in love with him. Since they were here enforcedly together, that was enough to keep a man drinking more than a day. Besides—if he was a comfortable guest of these fine Europeans, he might nonetheless



*not wish*

(to leave the grounds. Being seen with her on Houston streets would not calm his nerves.

But there were other reasons for drinking as well. America had put two White men on the moon, and lifted them off. A triumph of White men was being celebrated in the streets of this city. It was even worse than that. For the developed abilities of these White men, their production, their flight skills, their engineering feats, were the most successful part of that White superstructure which had been strangling the possibilities of his own Black people for years. The professor was an academic with no mean knowledge of colonial struggles of colored peoples. He was also a militant. If the degree of his militancy was not precisely defined, still its presence was not denied. His skin was dark. If he were to say, "Black is beautiful" with a cultivated smile, nonetheless he was still saying it. Aquarius had never been invited to enter this Black man's vision, but it was no great mystery the Black believed his people were possessed of a potential genius which was greater than Whites. Kept in incubation for two millennia, they would be all the more powerful when they prevailed. It was nothing less than a great civilization they were prepared to create. Aquarius could not picture the details of that civilization in the Black professor's mind, but they had talked enough to know they agreed that this potential greatness of the Black people was not to be found in technology. Whites might need the radio to become tribal but Blacks would have another communion. From the depth of one consciousness they could be ready to speak to the depth of another; by telepathy might they send their word. That was the logic implicit in CPT. If CPT was one of the jokes by which Blacks admitted Whites to the threshold of their view, it was a relief to learn that CPT stood for Colored People's Time. When a Black friend said he would arrive at 8 P.M. and came after midnight, there was still logic in his move. He was traveling on CPT. The vibrations he received at 8 P.M. were not sufficiently interesting to make him travel toward you—all that was hurt were the host's undue expectations. The real logic of CPT was that when there was trouble or happiness the brothers would come on the wave.

Well, White technology was not built on telepathy, it was built on electromagnetic circuits of transmission and reception, it was built on factory workers pressing their button or monitoring their function according to firm and bound stations of the clock. The time of a rocket mission

was Ground Elapsed Time, GET. Every sequence of the flight was tied into the pure numbers of the timeline. So the flight to the moon was a victory for GET, and the first heats of the triumph suggested that the fundamental notion of Black superiority might be incorrect: in this hour, it would no longer be as easy for a militant Black to say that Whitey had built a palace on numbers, and numbers killed a man, and numbers would kill Whitey's civilization before all was through. Yesterday, Whitey with his numbers had taken a first step to the stars, taken it ahead of Black men. How that had to burn in the ducts of this Black man's stomach, in the vats of his liver. Aquarius thought again of the lunar air of technologists. Like the moon, they traveled without a personal atmosphere. No wonder Blacks had distaste for numbers, and found trouble studying. It was not because they came—as liberals necessarily would have it—from wrecked homes and slum conditions, from drug-pushing streets, no, that kind of violence and disruption could be the pain of a people so rich in awareness they could not bear the deadening jolts of civilization on each of their senses. Blacks had distaste for numbers not because they were stupid or deprived, but because numbers were abstracted from the senses, numbers made you ignore the taste of the apple for the amount in the box, and so the use of numbers shrunk the protective envelope of human atmosphere, eroded that extrasensory aura which gave awareness, grace, the ability to move one's body and excel at sports and dance and war, or be able to travel on an inner space of sound. Blacks were not the only ones who hated numbers—how many attractive women could not bear to add a column or calculate a cost? Numbers were a pestilence to beauty.

Of course this particular Black man, this professor, was in torture, for he lived half in the world of numbers, and half in the wrappings of the aura. So did Aquarius. It was just that Aquarius was White and the other Black—so Aquarius could not conceal altogether his pleasure in the feat. A little part of him, indefatigably White, felt as mean as a Wasp. There was something to be said after all for arriving on time. CPT was excellent for the nervous system if you were the one to amble in at midnight, but Aquarius had played the host too often.

"You know," said the professor, "there are no Black astronauts."

"Of course not."

"Any Jewish astronauts?"



"I doubt it."

The Black man grunted. They would not need to mention Mexicans or Puerto Ricans. Say, there might not even be any Italians.

