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Frontiers never die. They just become theme parks.

I spent most of my shuttle ride to Nearside mulling sour thoughts about that. It's the kind of thing that only bothers lonely and nostalgic old men, especially when we're old enough to remember the days when a trip to Luna was not a routine commuter run, but instead a never-ending series of course corrections, systems checks, best-and-worst case simulations, and random unexpected crises ranging from ominous burning smells to the surreal balls of floating upchuck that got into everywhere if we didn't get over your nausea fast enough to clean them up. Folks of my vintage remember what it was to spend half their lives in passionate competition with dozens of other frighteningly qualified people, just to earn themselves seats on cramped rigs outfitted by the lowest corporate bidders—and then to look down at the ragged landscape of Sister Moon and know that the sight itself was a privilege well worth the effort. But that's old news now: before the first development crews gave way to the first settlements; before the first settlements became large enough to be called the first cities; before the first city held a parade in honor of its first confirmed mugging; before Independence and the Corporate Communities and the opening of Lunar Disney on the Sea of Tranquility. These days, the Moon itself is no big deal except for rubes and old-timers. Nobody looks out the windows; they're far too interested in their sims, or their virts, or their newspads or (for a vanishingly literate few) their paperback novels, to care about the sight of the airless world waxing large in the darkness outside.

I wanted to shout at them. I wanted to make a great big eloquent speech about what they were missing by taking it all for granted, and about their total failure to appreciate what others had gone through to pave the way. But that wouldn't have moved anybody. It just would have established me as just another boring old fart.

So I stayed quiet until we landed, and then I rolled my overnighiter down the aisle, and I made my way through the vast carpeted terminal at Armstrong Interplanetary (thinking all the while *carpet, carpet, why is there carpet, dammit, there shouldn't be carpeting on the moon*). Then I hopped a tram to my hotel, and I confirmed that the front desk had followed instructions and provided me one of their few (hideously expensive) rooms with an Outside View. Then I went upstairs and thought it all again when I saw that the view was just an alien distortion of the moon I had known. Though it was night, and the landscape was as dark as the constellations of manmade illumination peppered across its cratered surface would now ever allow it to be, I still saw marquee-sized advertisements for soy houses, strip clubs, rotating restaurants, golden arches, miniature golf courses, and the one-sixth-g Biggest Rollercoaster In the Solar System. The Earth, with Europe and Africa centered, hung silently above the blight.

I tried to imagine two gentle old people, and a golden retriever dog, wandering around somewhere in the garish paradise framed by that window.

I failed.

I wondered whether it felt good or bad to be here. I wasn't tired, which I supposed I could attribute to the sensation of renewed strength and vigor that older people are supposed to feel after making the transition to lower gravities. Certainly, my knees, which had been bothering me for more than a decade now, weren't giving me a single twinge here. But I was also here alone, a decade after burying my dear wife—and though I'd travelled around a little, in the last few years, I had never really grown used to the way the silence of a strange room, experienced alone, tastes like the death that waited for me too.

After about half an hour of feeling sorry for myself I dressed in one of my best blue suits—an old one Claire had picked out in better days, with a cut now two styles out of date—and went to the lobby to see the concierge. I found him in the center of a lobby occupied not by adventurers or pioneers but by businessmen and tourists. He was a sallow-faced young man seated behind a flat slab of a desk, constructed from some material made to resemble polished black marble. It might have been intended to represent a Kubrick monolith lying on its side, a touch that would have been appropriate enough for the moon but might have given the decorator too much credit for classical allusions. I found more Kubrick material in the man himself, in that he was a typical hotel functionary: courteous, professional, friendly, and as cold as a plain white wall. Beaming, he said: “Can I help you, sir?”

“I'm looking for Minnie and Earl,” I told him.

His smile was an unfaltering, professional thing, that might have been scissored out of a magazine ad and scotch-taped to the bottom half of his face. “Do you have their full names, sir?”

“Those are their full names.” I confess I smiled with reminiscence. “They're both one of a kind.”

“I see. And they're registered at the hotel?”

“I doubt it,” I said. “They're lunar residents. I just don't have their address.”

“Did you try the directory?”

“I tried that before I left Earth,” I said. “They're not listed. Didn't expect them to be, either.”

He hesitated a fraction of a second before continuing: “I'm not sure I know what to suggest, then—”

“I'm sure you don't,” I said, unwillingly raising my voice just enough to give him a little taste of the anger and frustration and dire need that had fueled this entire trip. Being a true professional, used to dealing with obnoxious and arrogant tourists, the concierge didn't react at all: just politely waited for me to get on with it. I, on the other hand, winced before continuing: “They're before your time. Probably way before your time. But there have to be people around—old people, mostly—who know who I'm talking about. Maybe you can ask around for me? Just a little? And pass around the word that I need to talk?”

The professional smile did not change a whit, but it still acquired a distinctively dubious flavor. “Minnie and Earl, sir?”

“Minnie and Earl.” I then showed him the size of the tip he'd earn if he accomplished it—big enough to

make certain that he'd take the request seriously, but not so large that he'd be tempted to concoct false leads. It impressed him exactly as much as I needed it to. Too bad there was almost no chance of it accomplishing anything; I'd been making inquiries about the old folks for years. But the chances of me giving up were even smaller: not when I now knew I only had a few months left before the heart stop beating in my chest.

They were Minnie and Earl, dammit.

And anybody who wasn't there in the early days couldn't possibly understand how much that meant.

* * * *

It's a funny thing, about frontiers: they're not as enchanting as the folks who work them like you to believe. And there was a lot that they didn't tell the early recruits about the joys of working on the moon.

They didn't tell you that the air systems gave off a nasal hum that kept you from sleeping soundly at any point during your first six weeks on rotation; that the vents were considerately located directly above the bunks to eliminate any way of shutting it out; that just when you found yourself actually needing that hum to sleep something in the circulators decided to change the pitch, rendering it just a tad higher or lower so that instead of lying in bed begging that hum to shut up SHUT UP you sat there instead wondering if the new version denoted a serious mechanical difficulty capable of asphyxiating you in your sleep.

They didn't tell you that the recycled air was a paradise for bacteria, which kept any cold or flu or ear infection constantly circulating between you and your co-workers; that the disinfectants regularly released into the atmosphere smelled bad but otherwise did nothing; that when you started sneezing and coughing it was a sure bet that everybody around you would soon be sneezing and coughing; and that it was not just colds but stomach viruses, contagious rashes and even more unpleasant things that got shared as generously as a bottle of a wine at one of the parties you had time to go to back on Earth when you were able to work only sixty or seventy hours a week. They didn't tell you that work took so very much of your time that the pleasures and concerns of normal life were no longer valid experiential input; that without that input you eventually ran out of non-work-related subjects to talk about, and found your personality withering away like an atrophied limb.

They didn't tell you about the whimsical supply drops and the ensuing shortages of staples like toothpaste and toilet paper. They didn't tell you about the days when all the systems seemed to conk out at once and your deadening routine suddenly became hours of all-out frantic terror. They didn't tell you that after a while you forgot you were on the moon and stopped sneaking looks at the battered blue marble. They didn't tell you that after a while it stopped being a dream and became instead just a dirty and backbreaking job; one that drained you of your enthusiasm faster than you could possibly guess, and one that replaced your ambitions of building a new future with more mundane longings, like feeling once again what it was like to stand unencumbered beneath a midday sun, breathing air that tasted like air and not canned sweat.

They waited until you were done learning all of this on your own before they told you about Minnie and Earl.

I learned on a Sunday—not that I had any reason to keep track of the day; the early development teams were way too short-staffed to enjoy luxuries like days off. There were instead days when you got the shitty jobs and the days when you got the jobs slightly less shitty than the others. On that particular Sunday I had repair duty, the worst job on the moon but for another twenty or thirty possible candidates.

It involved, among them, inspecting, cleaning, and replacing the panels on the solar collectors. There were a lot of panels, since the early collector fields were five kilometers on a side, and each panel was only half a meter square. They tended to collect meteor dust (at best) and get scarred and pitted from micrometeor impacts (at worst). We'd just lost a number of them from heavier rock precipitation, which meant that in addition to replacing those I had to examine even those that remained intact. Since the panels swiveled to follow the sun across the sky, even a small amount of dust debris threatened to fall through the joints into the machinery below. There was never a lot of dust—sometimes it was not even visible. But it had to be removed one panel at a time.

To overhaul the assembly, you spent the whole day on your belly, crawling along the catwalks between them, removing each panel in turn, inspecting them beneath a canopy with nothing but suit light, magnifiers and micro-thin air jet. (A vacuum, of course, would have been redundant.) You replaced the panels pitted beyond repair, brought the ruined ones back to the sled for disposal, and then started all over again.

The romance of space travel? Try nine hours of hideously tedious stoop labor, in a moonsuit. Try hating every minute of it. Try hating where you are and what you're doing and how hard you worked to qualify for this privilege. Try also hating yourself just for feeling that way—but not having any idea how to turn those feelings off.

I was muttering to myself, conjugating some of the more colorful expressions for excrement, when Phil Jacoby called. He was one of the more annoying people on the moon: a perpetual smiler who always looked on the bright side of things and refused to react to even the most acidic sarcasm. Appropriately enough, his carrot hair and freckled cheeks always made him look like a ventriloquist's dummy. He might have been our morale officer, if we'd possessed enough bad taste to have somebody with that job title; but that would have made him even more the kind of guy you grow to hate when you really want to be in a bad mood. I dearly appreciated how distant his voice sounded, as he called my name over the radio: “Max! You bored yet, Max?”

“Sorry,” I said tiredly. “Max went home.”

“Home as in his quarters? Or Home as in Earth?”

“There is no home here,” I said. “Of course Home as on Earth.”

“No return shuttles today,” Phil noted. “Or any time this month. How would he manage that trick?”

“He was so fed up he decided to walk.”

“Hope he took a picnic lunch or four. That's got to be a major hike.”

In another mood, I might have smiled. “What's the bad news, Phil?”

“Why? You expecting bad news?”

There was a hidden glee to his tone that sounded excessive even from Jacoby. “Surprise me.”

“You're quitting early. The barge will be by to pick you up in five minutes.”

According to the digital readout inside my helmet, it was only 13:38 LT. The news that I wouldn't have to devote another three hours to painstaking cleanup should have cheered me considerably; instead, it

rendered me about twenty times more suspicious. I said, “Phil, it will take me at least three times that long just to secure—”

“A relief shift will arrive on another barge within the hour. Don't do another minute of work. Just go back to the sled and wait for pickup. That's an order.”

Which was especially strange because Jacoby was not technically my superior. Sure, he'd been on the moon all of one hundred and twenty days longer than me—and sure, that meant any advice he had to give me needed to be treated like an order, if I wanted to do my job—but even so, he was not the kind of guy who ever ended anything with an authoritarian *That's An Order*. My first reaction was the certainty that I must have been in some kind of serious trouble. Somewhere, sometime, I forgot or neglected one of the safety protocols, and did something suicidally, crazily wrong—the kind of thing that once discovered would lead to me being relieved for incompetence. But I was still new on the moon, and I couldn't think of any recent occasion where I'd been given enough responsibility for that to be a factor. My next words were especially cautious: “Uh, Phil, did I—”

“Go to the sled,” he repeated, even more sternly this time. “And, Max?”

“What?” I asked.

The ebullient side of his personality returned. “I envy you, man.”

The connection clicked off before I could ask him why.

* * * *

A lunar barge was a lot like its terrestrial equivalent, in that it had no motive power of its very own, but needed to be pulled by another vehicle. Ours were pulled by tractors. They had no atmospheric enclosures, since ninety percent of the time they were just used for the slow-motion hauling of construction equipment; whenever they were needed to move personnel, we bolted in a number of forward-facing seats with oxygen feeds and canvas straps to prevent folks imprisoned by clumsy moonsuits from being knocked out of their chairs every time the flatbed dipped in the terrain. It was an extremely low-tech method of travel, not much faster than a human being could sprint, and we didn't often use it for long distances.

There were four other passengers on this one, all identical behind mirrored facemasks; I had to read their nametags to see who they were. Nikki Hollander, Oscar Desalvo, George Peterson, and Carrie Aldrin No Relation (the last two words a high-permanent part of her name, up here). All four of them had been on-site at least a year more than I had, and to my eyes had always seemed to be dealing with a routine a lot better than I had been. As I strapped in, and the tractor started up, and the barge began its glacial progress toward a set of lumpy peaks on the horizon, I wished my co-workers had something other than distorted reflections of the lunar landscape for faces; it would be nice to be able to judge from their expressions just what was going on here. I said: “So what's the story, people? Where we headed?”

Then Carrie Aldrin No Relation began to sing: “Over the river and through the woods / to grandmother's house we go...”

George Peterson snorted. Oscar Desalvo, a man not known for his giddy sense of humor, who was in fact even grimmer than me most of the time—(not from disenchantment with his work, but out of personal inclination)—giggled; it was like watching one of the figures on Mount Rushmore stick its tongue out. Nikki Hollander joined in, her considerably less-than-perfect pitch turning the rest of the song into a

nails-on-blackboard cacophony. The helmet speakers, which distorted anyway, did not help.

I said, "Excuse me?"

Nikki Hollander said something so blatantly ridiculous that I couldn't force myself to believe I'd heard her correctly.

"Come again? I lost that."

"No you didn't." Her voice seemed strained, almost hysterical.

One of the men was choking with poorly repressed laughter. I couldn't tell who.

"You want to know if I like yams?"

Nikki's response was a burlesque parody of astronautic stoicism. "That's an a-ffirmative, Houston."

"Yams the vegetable yams?"

"A-ffirmative." The A emphasized and italicized so broadly that it was not so much a separate syllable as a sovereign country.

This time I recognized the strangulated noises. They were coming from George Peterson, and they were the sounds made by a man who was trying very hard not to laugh. It was several seconds before I could summon enough dignity to answer. "Yeah, I like yams. How is that relevant?"

"Classified," she said, and then her signal cut off.

In fact, all their signals cut off, though I could tell from the red indicators on my internal display that they were all still broadcasting.

That was not unusual. Coded frequencies were one of the few genuine amenities allowed us; they allowed those of us who absolutely needed a few seconds to discuss personal matters with co-workers to do so without sharing their affairs with anybody else who might be listening. We're not supposed to spend more than a couple of minutes at a time on those channels because it's safer to stay monitored. Being shut out of four signals simultaneously—in a manner that could only mean raucous laughter at my expense—was unprecedented, and it pissed me off. Hell, I'll freely admit that it did more than that; it frightened me. I was on the verge of suspecting brain damage caused by something wrong with the air supply.

Then George Peterson's voice clicked: "Sorry about that, old buddy." (I'd never been his old buddy.) "We usually do a better job keeping a straight face."

"At what? Mind telling me what's going on here?"

"One minute." He performed the series of maneuvers necessary to cut off the oxygen provided by the barge, and restore his dependence on the supply contained in his suit, then unstrapped his harnesses, stood, and moved toward me, swaying slightly from the bumps and jars of our imperfectly smooth ride across the lunar surface.

It was, of course, against all safety regulations for him to be on his feet while the barge was in motion;

after all, even as glacially slow as that was, it wouldn't have taken all that great an imperfection in the road before us to knock him down and perhaps inflict the kind of hairline puncture capable of leaving him with a slight case of death. We had all disobeyed that particular rule from time to time; there were just too many practical advantages in being able to move around at will, without first ordering the tractor to stop. But it made no sense for him to come over now, just to talk, as if it really made a difference for us to be face-to-face. After all, we weren't faces. We were a pair of convex mirrors, reflecting each other while the men behind them spoke on radios too powerful to be noticeably improved by a few less meters of distance.

Even so, he sat down on a steel crate lashed to the deck before me, and positioned his faceplate opposite mine, his body language suggesting meaningful eye contact. He held that position for almost a minute, not saying anything, not moving, behaving exactly like a man who believed he was staring me down.

It made no sense. I could have gone to sleep and he wouldn't have noticed.

Instead, I said: "What?"

He spoke quietly: "Am I correct in observing that you've felt less than, shall we say... 'inspired', by your responsibilities here?"

Oh, Christ. This was about something I'd done.

"Is there some kind of problem?"

George's helmet trembled enough to suggest a man theatrically shaking his head inside it. "Lighten up, Max. Nobody has any complaints about your work. We think you're one of the best people we have here, and your next evaluation is going to give you straight A's in every department ... except enthusiasm. You just don't seem to believe in the work anymore."

As much as I tried to avoid it, my answer still reeked with denial. "I believe in it."

"You believe in the idea of it," George said. "But the reality has worn you down."

I was stiff, proper, absolutely correct, and absolutely transparent. "I was trained. I spent a full year in simulation, doing all the same jobs. I knew what it was going to be like. I knew what to expect."

"No amount of training can prepare you for the moment when you think you can't feel the magic anymore."

"And you can?" I asked, unable to keep the scorn from my voice:

The speakers inside lunar helmets were still pretty tinny, in those days; they no longer transformed everything we said into the monotones that once upon a time helped get an entire country fed up with the forced badinage of Apollo, but neither were they much good at conveying the most precise of emotional cues. And yet I was able to pick up something in George's tone that was, given my mood, capable of profoundly disturbing me: a strange, transcendent joy. "Oh, yes. Max. I can."

I was just unnerved enough to ask: "How?"

"I'm swimming in it," he said—and even as long as he'd been part of the secret, his voice still quavered,

as if there was some seven-year-old part of him that remained unwilling to believe that it could possibly be. “We're all swimming in it.”

“I'm not.”

And he laughed out loud. “Don't worry. We're going to gang up and shove you into the deep end of the pool.”

* * * *

That was seventy years ago.

Seventy years. I think about how old that makes me and I cringe. Seventy years ago, the vast majority of old farts who somehow managed to make it to the age I am now were almost always living on the outer edges of decrepitude. The physical problems were nothing compared with the senility. What's that? You don't remember senile dementia? Really? I guess there's a joke in there somewhere, but it's not that funny for those of us who can remember actually considering it a possible future. Trust me, it was a nightmare. And the day they licked that one was one hell of an advertisement for progress.

But still, seventy years. You want to know how long ago that was? Seventy years ago it was still possible to find people who had heard of Bruce Springsteen. There were even some who remembered the Beatles. Stephen King was still coming out with his last few books, Kate Emma Brenner hadn't yet come out with any, Exxon was still in business, the reconstruction of the ice packs hadn't even been proposed, India and Pakistan hadn't reconciled, and the idea of astronauts going out into space to blow up a giant asteroid before it impacted with Earth was not an anecdote from recent history but a half-remembered image from a movie your father talked about going to see when he was a kid. Seventy years ago the most pressing headlines had to do with the worldwide ecological threat posed by the population explosion among escaped sugar gliders.

Seventy years ago, I hadn't met Claire. She was still married to her first husband, the one she described as the nice mistake. She had no idea I was anywhere in her future. I had no idea she was anywhere in mine. The void hadn't been defined yet, let alone filled. (Nor had it been cruelly emptied again—and wasn't it sad how the void I'd lived with for so long seemed a lot larger, once I needed to endure it again?)

Seventy years ago I thought Faisal Awad was an old man. He may have been in his mid-thirties then, at most ten years older than I was. That, to me, was old. These days it seems one step removed from the crib.

I haven't mentioned Faisal yet; he wasn't along the day George and the others picked me up in the barge, and we didn't become friends til later. But he was a major member of the development team, back then—the kind of fixitall adventurer who could use the coffee machine in the common room to repair the heating system in the clinic. If you don't think that's a valuable skill, try living under 24-7 life support in a hostile environment where any requisitions for spare parts had to be debated and voted upon by a government committee during election years. It's the time of my life when I first developed my deep abiding hatred of Senators. Faisal was our life-saver, our miracle worker, and our biggest local authority on the works of Gilbert and Sullivan, though back then we were all too busy to listen to music and much more likely to listen to that 15-minute wonder Polka Thug anyway. After I left the moon, and the decades of my life fluttered by faster than I once could have imagined possible, I used to think about Faisal and decide that I really ought to look him up, someday, maybe, as soon as I had the chance. But he had stayed on Luna, and I had gone back to Earth, and what with one thing or another that resolution

had worked out as well as such oughtas always do: a lesson that old men have learned too late for as long as there have been old men to learn it.

I didn't even know how long he'd been dead until I heard it from his granddaughter Janine Seuss, a third-generation lunar I was able to track down with the help of the Selene Historical Society. She was a slightly-built thirty-seven year-old with stylishly mismatched eye color and hair micro-styled into infinitesimal pixels that, when combed correctly, formed the famous old black-and-white news photograph of that doomed young girl giving the finger to the cops at the San Diego riots of some thirty years ago. Though she had graciously agreed to meet me, she hadn't had time to arrange her hair properly, and the photo was eerily distorted, like an image captured and then distorted on putty. She served coffee, which I can't drink anymore but which I accepted anyway, then sat down on her couch with the frantically miaowing siamese.

“There were still blowouts then,” she said. “Some genuine accidents, some bombings arranged by the Flat-Mooners. It was one of the Flat-Mooners who got Poppy. He was taking Mermer—our name for Grandma—to the movies up on topside; back then, they used to project them on this big white screen a couple of kilometers outside, though it was always some damn thing fifty or a hundred years old with dialogue that didn't make sense and stories you had to be older than Moses to appreciate. Anyway, the commuter tram they were riding just went boom and opened up into pure vacuum. Poppy and Mermer and about fourteen others got sucked out.” She took a deep breath, then let it out all at once. “That was almost twenty years ago.”

What else can you say, when you hear a story like that? “I'm sorry.”

She acknowledged that with an equally ritual response. “Thanks.”

“Did they catch the people responsible?”

“Right away. They were a bunch of losers. Unemployed idiots.”

I remembered the days when the only idiots on the moon were highly-educated and overworked ones. After a moment, I said: “Did he ever talk about the early days? The development teams?”

She smiled. “Ever? It was practically all he ever did talk about. You kids don't, bleh bleh bleh. He used to get mad at the vids that made it look like a time of sheriffs and saloons and gunfights—he guessed they probably made good stories for kids who didn't know any better, but kept complaining that life back then wasn't anything like that. He said there was always too much work to do to strap on six-guns and go gunning for each other.”

“He was right,” I said. (There was a grand total of one gunfight in the first thirty years of lunar settlement—and it's not part of this story.)

“Most of his stories about those days had to do with things breaking down and him being the only person who could fix them in the nick of time. He told reconditioned-software anecdotes. Finding the rotten air filter anecdotes. Improvised joint-lubricant anecdotes. Lots of them.”

“That was Faisal.”

She petted the cat. (It was a heavy-lidded, meatloaf-shaped thing that probably bestirred itself only at the sound of a can opener: we'd tamed the moon so utterly that people like Janine were able to spare some pampering for their pets.) “Bleh. I prefer the gunfights.”

I leaned forward and asked the important question. “Did he ever mention anybody named Minnie and Earl?”

“Were those a couple of folks from way back then?”

“You could say that.”

“No last names?”

“None they ever used.”

She thought about that, and said: “Would they have been folks he knew only slightly? Or important people?”

“Very important people,” I said. “It’s vital that I reach them.”