"Did you want them," asked Aquarius, "to send a Protestant, a Catholic, and a Jew to the moon?"

"Look," said the Black professor, "do they have any awareness of how the money they spent could have been used?"

"They have a very good argument: they say if you stopped space tomorrow, only a token of the funds would go to poverty."

"I'd like to be in a position to argue about that," said the Black. He sipped at his drink. It trickled into his system like the inching of glucose from a bottle down a rubber tube. "Damn," he said, "are they still on the moon?"

"They took off already," said Aquarius.

"No trouble?"

"None."

If the Blacks yet built a civilization, magic would be at its heart. For they lived with the wonders of magic as the Whites lived with technology. How many Blacks had made a move or inhibited it because the emanations of the full moon might affect their cause. Now Whitey had walked the moon, put his feet on it. The moon presumably had not spoken. Or had it, and Richard Nixon received the favor and Teddy Kennedy the curse? Was there no magic to combat technology? Then the strength of Black culture was stricken. There would not be a future Black civilization, merely an adjunct to the White. What lava in the raw membranes of the belly. The Black professor had cause to drink. The moon shot had smashed more than one oncoming superiority of the Black.

ii

That night Aquarius had trouble falling asleep, as if the unrest of the Black professor at the passage of men's steps on the moon had now passed over to him. Nothing in the future might ever be the same—that was cause for unrest—nor could the future even be seen until one could answer the obsessive question: was our venture into space noble or insane, was it part of a search for the good, or the

agent of diabolisms yet unglimped? It was as if we had begun to turn the pocket of the universe inside out.

He had had at the end a curious discussion with the Black professor. "It's all in the remission of sin," the Black man had said. "Technology begins when men are ready to believe that the sins of the fathers are not visited on the sons. Remission of sin—that's what it's all about," he said in his Black slow voice.

Yes, if the sons were not punished, then the father might dare, as no primitive father had dared, to smash through a taboo. If the father was in error, or if he failed, the sons would be spared. Only the father would suffer. So men were thereby more ready to dare the gods. So that love on the cross which had requested that the sons not pay for the sins of the fathers had opened a hairline split which would finally crack the walls of taboo. And the windowless walls of technology came through the gap. Back to Sören the Dane. You could not know if you were a monster or a saint of the deep.

In the Nineteenth Century, they had ignored Kierkegaard. A middle-class White man, living on the rise of Nineteenth Century technology was able to feel his society as an eminence from which he could make expeditions, if he wished, into the depths. He would know all the while that his security was still up on the surface, a ship—if you will—to which he was attached by a line. In the Twentieth Century, the White man had suddenly learned what the Black man might have told him—that there was no ship unless it was a slave ship. There was no security. Everybody was underwater, and even the good sons of the middle class could panic in those depths, for if there were no surface, there was no guide. Anyone could lose his soul. That recognition offered a sensation best described as bottomless. So the Twentieth Century was a century which looked to explain the psychology of the dream, and instead entered the topography of the dream. The real had become more fantastic than the imagined. And might yet possess more of the nightmare.

Lying there, unable to sleep, lost in the caverns of questions whose answers never came (Mr. Answer Man, what is the existential equivalent of infinity?—Why insomnia, Sandy, good old insomnia) Aquarius knew for the first time in years that he no longer had the remotest idea of what he knew. It was the end of the decade, and the fashion was rising in New York literary lakes to inquire after the nature of the decade to come. He had been a

that



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poor prophet of the Sixties, but it was not a century for prophets—poor as he had been, he had still been one of the few who had some sense of what was coming. He had known that marijuana was on its way, and Hip, and the Kennedys, and a time of upheaval, and in the center of the Establishment: loss of belief. Now they asked him what he thought of the Seventies. He did not know. He thought of the Seventies and a blank like the windowless walls of the computer city came over his vision. When he conducted interviews with himself on the subject, it was not despair he felt, or fear—it was anesthesia. He had no intimations of what was to come and that was conceivably worse than any sentiment of dread, for a sense of the future, no matter how melancholy, was preferable to none—it spoke of some sense of continuation in the projects of one's life. He was adrift. If he tried to conceive of a likely perspective in the decade before him, he saw not one structure to society but two: if the social world did not break down into revolutions and counterrevolutions, into police and military rules of order with sabotage, guerrilla war and enclaves of resistance, if none of this occurred, then there would certainly be a society of reason, but its reason would be the logic of the computer. In that society, legally accepted drugs would become a necessity for accelerated cerebration, there would be inchings toward nuclear installation, a monotony of architectures, a pollution of nature which would arouse technologies of decontamination odious as deodorants, and transplanted hearts monitored like spaceships—the patients might be obliged to live in a compound reminiscent of a Mission Control Center where technicians could monitor on consoles the beatings of a thousand transplanted hearts. But in the society of computer-logic, the atmosphere would obviously be plastic, air-conditioned, sealed in bubble-domes below the smog, a prelude to living in space stations. People would die in such societies like fish expiring on a vinyl floor. So of course there would be another society, an irrational society of the dropouts, the saintly, the mad, the militant and the young. There the art of the absurd would reign in defiance against the computer.

In the society of the irrational would be found the weather of the whirlpool. Accelerations and torpor would ride over one another with eyes burned out by visions no longer recalled, motorcycles would climb the trees, a night of freakings when all the hair would be burned for the bonfire of the goat, and bald as the moon would be

the skins of the scalp. Hare Krishnal A part of the American world, gassed by the smog of computer logic, would live like gurus, babas and yogas in the smallest towns, the small towns of America would be repopulated with the poets of the city, and mysticism would live next to murder, for murder was love in freak newspeak, and the orgy was the family. Because the computer was the essence of narcissism (the computer could not conceive of its inability to correct its own mistakes) a view of the Seventies suggested a technological narcissism so great that freak newspeak was its only cure—only the threat of a murderous society without could keep computer society from withering within. How those societies would mingle! Acid and pot had opened the way.

Yet even this model of the future was too simple. For the society of the rational and the world of the irrational would be without boundaries. Computersville had no cure for skin disease but filth in the wound, and the guru had no remedy for insomnia but a trip to the moon, so people would be forever migrating between the societies. Sex would be a new form of currency in both worlds—on that you could count. The planner and the swinger were the necessary extremes of the computer city, and both would meet in the orgies of the suburbs. But was this a vision of the future or the vertigo of the early hours?

Aquarius got out of bed. He was a disciplinarian about insomnia. Having suffered from it years before, he had learned how to live with an occasional bad night. He took no pill, he took no drink, he looked to ride it out. Sometimes he indulged in a game of formal optimism, carrying over from artillery training the injunction to bracket a target. So now if his sense of the future was too pessimistic—he could only hope it was too dark!—he would look for the formal opposite: try to regard science as reasonable, religion as rewarding. He could see—sitting in a kitchen chair, reading by a lamp—how new religions might crystallize in the Seventies, they could give life, for their view of God might be new. And science ... But he could not regard science apart from technology. ~~Aquarius began to think of Dr. George Mueller.~~



be installed, the action of the machines might become a whole order of efficiency closer to the laws of physics, rather than to the adjustments and counterbalances of engineering. That meant a world of future machines whose view of present-day machines might be equal to nothing less than our view of Piltown man. Or would it merely mean that plastic could now be employed for the ball bearings in order to maintain the built-in obsolescence of machines? Indeed the center of the problem of capitalism's morale was in the perfect ball bearing. Machines built on perfect ball bearings would have a life duration so much greater than present machines that modern capitalism living with the vice of built-in obsolescence as the poison-stimulant to its blood, would be face to face with problems greater and more inescapable than automation. For once space explorers, seeking economic justification, would be forced to develop perfect ball bearings, their use would be bound to explode the sustaining fevers and indulgences of the economy. What then would they all do? Then, capitalism would be as much at war with itself over the continuing nature of the economy as world communism was at war with itself over the direction of its ideology.