She frowned. “It was a long time ago. Can you be sure they’re still alive?”

“Absolutely,” I said.

She considered that for a second. “No, I’m sorry. But you have to realize it was a long time ago for me too. I don’t remember him mentioning anybody.”

Faisal was the last of the people I’d known from my days on the moon. There were a couple on Earth, but both had flatly denied any knowledge of Minnie and Earl. Casting about for last straws, I said: “Do you have anything that belonged to him?”

“No, I don’t. But I know where you can go to look further.”

* * * *

Seventy years ago, after being picked up by the barge:

Nobody spoke to me again for forty-five minutes, which only fueled my suspicions of mass insanity.

The barge itself made slow but steady progress, following a generally uphill course of the only kind possible in that era, in that place, on the moon: which was to say, serpentine. The landscape here was rough, pocked with craters and jagged outcroppings, in no place willing to respect how convenient it might have been to allow us to proceed in something approaching a straight line. There were places where we had to turn almost a hundred and eighty degrees, double back a while, then turn again, to head in an entirely different direction; it was the kind of route that looks random from one minute to the next but gradually reveals progress in one direction or another. It was clearly a route that my colleagues had travelled many times before; nobody seemed impatient. But for the one guy who had absolutely no idea where we were going, and who wasn’t in fact certain that we were headed anywhere at all, it was torture.

We would have managed the trip in maybe one-tenth the time in one of our fliers, but I later learned that the very laboriousness of the journey was, for first-timers at least, a traditional part of the show. It gave us time to speculate, to anticipate. This was useful for unlimbering the mind, ironing the kinks out of the imagination, getting us used to the idea that we were headed someplace important enough to be worth the trip. The buildup couldn’t possibly be enough—the view over that last ridge was still going to hit us

with the force of a sledgehammer to the brain—but I remember how hard it hit and I'm still thankful the shock was cushioned even as inadequately as it was.

We followed a long boring ridge for the better part of fifteen minutes ... then began to climb a slope that bore the ruddy look of lunar ground that had known tractor-treads hundreds of times before. Some of my fellow journeyers hummed ominous, horror-movie soundtrack music in my ear, but George's voice overrode them all: “Max? Did Phil tell you he envied you this moment?”

I was really nervous now. “Yes.”

“He's full of crap. You're not going to enjoy this next bit instead in retrospect. Later on you'll think of it as the best moment of your life—and it might even be—but it won't feel like that when it happens. It'll feel big and frightening and insane when it happens. Trust me now when I tell you that it will get better, and quickly ... and that everything will be explained, if not completely, then at least as much as it needs to be.”

It was an odd turn of phrase. “As much as it needs to be? What's that supposed to—”

That's when the barge reached the top of the rise, providing us a nice panoramic view of what awaited us in the shallow depression on the other side.

My ability to form coherent sentences became a distant rumor.

It was the kind of moment when the entire universe seems to become a wobbly thing, propped up by scaffolding and held together with the cheapest brand of hardware-store nails. The kind of moment when gravity just turns sideways beneath you, and the whole world turns on its edge, and the only thing that prevents you from just jetting off into space to spontaneously combust is the compensatory total stoppage of time. I don't know the first thing I said. I'm glad nobody ever played me the recordings that got filed away in the permanent mission archives ... and I'm equally sure that the reason they didn't is that anybody actually on the moon to listen to them must have also had their own equally aghast reactions also saved for posterity. I got to hear such sounds many times, from others I would later escort over that ridge myself—and I can absolutely assure you that they're the sounds made by intelligent, educated people who first think they've gone insane, and who then realize it doesn't help to know that they haven't.

It was the only possible immediate reaction to the first sight of Minnie and Earl's.

What I saw, as we crested the top of that ridge, was this:

In the center of a typically barren lunar landscape, surrounded on all sides by impact craters, rocks, more rocks, and the suffocating emptiness of vacuum—

—a dark landscape, mind you, one imprisoned by lunar night, and illuminated only by the gibbous Earth hanging high above us—

—a rectangle of color and light, in the form of four square acres of freshly-watered, freshly moved lawn.

With a house on it.

Not a prefab box of the kind we dropped all over the lunar landscape for storage and emergency air stops.

A house.

A clapboard family home, painted a homey yellow, with a wraparound porch three steps off the ground, a canopy to keep off the sun, a screen door leading inside and a bug-zapper over the threshold. There was a porch swing with cushions in a big yellow daisy pattern, and a wall of neatly-trimmed hedges around the house, obscuring the latticework that enclosed the crawlspace underneath. It was over-the-top middle american that even in that first moment I half-crazily expected the scent of lemonade to cross the vacuum and enter my suit. (That didn't happen, but lemonade was waiting.) The lawn was completely surrounded with a white picket fence with an open gate; there was even an old-fashioned mailbox at the gate, with its flag up. All of it was lit, from nowhere, like a bright summer afternoon. The house itself had two stories, plus a sloping shingled roof high enough to hide a respectable attic; as we drew closer I saw that there were pull-down shades, not venetian blinds, in the pane-glass windows. Closer still, and I spotted the golden retriever that lay on the porch, its head resting between muddy paws as it followed our approach; it was definitely a lazy dog, since it did not get up to investigate us, but it was also a friendly one, whose big red tail thumped against the porch in greeting. Closer still, and I made various consonant noises as a venerable old lady in gardening overalls came around the side of the house, spotted us, and broke into the kind of smile native only to contented old ladies seeing good friends or grandchildren after too long away. When my fellow astronauts all waved back, I almost followed their lead, but for some reason my arms wouldn't move.

Somewhere in there I murmured, "This is impossible."

"Clearly not," George said. "If it were impossible it wouldn't be happening. The more accurate word is inexplicable."

"What the hell is—"

"Come on, goofball." This from Carrie Aldrin No Relation. "You're acting like you never saw a house before."

Sometimes, knowing when to keep your mouth shut is the most eloquent expression of wisdom. I shut up.

It took about a million and a half years—or five minutes if you go by merely chronological time—for the tractor to descend the shallow slope and bring us to a stop some twenty meters from the front gate. By then an old man had joined the old woman at the fence. He was a lean old codger with bright blue eyes, a nose like a hawk, a smile that suggested he'd just heard a whopper of a joke, and the kind of forehead some very old men have—the kind that by all rights ought to have been glistening with sweat, like most bald heads, but instead seemed perpetually dry, in a way that suggested a sophisticated system for the redistribution of excess moisture. He had the leathery look of old men who had spent much of their lives working in the sun. He wore neatly-pressed tan pants, sandals, and a white button-down shirt open at the collar, all of which was slightly loose on him—not enough to make him look comical or pathetic, but enough to suggest that he'd been a somewhat bigger man before age had diminished him, and was still used to buying the larger sizes. (That is, I thought, if there was any possibility of him finding a good place to shop around here.)

His wife, if that's who she was, was half a head shorter and slightly stouter; she had blue eyes and a bright smile, like him, but a soft and rounded face that provided a pleasant complement to his lean and angular one. She was a just overweight enough to provide her with the homey accoutrements of chubby cheeks and double chin; unlike her weathered, bone-dry husband, she was smooth-skinned and shiny-faced and very much a creature the sun had left untouched (though she evidently spent time there; at least, she wore gardener's gloves, and carried a spade).

They were, in short, vaguely reminiscent of the old folks standing before the farmhouse in that famous old painting “American Gothic”. You know the one I mean—the constipated old guy with the pitchfork next to the wife who seems mortified by his very presence? These two were those two after they cheered up enough to be worth meeting.

Except, of course, that this couldn't possibly be happening.

My colleagues unstrapped themselves, lowered the stairway, and disembarked. The tractor driver, whoever he was, emerged from its cab and joined them. George stayed with me, watching my every move, as I proved capable of climbing down a set of three steps without demonstrating my total incapacitation from shock. When my boots crunched lunar gravel—a texture I could feel right through the treads of my boots, and which served at that moment to reconnect me to ordinary physical reality—Carrie, Oscar, and Nikki patted me on the back, a gesture that felt like half-congratulation and, half-commiseration. The driver came by, too; I saw from the markings on his suit that he was Pete Rawlik, who was assigned to some kind of classified biochemical research in one of our outlabs; he had always been too busy to mix much, and I'd met him maybe twice by that point, but he still clapped my shoulder like an old friend. As for George, he made a wait gesture and went back up the steps.

In the thirty seconds we stood there waiting for him, I looked up at the picket fence, just to confirm that the impossible old couple was still there, and I saw that the golden retriever, which had joined its masters at the gate, was barking silently. That was good. If the sound had carried in vacuum, I might have been worried. That would have been just plain crazy.

Then George came back, carrying an airtight metal cylinder just about big enough to hold a soccer ball. I hadn't seen any vacuum boxes of that particular shape and size before, but any confusion I might have felt about that was just about the last thing I needed to worry about. He addressed the others: “How's he doing?”

A babble of noncommittal okays dueled for broadcast supremacy. Then the voices resolved into individuals.

Nikki Hollander said: “Well, at least he's not babbling anymore.”

Oscar Desalvo snorted: “I attribute that to brain-lock.”

“You weren't any better,” said Carrie Aldrin No Relation. “Worse. If I recall correctly, you made a mess in your suit.”

“I'm not claiming any position of false superiority, hon. Just giving my considered diagnosis.”

“Whatever,” said Pete Rawlik. “Let's just cross the fenceline, already. I have an itch.”

“In a second,” George said. His mirrored faceplate turned toward mine, aping eye-contact. “Max? You getting this?”

“Barely,” I managed.

“Outstanding. You're doing fine. But I need you with me a hundred percent while I cover our most important ground rule. Namely—everything inside that picket fence is a temperate-climate, sea-level, terrestrial environment. You don't have to worry about air filtration, temperature levels, or anything else.

It's totally safe to suit down, as long as you're inside the perimeter—and in a few minutes, we will all be doing just that. But once you're inside that enclosure, the picket fence itself marks the beginning of lunar vacuum, lunar temperatures, and everything that implies. You do not, repeat not, do anything to test the differential. Even sticking a finger out between the slats is enough to get you bounced from the program, with no possibility of reprieve. Is that clear?"

"Yes, but—"

"Rule Two," he said, handing me the sealed metal box. "You're the new guy. You carry the pie."

I regarded the cylinder. Pie?

* * * *

I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, but it never did.

The instant we passed through the front gate, the dead world this should have been surrendered to a living one. Sound returned between one step and the next. The welcoming cries of the two old people—and the barking of their friendly golden retriever dog—may have been muffled by my helmet, but they were still identifiable enough to present touches of personality. The old man's voice was gruff in a manner that implied a past flavored by whiskey and cigars, but there was also a sing-song quality to it, that instantly manifested itself as a tendency to end his sentences at higher registers. The old woman's voice was soft and breathy, with only the vaguest suggestion of an old-age quaver and a compensatory tinge of the purest Georgia Peach. The dog's barks were like little frenzied explosions, that might have been threatening if they hadn't all trailed off into quizzical whines. It was a symphony of various sounds that could be made for hello: laughs, cries, yips, and delighted shouts of George! Oscar! Nikki! Carrie! Pete! So glad you could make it! How are you?

It was enough to return me to statue mode. I didn't even move when the others disengaged their helmet locks, doffed their headgear, and began oohing and aahing themselves. I just spent the next couple of minutes watching, physically in their midst but mentally somewhere very far away, as the parade of impossibilities passed on by. I noted that Carrie Aldrin No Relation, who usually wore her long red hair beneath the tightest of protective nets, was today styled in pigtails with big pink bows; that Oscar, who was habitually scraggly-haired and two days into a beard, was today perfectly kempt and freshly shaven; that George giggled like a five-year-old when the dog stood up on its hind legs to slobber all over his face; and that Pete engaged with a little mock wrestling match with the old man that almost left him toppling backward onto the grass. I saw the women whisper to each other, then bound up the porch steps into the house, so excitedly that they reminded me of schoolgirls skipping off to the playground—a gait that should have been impossible to simulate in a bulky moonsuit, but which they pulled off with perfect flair. I saw Pete and Oscar follow along behind them, laughing at a shared joke.

I was totally ignored until the dog stood up on its hind legs to sniff at, then snort nasal condensation on, my faceplate. His ears went back. He whined, then scratched at his reflection, then looked over his shoulder at the rest of his pack, long pink tongue lolling plaintively. *Look, guys. There's somebody in this thing.*

I didn't know I was going to take the leap of faith until I actually placed the cake cylinder on the ground, then reached up and undid my helmet locks. The hiss of escaping air made my blood freeze in my chest; for a second I was absolutely certain that all of this was a hallucination brought on by oxygen deprivation, and that I'd just committed suicide by opening my suit to vacuum. But the hiss subsided, and I realized that it was just pressure equalization; the atmosphere in this environment must have been slightly less than

that provided by the suit. A second later, as I removed my helmet, I tasted golden retriever breath as the dog leaned in close and said hello by licking me on the lips. I also smelled freshly mowed grass and the perfume of nearby flowers: I heard a bird not too far away go whoot-toot-toot-weet; and I felt direct sunlight on my face, even though the sun itself was nowhere to be seen. The air itself was pleasantly warm, like summer before it gets obnoxious with heat and humidity.

“Miles!” the old man said. “Get down!”

The dog gave me one last lick for the road and sat down, gazing up at me with that species of tongue-lolling amusement known only to large canines.

The old woman clutched the elbow of George's suit. “Oh, you didn't tell me you were bringing somebody new this time! How wonderful!”

“What is this place?” I managed.

The old man raised his eyebrows. “It's our front yard, son. What does it look like?”

The old woman slapped his hand lightly. “Be nice, dear. You can see he's taking it hard.”

He grunted. “Always did beat me how you can tell what a guy's thinking and feeling just by looking at him.”

She patted his arm again. “It's not all that unusual, apricot. I'm a woman.”

George ambled on over, pulling the two oldsters along. “All right, I'll get it started. Max Fischer, I want you to meet two of the best people on this world or any other—Minnie and Earl. Minnie and Earl, I want you to meet a guy who's not quite as hopeless as he probably seems on first impression—Max Fischer. You'll like him.”

“I like him already,” Minnie said. “I've yet to dislike anybody the dog took such an immediate shine to. Hi, Max.”

“Hello,” I said. After a moment: “Minnie. Earl.”

“Wonderful to meet you, young man. Your friends have said so much about you.”

“Thanks.” Shock lent honesty to my response: “They've said absolutely nothing about you.”

“They never do,” she said, with infinite sadness, as George smirked at me over her back. She glanced down at the metal cylinder at my feet, and cooed: “Is that cake?”

Suddenly, absurdly, the first rule of family visits popped unbidden into my head, blaring its commandment in flaming letters twenty miles high: THOU SHALT NOT PUT THE CAKE YOU BROUGHT ON THE GROUND—ESPECIALLY NOT WHEN A DOG IS PRESENT. Never mind that the container was sealed against vacuum, and that the dog would have needed twenty minutes to get in with an industrial drill: the lessons of everyday American socialization still applied. I picked it up and handed it to her; she took it with her bare hands, reacting not at all to what hindsight later informed me should have been a painfully cold exterior. I said: “Sorry.”

“It's pie,” said George. “Deep-dish apple pie. Direct from my grandma's orchard.”

“Oh, that's sweet of her. She still having those back problems?”

“She's getting on in years,” George allowed. “But she says that soup of yours really helped.”

“I'm glad,” she said, her smile as sunny as the entire month of July. “Meanwhile, why don't you take your friend upstairs and get him out of that horrid suit? I'm sure he'll feel a lot better once he's had a chance to freshen up. Earl can have a drink set for him by the time you come down.”

“I'll fix a Sea of Tranquility,” Earl said, with enthusiasm.

“Maybe once he has his feet under him. A beer should be fine for now.”

“All rightee,” said Earl, with the kind of wink that established he knew quite well I was going to need something a lot more substantial than beer.

As for Minnie, she seized my hand, and said: “It'll be all right, apricot. Once you get past this stage, I'm sure we're all going to be great friends.”

“Um,” I replied, with perfect eloquence.

Wondering just what stage I was being expected to pass.

Sanity?

* * * *

Dying inside, I did what seemed to be appropriate. I followed George through the front door (first stamping my moonboots on the mat, as he specified) and up the narrow, creaky wooden staircase.

You ever go to parties where the guests leave their coats in a heap on the bed of the master bedroom? Minnie and Earl's was like that. Except it wasn't a pile of coats, but a pile of disassembled moonsuits. There were actually two bedrooms upstairs—the women changed in the master bedroom that evidently belonged to the oldsters themselves, the men in a smaller room that felt like it belonged to a teenage boy. The wallpaper was a pattern of galloping horses, and the bookcases were filled with mint-edition paperback thrillers that must have been a hundred years old even then. (Or more: there was a complete collection of the hardcover Hardy Boys Mysteries, by Franklin W. Dixon.) The desk was a genuine antique rolltop, with a green blotter; no computer or hytex. The bed was just big enough to hold one gangly teenager, or three moonsuits disassembled into their component parts, with a special towel provided so our boots wouldn't get moondust all over the bedspread. By the time George and I got up there, Oscar and Pete had already changed into slacks, dress shoes with black socks, and button-down shirts with red bowties; Pete had even put some shiny gunk in his hair to slick it back. They winked at me as they left.

I didn't change, not immediately; nor did I speak, not even as George doffed his own moonsuit and jumpers in favor of a similarly earthbound outfit he blithely salvaged from the closet. The conviction that I was being tested, somehow, was so overwhelming that the interior of my suit must have been a puddle of flop sweat.

Then George said: “You going to be comfortable, dressed like that all night?”

I stirred. “Clothes?”

He pulled an outfit my size from the closet—tan pants, a blue short-sleeved button-down shirt, gleaming black shoes, and a red bowtie identical to the ones Oscar and Pete had donned. “No problem borrowing. Minnie keeps an ample supply. You don't like the selection, you want to pick something more your style, you can always have something snazzier sent up on the next supply drop. I promise you, she'll appreciate the extra effort. It makes her day when—”

“George,” I said softly.

“Have trouble with bowties? No problem. They're optional. You can—”

“George,” I said again, and this time my voice was a little louder, a little deeper, a little more *For Christ's Sake Shut Up I'm Sick Of This Shit*.

He batted his eyes, all innocence and naivete. “Yes, Max?”

My look, by contrast, must have been half-murderous. “Tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

It was very hard not to yell. “You know what!”

He fingered an old issue of some garishly-colored turn-of-the-millennium science fiction magazine. “Oh. That mixed drink Earl mentioned. The Sea of Tranquility. It's his own invention, and he calls it that because your first sip is one small step for Man, and your second is one giant leap for Mankind. There's peppermint in it. Give it a try and I promise you you'll be on his good side for life. He—”

I squeezed the words through clenched teeth. “I. Don't. Care. About. The. Bloody. Drink.”

“Then I'm afraid I don't see your problem.”

“My problem,” I said, slowly, and with carefully repressed frustration, “is that all of this is downright impossible.”

“Apparently not,” he noted.

“I want to know who these people are, and what they're doing here.”

“They're Minnie and Earl, and they're having some friends over for dinner.”

If I'd been five years old, I might have pouted and stamped my foot. (Sometimes, remembering, I think I did anyway.) “Dammit, George!”

He remained supernaturally calm. “No cursing in this house, Max. Minnie doesn't like it. She won't throw you out for doing it—she's too nice for that—but it does make her uncomfortable.”

This is the point where I absolutely know I stamped my foot. “That makes HER uncomfortable!?”

He put down the skiffy magazine. “Really. I don't see why you're having such a problem with this. They're just this great old couple who happen to live in a little country house on the moon, and their

favorite thing is getting together with friends, and we're here to have Sunday night dinner with them. Easy to understand ... especially if you accept that it's all there is."

"That can't be all there is!" I cried, my exasperation reaching critical mass.

"Why not? Can't 'Just Because' qualify as a proper scientific theory?"

"No! It doesn't!—How come you never told me about this place before?"

"You never asked before." He adjusted his tie, glanced at the outfit laid out for me on the bed, and went to the door. "Don't worry; it didn't for me, either. Something close to an explanation is forthcoming. Just get dressed and come downstairs already. We don't want the folks to think you're antisocial..."

* * * *

I'd been exasperated, way back then, because Minnie and Earl were there and had no right to be. I was exasperated now because the more I looked the more impossible it became to find any indication that they'd ever been there at all.

I had started looking for them, if only in a desultory, abstracted way, shortly after Claire died. She'd been the only person on Earth who had ever believed my stories about them. Even now, I think it's a small miracle that she did. I had told her the story of Minnie and Earl before we even became man and wife—sometime after I knew I was going to propose, but before I found the right time and place for the question. I was just back from a couple of years of Outer-System work, had grown weary of the life, and had met this spectacularly kind and funny and beautiful person whose interests were all on Earth, and who had no real desire to go out into space herself. That was just fine with me. It was what I wanted too. And of course I rarely talked to her about my years in space, because I didn't want to become an old bore with a suitcase full of old stories. Even so, I still knew, at the beginning, that knowing about a real-life miracle and not mentioning it to her, ever, just because she was not likely to believe me, was tantamount to cheating. So I sat her down one day, even before the proposal, and told her about Minnie and Earl. And she believed me. She didn't humor me. She didn't just say she believed me. She didn't just believe me to be nice. She believed me. She said she always knew when I was shoveling manure and when I was not—a boast that turned out to be an integral strength of her marriage—and that it was impossible for her to hear me tell the story without knowing that Minnie and Earl were real. She said that if we had children I would have to tell the story to them, too, to pass it on.

That was one of the special things about Claire: she had faith when faith was needed.

But our son and our daughter, and later the grandkids, outgrew believing me. For them, Minnie and Earl were whimsical space-age versions of Santa.

I didn't mind that, not really.

But when she died, finding Minnie and Earl again seemed very important.

It wasn't just that their house was gone, or that Minnie and Earl seemed to have departed for regions unknown; and it wasn't just that the official histories of the early development teams now completely omitted any mention of the secret hoarded by everybody who had ever spent time on the moon in those days. It wasn't just that the classified files I had read and eventually contributed to had disappeared, flushed down the same hole that sends all embarrassing government secrets down the pipe to their final resting place in the sea. But for more years than I'd ever wanted to count, Minnie and Earl had been the

secret history nobody ever talked about. I had spoken to those of my old colleagues who still remained alive, and they had all said, what are you talking about, what do you mean, are you feeling all right, nothing like that ever happened.

It was tempting to believe that my kids were right: that it had been a fairy tale: a little harmless personal fantasy I'd been carrying around with me for most of my life.

But I knew it wasn't.

Because Claire had believed me.

Because whenever I did drag out the old stories one more time, she always said, "I wish I'd known them." Not like an indulgent wife allowing the old man his delusions, but like a woman well acquainted with miracles. And because even if I was getting too old to always trust my own judgement, nothing would ever make me doubt hers.

I searched with phone calls, with letters, with hynet research, with the calling-in of old favors, with every tool available to me. I found nothing.

And then one day I was told that I didn't have much more time to look. It wasn't a tragedy; I'd lived a long and happy life. And it wasn't as bad as it could have been; I'd been assured that there wouldn't be much pain. But I did have that one little unresolved question still hanging over my head

That was the day I overcame decades of resistance and booked return passage to the world I had once helped to build.