But, the mood of space which remained with Aquarius, after talking to Mueller, that mood elegant and austere as the perfect laws of physical principle, was still a force for disruption. Sitting in the spaced-out colors of Dun Cove, inhabiting the shank end of ruminations like this, was the thought that the moon shot was conceivably the first voyage of the very cancer of the world, for indeed the first journeys of the cancer cell in a body, taken from the point of view of the cancer cell, were certainly bold and dangerous. Not by little effort did a cell leave its own organ and learn how to survive in another. Cancer cells, seen in relation to ordinary cells, were often extraordinary in the variety of their form, as different as a view of Las Vegas at night is different from a village in the Bluegrass, or as different as the internal works of Apollo were in comparison to the works of the family car. Did that account for the curious depression, the sobriety mixed in so many faces with the pride of the achievement? Aquarius did not know.

That was still another reason why he did not perceive the decade to come with any clear picture of events. A dull sense of disaster pushed at the compass of the picture. He was not so certain the decade would have a life

like other decades. If space was benign, then on we would continue into space, and the artists would yet be voyaging with the astronauts—think of that happy day when he would nominate himself to be first writer to visit the moon. (Not a chance! NASA would opt for Updike!)

But what if space were not so benign? What if we did not act upon space, explore into space, but space rather acted upon us, drew us toward her dispositions, her plans for us, her intent upon human life, what if we thought we moved up but were drawn up, what if the moon was as quiet as the fisherman when he lays the fly on the water

... Having journeyed to the center of his gloom, Aquarius went to sleep. In his dreams a country doctor he had known for years murmured, "I don't know about all of this. Recognize that the moon could be some kind of catchall simple as the tonsils to protect us here on earth. Maybe those craters come from catching all the cess." In his dream Aquarius answered back, "It depends on your idea of God, that's what it must depend on." Out into sleep he went again, ringings of ether in his ear.

#### iv

In the morning after breakfast, he found himself rereading a transcript of the postlaunch briefing, a curious activity, but he was like a man on the cusp of a clue. To fall asleep in pursuit of the answer to a mystery was to awaken with the fire in a new place. It had burned beneath the ground while he was sleeping. So he dallied over the substance of the transcript as if some hint of smoke could linger here in the words of men taken down for posterity four hours after the launch.

**PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICER:** *I'd like to introduce Mr. Rocco A. Petrone, Director of Launch Operations for the Kennedy Space Center and Launch Director for the Apollo 11 flight. Rocco?*

**PETRONE:** *Thank you. Well, this is our sixth Saturn V, the Apollo aboard, to go up in a row on time. But I'm not saying, of course—this meant a lot more to us. This is the big one. This is the one we've been working for eight years. The mission is just getting started. I'm sure you all*



*know. But the first step in this historic mission has been just the step we've wanted to take.*

Every detail of the launch, Aquarius recollected, had been Petrone's responsibility. Four hours after lift-off, matters now comfortably out of his hands, he was by the evidence of the transcript as tired as a boxer in his dressing room after a fifteen-round fight.

*PETRONE: From the moment of truth here, from the moment of ignition and lift-off, lots and lots of equipment have to work for a number of starts to come on our side. We had a few difficulties in the count. I'm sure they already fed it to you. I'd be glad to answer questions. I'm pleased to say that the team was able to handle the problems, keeping the count rolling, and very obviously start this historic mission off. I say on the right first step, which I can assure you is most pleasing to me. And for the team that's worked so hard to get to this point . . .*

PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICER: *Okay; thanks, Rock.*

At NASA, the elegance was in the design of the engineering systems rather than in the manners of the men. Which future student of language, unfamiliar with Saturn V, Apollo 11 or lift-off, would have any idea, encountering this scrap of Petrone's transcript, that the man was describing the emotions he felt after having led thousands of men in Launch Control through the nine hundred hours, the ninety and the nine hours of the preparations and countdowns which put his ship into the air. Who was to know by such a speech—thought Aquarius sipping his breakfast tea—that Petrone had been midwife to the most momentous week, and the mightiest hour. Yes, and that was not so ridiculous if one recognized that to believe in progress and believe in God as well might make it necessary to conceive of our Lord as a vision of existence who conceivably was obliged to compete with other visions of existence in the universe, other conceptions of how life should be. But this had brought him to the heart of the question. It was as if his mind, knowing the style of his thoughts, had directed him to the transcript in the confidence that his sense of irony once aroused, his sense of apocalypse could never be far behind. He was, after all, quick to hunt for reason in absurdity. So to read the language of men who were not devoid of mechanical genius and yet spoke in language not even fit for a

computer, of events which might yet dislocate eternity, was a fine irony—the banality of the verbal reaction was an indication of the disease of our time, so advanced in one lobe, so underdeveloped in the other, a fine irony! Unless one was encountering the very desperation of the Lord—there might not be time to develop men to speak like Shakespeare as they departed on heavenly ships.