The day after I spoke to Janine Seuss, I followed her advice and took a commuter tram to the Michael Collins Museum of Early Lunar Settlement. It was a popular tourist spot with all the tableaux and reenactments and, you should only excuse the expression, cheesy souvenirs you'd expect from such an establishment; I'd avoided it up until now mostly because I'd seen and heard most of it before, and much of what was left was the kind of crowd-pleasing foofaraw that tames and diminishes the actual experience I lived through for the consumption of folks who are primarily interested in tiring out their hyperactive kids. The dumbest of those was a pile of real Earth rocks, replacing the weight various early astronauts had taken from the moon; ha ha ha, stop, I'm dying here. The most offensive was a kids' exhibit narrated by a cartoon-character early development engineer; he spoke with a cornball rural accent, had comic-opera patches on the knees of his moonsuit, and seemed to have an I.Q. of about five.

Another annoying thing about frontiers: when they're not frontiers anymore, the civilizations that move in like to think that the people who came first were stupid.

But when I found pictures of myself, in an exhibit on the development programs, and pointed them out to an attendant, it was fairly easy to talk the curators into letting me into their archives for a look at certain other materials that hadn't seen the light of day for almost twenty years. They were taped interviews, thirty years old now, with a number of the old guys and gals, talking about their experiences in the days of early development: the majority of those had been conducted here on the moon, but others had taken place on Earth or Mars or wherever else any of those old farts ended up. I felt vaguely insulted that they hadn't tried to contact me; maybe they had, and my wife, anticipating my reluctance, had turned them away. I wondered if I should have felt annoyed by that. I wondered too if my annoyance at the taming of the moon had something to do with the disquieting sensation of becoming ancient history while you're still alive to remember it.

There were about ten thousand hours of interviews; even if my health remained stable long enough for me to listen to them all, my savings would run out far sooner. But they were indexed, and audio-search is a wonderful thing. I typed in “Minnie” and got several dozen references to small things, almost as many references to Mickey's rodent girlfriend, and a bunch of stories about a project engineer, from after my time, who had also been blessed with that particular first name. (To believe the transcripts, she spent all her waking hours saying impossibly cute things that her friends and colleagues would remember and be compelled to repeat decades later; what a bloody pixie.) I typed in “Earl” and, though it felt silly, “Miles”, and got a similar collection of irrelevancies—many many references to miles, thus proving conclusively that as recently as thirty years ago the adoption of the metric system hadn't yet succeeded in wiping out any less-elegant but still fondly-remembered forms of measurement. After that, temporarily stuck, I typed in my own name, first and last, and was rewarded with a fine selection of embarrassing anecdotes from folks who recalled what a humorless little pissant I had been way back then. All of this took hours; I had to listen to each of these references, if only for a second or two, just to know for sure what was being talked about, and I confess that, in between a number of bathroom breaks I would have considered unlikely as a younger man, I more than once forgot what I was supposedly looking for long enough to enjoy a few moments with old voices I hadn't heard for longer than most lunar residents had been alive.

I then cross-referenced by the names of the various people who were along on that first Sunday night trip to Minnie and Earl's. “George Peterson” got me nothing of obvious value. “Carrie Aldrin” and “Peter Rawlik”, ditto. Nor did the other names. There were references, but nothing I particularly needed.

Feeling tired, I sat there drumming my fingertips on the tabletop. The museum was closing soon. The research had exhausted my limited stores of strength; I didn't think I could do this many days in a row. But I knew there was something here. There had to be. Even if there was a conspiracy of silence—organized or accidental—the mere existence of that unassuming little house had left too great a footprint on our lives.

I thought about details that Claire had found particularly affecting.

And then I typed “Yams”.

* * * *

Seventy years ago, suffering from a truly epic sense of dislocation that made everything happening to me seem like bits of stage business performed by actors in a play whose author had taken care to omit all the important exposition, I descended a creaky flight of wooden stairs, to join my colleagues in Minnie and Earl's living room. I was the last to come down, of course; everybody else was already gathered around the three flowery-print sofas, munching on finger foods as they chatted up a storm. The women were in soft cottony dresses, the men in starched trousers and button-downs. They all clapped and cheered as I made my appearance, a reaction that brought an unwelcome blush to my cheeks. It was no wonder; I was a little withdrawn to begin with, back then, and the impossible context had me so off-center that all my defenses had turned to powder.

It was a homey place, though: brightly lit, with a burning fireplace, an array of glass shelving covered with a selection of home-made pottery, plants and flowers in every available nook, an upright piano, a bar that did not dominate the room, and an array of framed photographs on the wall behind the couch. There was no TV or hytex. I glanced at the photographs and moved toward them, hungry for data.

Then Earl rose from his easy chair and came around the coffee table, with a gruff, “Plenty of time to look around, son. Let me take care of you.”

“That's—” I said. I was still not managing complete sentences, most of the time.

He took me by the arm, brought me over to the bar, and sat me down on a stool. “Like I said, plenty of time. You're like most first-timers, you're probably in dire need of a drink. We can take care of that first and then get acquainted.” He moved around the bar, slung a towel over his shoulder, and said: “What'll it be, Pilgrim?”

Thank God I recognized the reference. If I hadn't—if it had just been another inexplicable element of a day already crammed with them—my head would have exploded from the effort of figuring out why I was being called a Pilgrim. “A ... Sea of Tranquility?”

“Man after my own heart,” Earl said, flashing a grin as he compiled an impressive array of ingredients in a blender. “Always drink the local drink, son. As my Daddy put it, there's no point in going anywhere if you just get drunk the same way you can at home.—Which is where, by the way?”

I said, “What?”

“You missed the segue. I was asking you where you were from.”

It seemed a perfect opportunity. “You first.”

He chuckled. “Oh, the wife and I been here long enough, you might as well say we're from here. Great place to retire, isn't it? The old big blue marble hanging up there all day and all night?”

“I suppose,” I said.

“You suppose,” he said, raising an eyebrow at the concoction taking shape in his blender. “That's awful noncommittal of you. Can't you even admit to liking the view?”

“I admit to it,” I said.

“But you're not enthused. You know, there's an old joke about a fella from New York and a fella from New Jersey. And the fella from New York is always bragging on his town, talking about Broadway, and the Empire State Building, and Central Park, and so on, and just as often saying terrible things about how ugly things are on the Jersey side of the river. And the fella from Jersey finally gets fed up, and says, all right, I've had enough of this, I want you to say one thing, just one thing, about New Jersey that's better than anything you can say about Manhattan. And the fella from New York says, No problem. The view.”

I didn't laugh, but I did smile.

“That's what's so great about this place,” he concluded. “The view. Moon's pretty nice to look at for folks on Earth—and a godsend for bad poets, too, what with june-moon-spoon and all—but as views go, it can't hold a candle to the one we have, looking back. So don't give me any supposes. Own up to what you think.”

“It's a great view,” I said, this time with conviction, as he handed my drink. Then I asked the big question another way: “How did you arrange it?”

“You ought to know better than that, son. We didn't arrange it. We just took advantage of it. Nothing like a scenic overlook to give zip to your real estate.—So answer me. Where are you from?”

Acutely aware that more than a minute had passed since I'd asked him the same question, and that no answer seemed to be forthcoming, I was also too trapped by simple courtesy to press the issue. "San Francisco."

He whistled. "I've seen pictures of San Francisco. Looks like a beautiful town."

"It is," I said.

"You actually climb those hills in Earth gravity?"

"I used to run up Hyde every morning at dawn."

"Hyde's the big steep one that heads down to the bay?"

"One of them," I said.

"And you ran up that hill? At dawn? Every day?"

"Yup."

"You have a really obsessive personality, don't you, son?"

I shrugged. "About some things, I suppose."

"Only about some things?"

"That's what being obsessive means, right?"

"Ah, well. Nothing wrong about being obsessive, as long as you're not a fanatic about it. Want me to freshen up that drink?"

I felt absolutely no alcoholic effect at all. "Maybe you better."

I tried to turn the conversation back to where he was from, but somehow I didn't get a chance, because that's when Minnie took me by the hand and dragged me over to the wall of family photos. There were pictures of them smiling on the couch, pictures of them lounging together in the backyard, pictures of them standing proudly before their home. There were a large number of photos that used Earth as a backdrop. Only four photos showed them with other people, all from the last century: in one, they sat at their dining table with a surprised-looking Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin; in another, they sat on their porch swing chatting with Carl Sagan; in a third, Minnie was being enthusiastically hugged by Isaac Asimov; the fourth showed Earl playing the upright piano while Minnie sat beside him and a tall, thin blonde man with androgynous features and two differently-colored eyes serenaded them both. The last figure was the only one I didn't recognize immediately; by the time somebody finally clued me in, several visits later, I would be far too jaded to engage in the spit-take it would have merited any other time.

I wanted to ask Minnie about the photos with the people I recognized, but then Peter and Earl dragged me downstairs to take a look at Earl's model train set, a rural landscape incorporating four lines and six separate small towns. It was a remarkably detailed piece of work, but I was most impressed with the small miracle of engineering that induced four heavy chains to pull it out of the way whenever Earl pulled a small cord. This handily revealed the pool table. Earl whipped Peter two games out of three, then

challenged me; I'm fairly good at pool, but I was understandably off my game that afternoon, and missed every single shot. When Carrie Aldrin No Relation came down to challenge Earl, he mimed terror. It was a genial hour, totally devoted to content-free conversation—and any attempt I made to bring up the questions that burned in my breast was terminated without apparent malice.

Back upstairs. The dog nosing at my hand. Minnie noting that he liked me. Minnie saying anything about the son whose room we'd changed in, the one who'd died “in the war”. A very real heartbreak about the way her eyes grew distant at that moment. I asked which war, and she smiled sadly: “There's only been one war, dear—and it doesn't really matter what you call it.” Maxine patting her hand. Oscar telling a mildly funny anecdote from his childhood, Minnie asking him to tell her the one about the next-door neighbors again. I brought up the photo of Minnie and Earl with Neal Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, and Minnie clucked that they had been such nice boys.

Paranoia hit. “Ever hear of Ray Bradbury?”

She smiled with real affection. “Oh, yes. We only met him once or twice, but he was genuinely sweet. I miss him.”

“So you met him, too.”

“We've met a lot of people, apricot. Why? Is he a relation?”

“Just an old-time writer I like,” I said.

“Ahhhhhh.”

“In fact,” I said, “one story of his I particularly like was called ‘Mars is Heaven’.”

She sipped her tea. “Don't know that one.”

“It's about a manned expedition to Mars—written while that was still in the future, you understand. And when the astronauts get there they discover a charming, rustic, old-fashioned American small town, filled with sweet old folks they remember from their childhoods. It's the last thing they expect, but after a while they grow comfortable with it. They even jump to the conclusion that Mars is the site of the afterlife. Except it's not. The sweet old folks are aliens in disguise, and they're lulling all these gullible earthlings into a false sense of security so they can be killed at leisure.”

My words had been hesitantly spoken, less out of concern for Minnie's feelings than those of my colleagues. Their faces were blank, unreadable, masking emotions that could have been anything from anger to amusement. I will admit that for a split second there, my paranoia reaching heights it had never known before (or thank God, since), I half-expected George and Oscar and Maxine to morph into the hideously tentacled bug-eyed monsters who had taken their places immediately after eating their brains. Then the moment passed, and the silence continued to hang heavily in the room, and any genuine apprehension I might have felt gave way to an embarrassment of more mundane proportions. After all—whatever the explanation for all this might have been—I'd just been unforgivably rude to a person who had only been gracious and charming toward me.

She showed no anger, no sign that she took it personally. “I remember that one now, honey. I'm afraid I didn't like it as much as some of Ray's other efforts. Among other things, it seemed pretty unreasonable to me that critters advanced enough to pull off that kind of masquerade would have nothing better to do with their lives to eat nice folks who came calling.—But then, he also wrote a story about a baby that

starts killing as soon as it leaves the womb, and I prefer to believe that infants, given sufficient understanding and affection, soon learn that the universe outside the womb isn't that dark and cold a place after all. Given half a chance, they might even grow up ... and it's a wonderful process to watch.”

I had nothing to say to that.

She sipped her tea again, one pinky finger extended in the most un-self-conscious manner imaginable, just as if she couldn't fathom drinking her tea any other way, then, spoke brightly, with perfect timing: “But if you stay the night, I'll be sure to put you in the room with all the pods.”

There was a moment of silence, with every face in the room—including those of Earl and Peter and Carrie, who had just come up from downstairs—as distinguishedly impassive as a granite bust of some forefather you had never heard of.

Then I averted my eyes, trying to hide the smile as it began to spread on my face.

Then somebody made a helpless noise, and we all exploded with laughter.

* * * *

Seventy years later:

If every land ever settled by human beings has its garden spots, then every land ever settled by human beings has its hovels. This is true even of frontiers that have become theme parks. I had spent much of this return to the world I had once known wandering through a brightly-lit, comfortably-upholstered tourist paradise—the kind of ersatz environment common to all overdeveloped places, that is less an expression of local character than a determined struggle to ensure the total eradication of anything resembling local character. But now I was headed toward a place that would never be printed on a postcard, that would never be on the tours, that existed on tourist maps only as the first, best sign that those looking for easy travelling have just made a disastrous wrong turn.

It was on Farside, of course. Most tourist destinations, and higher-end habitats, are on Nearside, which comes equipped with a nice blue planet to look at. Granted that even on Nearside the view is considered a thing for tourists, and that most folks who live here live underground and like to brag to each other about how long they've gone with Earthgazing—our ancestral ties are still part of us, and the mere presence of Earth, seen or unseen, is so inherently comforting that most normal people with a choice pick Nearside. Farside, by comparison, caters almost exclusively to hazardous industries and folks who don't want that nice blue planet messing up the stark emptiness of their sky—a select group of people that includes a small number of astronomers at the Frank Drake Observatory, and a large number of assorted perverts and geeks and misanthropes. The wild frontier of the fantasies comes closest to being a reality here—the hemisphere has some heavy-industry settlements that advertise their crime rates as a matter of civic pride.

And then there are the haunts of those who find even those places too civilized for their tastes. The mountains and craters of Farside are dotted with the little boxy single-person habitats of folks who have turned their back not only on the home planet but also the rest of humanity as well. Some of those huddle inside their self-imposed solitary confinement for weeks or months on end, emerging only to retrieve their supply drops or enforce the warning their radios transmit on infinite loop: that they don't want visitors and that all trespassers should expect to be shot. They're all eccentric, but some are crazy and a significant percentage of them are clinically insane. They're not the kind of folks the sane visit just for local color.

I landed my rented skimmer on a ridge overlooking an oblong metal box with a roof marked by a glowing ten-digit registration number. It was night here, and nobody who lived in such a glorified house trailer would have been considerate enough to provide any outside lighting for visitors, so those lit digits provided the only ground-level rebuttal to starfield up above; it was an inadequate rebuttal at best, which left the ground on all sides an ocean of undifferentiated inky blackness. I could carry my own lamp, of course, but I didn't want to negotiate the walk from my skimmer to the habitat's front door if the reception I met there required a hasty retreat; I wasn't very capable of hasty retreats, these days.

So I just sat in my skimmer and transmit the repeating loop: Walter Stearns. I desperately need to speak to Walter Stearns. Walter Stearns. I desperately need to speak to Walter Stearns. Walter Stearns. I desperately need to speak to Walter Stearns. Walter Stearns. I desperately need to speak to Walter Stearns. It was the emergency frequency that all of these live-alones are required to keep open 24-7, but there was no guarantee Stearns was listening—and since I was not in distress, I was not really legally entitled to use it. But I didn't care; Stearns was the best lead I had yet.

It was only two hours before a voice like a mouth full of steel wool finally responded: “Go away.”

“I won't be long, Mr. Stearns. We need to talk.”

“You need to talk. I need you to go away.”

“It's about Minnie and Earl, Mr. Stearns.”

There was a pause. “Who?”

The pause had seemed a hair too long to mean mere puzzlement. “Minnie and Earl. From the development days. You remember them, don't you?”

“I never knew any Minnie and Earl,” he said. “Go away.”

“I listened to the tapes you made for the Museum, Mr. Stearns.”

The anger in his hoarse, dusty old voice was still building. “I made those tapes when I was still talking to people. And there's nothing in them about any Minnie or Earl.”

“No,” I said, “there's not. Nobody mentioned Minnie and Earl by name, not you, and not anybody else who participated. But you still remember them. It took me several days to track you down, Mr. Stearns. We weren't here at the same time, but we still had Minnie and Earl in common.”

“I have nothing to say to you,” he said, with a new shrillness in his voice. “I'm an old man. I don't want to be bothered. Go away.”

My cheeks ached from the size of my triumphant grin. “I brought yams.”

There was nothing on the other end but the sibilant hiss of background radiation. It lasted just long enough to persuade me that my trump card had been nothing of the kind; he had shut down or smashed his receiver, or simply turned his back to it, so he could sit there in his little cage waiting for the big bad outsider to get tired and leave.

Then he said: “Yams.”

Twenty-four percent of the people who contributed to the Museum's oral history had mentioned yams at least once. They had talked about the processing of basic food shipments from home, and slipped yams into their lists of the kind of items received; they had conversely cited yams as the kind of food that the folks back home had never once thought of sending; they had related anecdotes about funny things this co-worker or that co-worker had said at dinner, over a nice steaming plate of yams. They had mentioned yams and they had moved on, behaving as if it was just another background detail mentioned only to provide their colorful reminiscences the right degree of persuasive verisimilitude. Anybody not from those days who noticed the strange recurring theme might have imagined it a statistical oddity or an in-joke of some kind. For anybody who had been to Minnie and Earl's—and tasted the delicately seasoned yams she served so frequently—it was something more: a strange form of confirmation.

When Stearns spoke again, his voice still rasped of disuse, but it also possessed a light quality that hadn't been there before. “They've been gone a long time. I'm not sure I know what to tell you.”

“I checked your records,” I said. “You've been on the moon continuously since those days; you went straight from the development teams to the early settlements to the colonies that followed. You've probably been here nonstop longer than anybody else living or dead. If anybody can give me an idea what happened to them, it's you.”

More silence.

“Please,” I said.

And then he muttered a cuss word that had passed out of the vernacular forty years earlier. “All right, damn you. But you won't find them. I don't think anybody will ever find them.”

* * * *

Seventy years earlier:

We were there for about two more hours before George took me aside, said he needed to speak to me in private, and directed me to wait for him in the backyard.

The backyard was nice.

I've always hated that word. Nice. It means nothing. Describing people, it can mean the most distant politeness, or the most compassionate warmth; it can mean civility and it can mean charity and it can mean grace and it can mean friendship. Those things may be similar, but they're not synonyms; when the same word is used to describe all of them, then that word means nothing. It means even less when describing places. So what if the backyard was nice? Was it just comfortable, and well-tended, or was it a place that reinvigorated you with every breath? How can you leave it at “nice” and possibly imagine that you've done the job?

Nice. Feh.

But that's exactly what this backyard was.

It was a couple of acres of trimmed green lawn, bordered by the white picket fence that signalled the beginning of vacuum. A quarter-circle of bright red roses marked each of the two rear corners; between them, bees hovered lazily over a semicircular garden heavy on towering orchids and sunflowers. The painted white rocks which bordered that garden were arranged in a perfect line, none of them even a

millimeter out of place, none of them irregular enough to shame the conformity that characterized the relationship between all the others. There was a single apple tree, which hugged the rear of the house so tightly that the occupants of the second floor might have been able to reach out their windows and grab their breakfast before they trudged off to the shower; there were enough fallen green apples to look picturesque, but not enough to look sloppy. There was a bench of multicolored polished stone at the base of the porch steps, duplicating the porch swing up above but somehow absolutely right in its position; and as I sat on that bench facing the nice backyard I breathed deep and I smelled things that I had almost forgotten I could smell—not just the distant charcoal reek of neighbors burning hamburgers in their own backyards, but lilacs, freshly cut grass, horse scent, and a cleansing whiff of rain. I sat there and I spotted squirrels, hummingbirds, monarch butterflies, and a belled calico cat that ran by, stopped, saw me, looked terribly confused in the way cats have, and then went on. I sat there and I breathed and after months of inhaling foot odor and antiseptics I found myself getting a buzz. It was intoxicating. It was invigorating. It was a shot of pure energy. It was joy. God help me, it was Nice.

But it was also surrounded on all sides by a pitiless vacuum that, if real physics meant anything, should have claimed it in an instant. Perhaps it shouldn't have bothered me that much, by then; but it did.

The screen door slammed. Miles the dog bounded down the porch steps and, panting furiously, nudged my folded hands. I scratched him under the ears. He gave me the usual unconditional adoration of the golden retriever—I petted him, therefore I was God. Most panting dogs look like they're smiling (it's a major reason humans react so strongly to the species), but Miles, the canine slave to context, looked like he was enjoying the grand joke that everybody was playing at my expense. Maybe he was. Maybe he wasn't even really a dog...

The screen door opened and slammed. This time it was George, carrying a couple of tall glasses filled with pink stuff and ice. He handed me one of the glasses; it was lemonade, of course. He sipped from the other one and said: "Minnie's cooking yams again. She's a miracle worker when it comes to yams. She does something with them, I don't know, but it's really—"

"You," I said wryly, "are enjoying this way too much."

"Aren't you?" he asked.

Miles the dog stared at the lemonade as if it was the most wondrous sight in the universe. George dipped a finger into his drink and held it out so the mutt could have a taste. Miles adored him now. I was so off-center I almost felt betrayed. "Yeah. I guess I am. I like them."

"Pretty hard not to like them. They're nice people."

"But the situation is so insane—"

"Sanity," George said, "is a fluid concept. Think about how nuts relativity sounded, the first time somebody explained it to you. Hell, think back to when you were a kid, and somebody first explained the mechanics of sex."

"George—"

He gave Miles another taste. "I can see you trying like mad to work this out. Compiling data, forming and rejecting theories, even concocting little experiments to test the accuracy of your senses. I know because I was once in your position, when I was brought out here for the first time, and I remember doing all the same things. But I now have a lot of experience in walking people through this, and I can

probably save you a great deal of time and energy by completing your data and summarizing all of your likely theories.”

I was too tired to glare at him anymore. “You can skip the data and theories and move on to the explanation. I promise you I won't mind.”

“Yes, you would,” he said, with absolute certainty. “Trust me, dealing with the established lines of inquiry is the only real way to get there.

“First, providing the raw data. One: this little homestead cannot be detected from Earth; our most powerful telescopes see nothing but dead moonscape here. Two: It, and the two old folks, have been here since at least Apollo; those photos of them with Armstrong and Aldrin are genuine. Three: There is nothing you can ask them that will get any kind of straight answer about who or what they are and why they're here. Four: we have no idea how they knew Asimov, Sagan, or Bradbury—but I promise you that those are not the most startling names you will hear them drop if you stick around long enough to get to know them. Five: We don't know how they maintain an earthlike environment in here. Six, about that mailbox: they do get delivery, on a daily basis, though no actual mailman has ever been detected, and none of the mail we've ever managed to sneak a peek at is the slightest bit interesting. It's all senior citizen magazines and grocery store circulars. Seven: they never seem to go shopping, but they always have an ample supply of food and other provisions. Eight (I am up to eight, right?): they haven't noticeably aged, not even the dog. Nine: they do understand every language we've sprung on them, but they give all their answers in midwestern-American english. And ten: we have a group of folks from our project coming out here to visit just about every night of the week, on a rotating schedule that works out to just about once a week for each of us.