To believe in God and to believe in progress—what could that mean but that the desire for progress existed in the very creation of man, as if man were designed from the outset to labor as God's agent, to carry God's vision of existence across the stars. If this were true then the intent of the Lord could hardly be to reveal His goodness to us; rather He must employ us to reveal His vision of existence *out there*, somewhere out there where His hegemony came to an end and other divine conceptions began to exist, or indeed were opposed to us. If God finally was the embodiment of a vision which might cease to exist in the hostilities of the larger universe, a vision which indeed might be *obliged* to prevail or would certainly cease to exist, then it was legitimate to see all of human history as a cradle which had nurtured a baby which had now taken its first step. Intended by divine will to travel across the heavens, we were now at least on our way to the moon, and who could know if we were ahead or behind of some schedule the Lord had presented us, a schedule which presumably each man and woman alive would keep in the depths of their unconscious along with everything else most vital for the preservation of life. A large and uncomfortable thought, for if it were so, then the flight of Apollo 11 was a first revelation of the real intent of History. So this much, anyway, had been revealed: one could not make a judgment on the value or absurdity of devoting such effort to go to the moon unless one was ready to recognize that eschatology had conceivably been turned on its head. For if eschatology, that science of "the four last things: death, judgment, heaven and hell," was now to be considered in the light of God's need for supermen to negotiate His passage quickly through the heavens, then how much more value might He give to courage than to charity, how much harsh judgment to justice itself if the act to be considered was not expeditious but merely just, yes if speed were of the essence then Hell's Angels were possibly nearer to God than the war against poverty.

This last suggested a step Aquarius was not prepared to



take: the idea was as disruptive to a liberal philosophical system as tartar emetic and mustard to a glutton. For it offered a reason why the heroes of the time were technologists, not poets, and the art was obliged to be in the exceptional engineering, while human communication had become the routine function. It was because the Power guiding us had desired nothing less. He was looking to the day when all of mankind would yet be part of one machine, with mechanical circuits, social flesh circuits, and combined electromagnetic and thought-transponder circuits, an instrument of divine endeavor put together by a Father to whom one might no longer be able to pray since the ardors of His embattled voyage could have driven Him mad.

Sweet thoughts for Aquarius to have as a sequel to the ascent, but the questions were grand at least, they could occupy the consciousness of the century. It was somehow superior to see the astronauts and the flight of Apollo 11 as the instrument of such celestial or satanic endeavors, than as a species of sublimation for the profoundly unmanageable violence of man, a meaningless journey to a dead arena in order that men could engage in the irrational activity of designing machines which would give birth to other machines which would travel to meaningless places as if they were engaged in these collective acts of hugely organized but ultimately pointless activity because they had not the wit, goodness, or charity to solve their real problems, and so would certainly destroy themselves if they did not have a game of gargantuan dimensions for diversion, a devilish entertainment, a spend-spree of resources, a sublimation, yes, the very word, a sublimation of aggressive and intolerably inhuman desires, as if like a beast enraged with the passion of gorging nature, we looked now to make incisions into the platinum satellite of our lunacy, our love, and our dreams.

Aquarius would have given much to find a truly revealing face at NASA, for that could have given a clue to these questions, but it was in the logic of such endeavor that no answers be apparent on the surface. If it would take the rest of the century to begin to disclose the real intent of the act, no lightning raid on the evidence, no single happy disclosure, could possibly offer a reply.

Still, Aquarius preferred the first assumption, that we were the indispensable instruments of a monumental vision with whom we had begun a trip. On that conclusion he would rest his thoughts. Having come back at last to earth

from the orbits of the dream with such a hypothesis in his pocket, Aquarius was a little more ready to head for home, the writing of a book and conceivably the pouring of a drink. The study of more than one technical manual awaited him.