“So much for the raw data. The theories take longer to deal with. Let me go through all the ones you're likely to formulate.” He peeled back a finger. “One. This is all just a practical joke perpetrated by your friends and colleagues in an all-out attempt to shock you out of your funk. We put it all together with spit and baling wire and some kind of elaborate special effects trickery that's going to seem ridiculously obvious just as soon as you're done figuring it out. We went to all this effort, and spent the many billions of dollars it would have cost to get all these construction materials here, and developed entirely new technologies capable of holding in an atmosphere, and put it all together while you weren't looking, and along the way brought in a couple of convincing old folks from Central Casting, just so we could enjoy the look on your face. What a zany bunch of folks we are, huh?”

I felt myself blushing. “I'd considered that.”

“And why not? It's a legitimate theory. Also a ridiculous one, but let's move on.” He peeled back another finger. “Two. This is not a practical joke, but a test or psychological experiment of some kind, arranged by the brain boys back home. They put together all of this trickery, just to see how the average astronaut, isolated from home and normal societal context, reacts to situations that defy easy explanation and cannot be foreseen by even the most exhaustively-planned training. This particular explanation works especially well if you also factor in what we cleverly call the McGoohan Corollary—that is, the idea that we're not really on the moon at all, but somewhere on Earth, possibly underground, where the real practical difficulty would lie in simulating not a quaint rural setting on a warm summer day, but instead the low-g, high-radiation, temperature-extreme vacuum that you gullibly believed you were walking around in, every single time you suited up. This theory is, of course, equally ridiculous, for many reasons—but we did have one guy about a year ago who stubbornly held on to it for almost a full week. Something about his psychological makeup just made it easier for him to accept that, over all the others, and we had to keep a close watch on him to stop him from trying to prove it with a nice unsuited walk. But from the way you're looking at me right now I don't think we're going to have the same problem with you. So.

“Assuming that this is not a joke, or a trick, or an experiment, or some lame phenomenon like that, that this situation you're experiencing is precisely what we have represented to you, then we are definitely looking at something beyond all terrestrial experience. Which brings us to Three.” He peeled back another finger. “This is a first-contact situation. Minnie and Earl, and possibly Miles here, are aliens in disguise, or simulations constructed by aliens. They have created a friendly environment inside this picket fence, using technology we can only guess at—let's say an invisible bubble capable of filtering out radiation and retaining a breathable atmosphere while remaining permeable to confused bipeds in big clumsy moonsuits. And they have done so—why? To hide their true nature while they observe our progress? Possibly. But if so, it would be a lot more subtle to place their little farmhouse in Kansas, where it wouldn't seem so crazily out of place. To communicate us in terms we can accept? Possibly—except that couching those terms in such an insane context seems as counterproductive to genuine communication as their apparent decision to limit the substance of that communication to geriatric small talk. To make us comfortable with something familiar? Possibly—except that this kind of small mid-american home is familiar to only a small fraction of humanity, and it seems downright exotic to the many observers we've shuttled in from China, or India, or Saudi Arabia, or for that matter Manhattan. To present us with a puzzle that we have to solve? Again, possibly—but since Minnie and Earl and Miles won't confirm or deny, it's also a possibility we won't be able to test unless somebody like yourself actually does come up with the great big magic epiphany. I'm not holding my breath. But I do reject any theory that they're hostile, including the “Mars is Heaven” theory you already cited. Anybody capable of pulling this off must have resources that could mash us flat in the time it takes to sneeze.”

Miles woofed. In context it seemed vaguely threatening.

“Four.” Another finger. “Minnie and Earl are actually human, and Miles is actually canine. They come here from the future, or from an alternate universe, or from some previously-unknown subset of humanity that's been living among us all this time, hiding great and unfathomable powers that, blaaah blaah blaah, fill in the blank. And they're here, making their presence known—why? All the same subtheories that applied to alien visitors also apply to human agencies, and all the same objections as well. Nothing explains why they would deliberately couch such a maddening enigma in such, for lack of a more appropriate word, banal terms. It's a little like coming face to face with God and discovering that He really does look like an bearded old white guy in a robe; He might, for all I know, but I'm more religious than you probably think, and there's some part of me that absolutely refuses to believe it. He, or She, if you prefer, could do better than that. And so could anybody, human or alien, whose main purpose in coming here is to study us, or test us, or put on a show for us.

“You still with me?” he inquired.

“Go on,” I growled. “I'll let you know if you leave anything out.”

He peeled back another finger. “Five. I kind of like this one. Minnie and Earl, and by extension Miles, are not creatures of advanced technology, but of a completely different kind of natural phenomenon—let's say, for the sake of argument, a bizarre jog in the space-time continuum that allows a friendly but otherwise unremarkable couple living in Kansas or Wyoming or someplace like that to continue experiencing life down on the farm while in some way as miraculous to them as it seems to us, projecting an interactive version of themselves to this otherwise barren spot on the moon. Since, as your little conversation with Earl established, they clearly know they're on the moon, we would have to accept that they're unflappable enough to take this phenomenon at face value, but I've known enough midwesterners to know that this is a genuine possibility.

“Six.” Starting now on another hand. “Mentioned only so you can be assured I'm providing you an

exhaustive list—a phenomenon one of your predecessors called the Law of Preservation of Home. He theorized that whenever human beings penetrate too far past their own natural habitat, into places sufficiently inhospitable to life, the universe is forced to spontaneously generate something a little more congenial to compensate—the equivalent, I suppose, of magically whomping up a Holiday Inn with a swimming pool, to greet explorers lost in the coldest reaches of Antarctica. He even said that the only reason we hadn't ever received reliable reports of this phenomenon on Earth is that we weren't ever sufficiently far from our natural habitat to activate it...but I can tell from the look on your face that you don't exactly buy this one either, so I'll set it aside and let you read the paper he wrote on the subject at your leisure.”

“I don't think I will,” I said.

“You ought to. It's a real hoot. But if you want to, I'll skip all the way to the end of the list, to the only explanation that ultimately makes any sense. Ready?”

“I'm waiting.”

“Alright. That explanation is—” he paused dramatically “—it doesn't matter.”

There was a moment of pregnant silence.

I didn't explode; I was too shellshocked to explode. Instead, I just said: “I sat through half a dozen bullshit theories for ‘It doesn't matter’?”

“You had to, Max; it's the only way to get there. You had to learn the hard way that all of these propositions are either completely impossible or, for the time being, completely impossible to test—and we know this because the best minds on Earth have been working on the problem for as long as there's been a sustained human presence on the moon. We've taken hair samples from Minnie's hairbrush. We've smuggled out stool samples from the dog. We've recorded our conversations with the old folks and studied every second of every tape from every possible angle. We've monitored the house for years on end, analyzed samples of the food and drink served in there, and exhaustively charted the health of everybody to go in or out. And all it's ever gotten us, in all these years of being frantic about it, is this—that as far as we can determine, Minnie and Earl are just a couple of friendly old folks who like having visitors.”

“And that's it?”

“Why can't it be? Whether aliens, time travellers, displaced human beings, or natural phenomena—they're good listeners, and fine people, and they sure serve a good Sunday dinner. And if there must be things in the universe we can't understand—well, then, it's sure comforting to know that some of them just want to be good neighbors. That's what I mean by saying, It doesn't matter.”

He stood up, stretched, took the kind of deep breath people only indulge in when they're truly luxuriating in the freshness of the air around them, and said: “Minnie and Earl expect some of the new folks to be a little pokey, getting used to the idea. They won't mind if you stay out here and smell the roses a while. Maybe when you come in, we'll talk a little more bout getting you scheduled for regular visitation. Minnie's already asked me about it—she seems to like you. God knows why.” He winked, shot me in the chest with a pair of pretend six-shooters made from the index fingers of both hands, and went back inside, taking the dog with him. And I was alone in the nice backyard, serenaded by birdsong as I tried to decide how to reconcile my own rational hunger for explanations with the unquestioning acceptance that was being required of me.

* * * *

Eventually, I came to the same conclusion George had; the only conclusion that was possible under the circumstances. It was a genuine phenomenon, that conclusion: a community of skeptics and rationalists and followers of the scientific method deciding that there were some things Man was having too good a time to know. Coming to think of Minnie and Earl as family didn't take much longer than that. For the next three years, until I left for my new job in the outer system, I went out to their place at least once, sometimes twice a week; I shot pool with Earl and chatted about relatives back home with Minnie; I'd tussled with Miles and helped with the dishes and joined them for long all-nighters talking about nothing in particular. I learned how to bake with the limited facilities we had at Base, so I could bring my own cookies to her feasts. I came to revel in standing on a creaky front porch beneath a bug lamp, sipping grape juice as I joined Minnie in yet another awful rendition of "Anatevka." Occasionally I glanced at the big blue cradle of civilization hanging in the sky, remembered for the fiftieth or sixtieth or one hundredth time that none of this had any right to be happening, and reminded myself for the fiftieth or sixtieth or one hundredth time that the only sane response was to continue carrying the tune. I came to think of Minnie and Earl as the real reason we were on the moon, and I came to understand one of the major reasons we were all so bloody careful to keep it a secret—because the needy masses of Earth, who were at that point still agitating about all the time and money spent on space program, would not have been mollified by the knowledge that all those billions were being spent, in part, so that a few of the best and the brightest could indulge themselves in sing-alongs and wiener dog cookouts.

I know it doesn't sound much like a frontier. It wasn't, not inside the picket fence. Outside, it remained dangerous and back-breaking work. We lost five separate people while I was there; two to blowouts, one to a collapsing crane, one to a careless tumble off a crater rim, and one to suicide (she, alas, had not been to Minnie and Earl's yet). We had injuries every week, shortages every day, and crises just about every hour. Most of the time, we seemed to lose ground—and even when we didn't, we lived with the knowledge that all of our work and all of our dedication could be thrown in the toilet the first time there was a political shift back home. There was no reason for any of us to believe that we were actually accomplishing what we were there to do—but somehow, with Minnie and Earl there, hosting a different group every night, it was impossible to come to any other conclusion. They liked us. They believed in us. They were sure that we were worth their time and effort. And they expected us to be around for a long, long time ... just like they had been.

I suppose that's another reason why I was so determined to find them now. Because I didn't know what it said about the people we'd become that they weren't around keeping us company anymore.

* * * *

I was in a jail cell for forty-eight hours once. Never mind why; it's a stupid story. The cell itself wasn't the sort of thing I expected from movies and television; it was brightly lit, free of vermin, and devoid of any steel bars to grip obsessively while cursing the guards and bemoaning the injustice that had brought me there. It was just a locked room with a steel door, a working toilet, a clean sink, a soft bed, and absolutely nothing else. If I had been able to come and go at will it might have been an acceptable cheap hotel room. Since I was stuck there, without anything to do or anybody to talk to, I spent those forty-eight hours going very quietly insane.

The habitat module of Walter Stearns was a lot like that cell, expanded to accommodate a storage closet, a food locker, and a kitchenette; it was that stark, that empty. There were no decorations on the walls, no personal items, no htex or music system I could see, nothing to read and nothing to do. It lost its charm for me within thirty seconds. Stearns had been living there for sixteen years: a self-imposed

prison sentence that might have been expiation for the sin of living past his era.

The man himself moved with what seemed glacial slowness, like a wind-up toy about to stop and fall over. He dragged one leg, but if that was a legacy of a stroke—and an explanation for why he chose to live as he did—there was no telltale slur to his speech to corroborate it. Whatever the reason might have been, I couldn't help regarding him with the embarrassed pity one old man feels toward another the same age who hasn't weathered his own years nearly as well.

He accepted my proffered can of yams with a sour grin and gave me a mug of some foul-smelling brown stuff in return. Then he poured some for himself and shuffled to the edge of his bed and sat down with a grunt. "I'm not a hermit," he said, defensively.

"I didn't use the word," I told him.

"I didn't set out to be a hermit," he went on, as if he hadn't heard me. "Nobody sets out to be a hermit. Nobody turns his back on the damned race unless he has some reason to be fed up. I'm not fed up. I just don't know any alternative. It's the only way I know to let the moon be the moon."

He sipped some of the foul-smelling brown stuff and gestured for me to do the same. Out of politeness, I sipped from my own cup. It tasted worse than it smelled, and had a consistency like sand floating in vinegar. Somehow I didn't choke. "Let the moon be the moon?"

"They opened a casino in Shepardsville. I went to see it. It's a big luxury hotel with a floor show; trained white tigers jumping through flaming hoops for the pleasure of a pretty young trainer in a spangled bra and panties. The casino room is oval-shaped, and the walls are alive with animated holography of wild horses running around and around and around and around, without stop, twenty-four hours a day. There are night clubs with singers and dancers, and an amusement park with rides for the kids. I sat there and I watched the gamblers bent over their tables and the barflies bent over their drinks and I had to remind myself that I was on the moon—that just being here at all was a miracle that would have had most past civilizations consider us gods. But all these people, all around me, couldn't feel it. They'd built a palace in a place where no palace had ever been and they'd sucked all the magic and all the wonder all the way out of it." He took a deep breath, and sipped some more of his contemptible drink. "It scared me. It made me want to live somewhere where I could still feel the moon, being the moon. So I wouldn't be some useless ... relic who didn't know where he was half the time."

The self-pity had wormed its way into his voice so late that I almost didn't catch it. "It must get lonely," I ventured.

"Annnh. Sometimes I put on my moonsuit and go outside, just to stand there. It's so silent there that I can almost hear the breath of God. And I remember that it's the moon—the moon, dammit. Not some five-star hotel. The moon. A little bit of that and I don't mind being a little lonely the rest of the time. Is that crazy? Is that being a hermit?"

I gave the only answer I could. "I don't know."

He made a hmmmph noise, got up, and carried his mug over to the sink. A few moments cleaning it out and he returned, his lips curled into a half-smile, his eyes focused on some far-off time and place. "The breath of God," he murmured.

"Yams," I prompted.

“You caught that, huh? Been a while since somebody caught that. It's not the sort of thing people catch unless they were there. Unless they remember her.”

“Was that by design?”

“You mean, was it some kind of fiendish secret code? Naah. More like a shared joke. We knew by then that nobody would believe us if we actually talked about Minnie and Earl. They were that forgotten. So we dropped yams into our early-settlement stories. A little way of saying, hey, we remember the old lady. She sure did love to cook those yams.”

“With her special seasoning.” I said. “And those rolls she baked.”

“Uh-huh.” He licked his lips, and I almost fell into the trap of considering that unutterably sad ... until I realized that I was doing the same thing. “Used to try to mix one of Earl's special cocktails, but I never could get them right. Got all the ingredients. Mixed ‘em the way he showed me. Never got ‘em to taste right. Figure he had some kind of technological edge he wasn't showing us. Real alien superscience, applied to bartending. Or maybe I just can't replace the personality of the bartender. But they were good drinks. I've got to give him that.”

We sat together in silence for a while, each lost in the sights and sounds of a day long gone. After a long time, I almost whispered it: “Where did they go, Walter?”

His eyes didn't focus: “I don't know where they are. I don't know what happened to them.”

“Start with when you last visited them.”

“Oh, that was years and years and years ago.” He lowered his head and addressed the floor. “But you know how it is. You have relatives, friends, old folks very important to you. Folks you see every week or so, folks who become a major part of who you are. Then you get busy with other things and you lose touch. I lost touch when the settlement boom hit, and there was always some other place to be, some other job that needed to be done; I couldn't spare one night a week gabbing with old folks just because I happened to love them. After all, they'd always be there, right? By the time I thought of looking them up again, it turned out that everybody else had neglected them too. There was no sign of the house and no way of knowing how long they'd been gone.”

I was appalled. “So you're saying that Minnie and Earl moved away because of ... neglect?”

“Naaah. That's only why they didn't say goodbye. I don't think it has a damn thing to do with why they moved away; just why we didn't notice. I guess that's another reason why nobody likes to talk about them. We're all just too damn ashamed.”

“Why do you think they moved, Walter?”

He swallowed another mouthful of his vile brew, and addressed the floor some more, not seeing me, not seeing the exile he'd chosen for himself, not seeing anything but a tiny little window of his past. “I keep thinking of that casino,” he murmured. “There was a rotating restaurant on the top floor of the hotel. Showed you the landscape, with all the billboards and amusement parks—and above it all, in the place where all the advertisers hope you're going to forget to look, Mother Earth herself. It was a burlesque and it was boring. And I also keep thinking of that little house, out in the middle of nowhere, with the picket fence and the golden retriever dog ... and the two sweet old people ... and the more I compare one thought to the other the more I realize that I don't blame them for going away. They saw that, on the

moon we were building, they wouldn't be miraculous any more.”

“They had a perfectly maintained little environment—”

“We have a perfectly maintained little environment. We have parks with grass. We have roller coasters and golf courses. We have people with dogs. We even got rotating restaurants and magic acts with tigers. Give us a few more years up here and we'll probably work out some kind of magic trick to do away with the domes and the bulkheads and keep in an atmosphere with nothing but a picket fence. We'll have houses like theirs springing up all over the place. The one thing we don't have is the moon being the moon. Why would they want to stay here?” His voice, which had been rising throughout his little tired, rose to a shriek with that last question; he hurled his mug against the wall, but it was made of some indestructible ceramic that refused to shatter. It just tumbled to the floor, and skittered under the bunk, spinning in place just long enough to mock him for his empty display of anger. He looked at me, focused, and let me know with a look that our audience was over. “What would be left for them?”

* * * *

I searched some more, tracking down another five or six oldsters still capable of talking about the old days, as well as half a dozen children or grandchildren of same willing to speak to me about the memories the old folks had left behind, but my interview with Walter Stearns was really the end of it; by the time I left his habitat, I knew that my efforts were futile. I saw that even those willing to talk to me weren't going to be able to tell me more than he had ... and I turned out to be correct about that. Minnie and Earl had moved out, all right, and there was no forwarding address to be had.

I was also tired: bone-weary in a way that could have been just a normal symptom of age and could have been despair that I had not found what I so desperately needed to find and could have been the harbinger of my last remaining days. Whatever it was, I just didn't have the energy to keep going that much longer ... and I knew that the only real place for me was the bed I had shared with my dear Claire.

On the night before I flew back I had some money left over, so I went to see the musical CERES at New Broadway. I confess I found it dreadful—like most old farts, I can't fathom music produced after the first three decades of my life—but it was definitely elaborate, with a cast of lithe and gymnastic young dancers in silvery jumpsuits leaping about in a slow-motion ballet that took full advantage of the special opportunities afforded by lunar gravity. At one point the show even simulated free fall, thanks to invisible filaments that crisscrossed the stage allowing the dancers to glide from place to place like objects ruled only by their own mass and momentum. The Playbill said that one of the performers, never mind which one, was not a real human being, but a holographic projection artfully integrated with the rest of the performers. I couldn't discern the fake, but I couldn't find it in myself to be impressed. We were a few flimsy bulkheads and half a kilometer from lunar vacuum, and to me, that was the real story....even if nobody else in the audience of hundreds could see it.

I moved out of my hotel. I tipped my concierge, who hadn't found me anything about Minnie and Earl but had provided all the other amenities I'd asked for. I bought some stupid souvenirs for the grandchildren, and boarded my flight back to Earth.

After about an hour I went up to the passenger lounge, occupied by two intensely-arguing businesswomen, a child playing a handheld hytex game, and a bored-looking thin man with a shiny head. Nobody was looking out the panoramic window, not even me. I closed my eyes and pretended that the view wasn't there. Instead I thought of the time Earl had decided he wanted to fly a kite. That was a major moment. He built it out of newspapers he got from somewhere, and sat in his backyard letting out more than five hundred meters of line; though the string and the kite extended far beyond the atmospheric

picket-fence perimeter, it had still swooped and sailed like an object enjoying the robust winds it would have known, achieving that altitude on Earth. That, of course, had been another impossibility ... but my colleagues and I had been so inured to such things by then that we simply shrugged and enjoyed the moment as it came.

I badly wanted to fly a kite.

I badly wanted to know that Minnie and Earl had not left thinking poorly of us.

I didn't think they were dead. They weren't the kind of people who died. But they were living somewhere else, someplace far away—and if the human race was lucky it was somewhere in the solar system. Maybe, even now, while I rode back to face however much time I had left, there was a mindboggling little secret being kept by the construction teams building those habitats out near the Jovian moons; maybe some of those physicists and engineers were taking time out from a week of dangerous and backbreaking labor to spend a few hours in the company of an old man and old woman whose deepest spoken insight about the massive planet that graces their sky was how it presented one hell of a lovely view. Maybe the same thing happened when Anderson and Santiago hitched a ride on the comet that now bears their names—and maybe there's a little cottage halfway up the slope of Olympus Mons where the Mars colonists go whenever they need a little down-home hospitality. I would have been happy with all of those possibilities. I would have felt the weight of years fall from my bones in an instant, if I just knew that there was still room for them in the theme-park future we seemed to be building.

Then something, maybe chance, maybe instinct, made me look out the window.

And my poor, slowly failing heart almost stopped right then.

Because Miles, the golden retriever, was pacing us.

He ran alongside the shuttle, keeping up with the lounge window, his lolling pink tongue and long floppy ears trailing behind him like banners driven by some unseen (and patently impossible) breeze. He ran in slow motion, his feet pawing a ground that wasn't there, his muscles rippling along his side, his muzzle foaming with perspiration. His perpetually laughing expression, so typical of his breed, was not so much the look of an animal merely panting with exertion, but the genuine mirth of a creature aware that it has just pulled off a joke of truly epic proportions. As I stared at him, too dumbstruck to whoop and holler and point him out to my fellow passengers, he turned his head, met my gaze with soulful brown eyes, and did something I've never seen any other golden retriever do, before or since.

He winked.

Then he faced forward, lowered his head, and sped up, leaving us far behind.

I whirled and scanned the lounge, to see if any of my fellow passengers had seen him. The two businesswomen had stopped arguing, and were now giggling over a private joke of some kind. The kid was still intently focused on his game. But the eyes of the man with the shiny head were very large and very round. He stared at me, found in my broad smile confirmation that he hadn't been hallucinating, and tried to speak. "That," he said. And "Was." And after several attempts, "A dog."

He might have gone on from there given another hour or so of trying.

I knew exactly how he felt, of course. I had been in the same place, once, seventy years ago.

Now, for a while, I felt like I was twelve again.

I rose from my seat, crossed the lounge, and took the chair facing the man with the shiny head. He was wide-eyed, like a man who saw me, a total stranger, as the only fixed constant in his universe. That made me feel young, too.

I said, "Let me tell you a little bit about some old friends of mine."

* * * *

This one's for Jerry and Kathy Oltion,

the Minnie and Earl of the future.

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