

ON THE PEAK OF ETERNAL LIGHT

□

10...

9...

8...

A question.

Why the countdown? Are they, during that brief elapsement, actually doing anything? I would think that rocket science—the very definition of difficult—would take more than ten seconds to accomplish. They must be done doing everything important. If they left it to this last minute, this last sixth of a minute, the whole situation is in a lot of expensive trouble.

7...

6...

I have a lot of questions, now, in these final ten seconds. Am I ready to die? This question sounded different, a year ago, six months, last week, when it was phrased in such neutered terms as: ‘30% mortality rate’, and ‘There is a chance you won’t make it back’, and ‘Complete your will and testament before departure’. It had a different answer then, too, as

I nodded and said soberly, 'I understand'. Today, in this terrible last ten seconds, it has a new answer, which is 'NO'.

5...

4...

I need to shit. How horrifying. I squeeze my cheeks together. I Kegel. I am representing the United States of America; I will not shit my pants. I will not even wrinkle my brow. The kiln of a billion American Eyes is on me, and it hardens my face into a glazed facade, one that smiles, one that they chose to send into space.

3...

2...

Across from me the others have pottery faces as well, beautiful, and I wonder if they are undergoing the countdown education I am, if they are holding in diarrhea with their buttocks, sobs of fear with their American hero grins, or if I am the weak link, the rotten apple, the leftovers at the back of the fridge that everyone thought was still good, until they open it, and find out it isn't.

1...

And the western world erupts in applause; the small volcano erupts beneath us, and off we go, burning away, dropping limbs like Icarus, but winning—hubris wins at last!

Write that down, Homer!—piercing the membrane of the sky and shooting beyond it, an egg in the everlasting night, a mote in the eye of god.

Blast-off!

We are smashed, helpless as backed beetles, against our seats. My ribs creak and my lungs labor; my heart struggles like a submerged cat. We have trained for this, but nothing is like this. Keep on breathing, I tell myself, but the monstrous weight on my chest has other ideas.

In the end, ascent is not the companion of consciousness and it comes between us easily, first with nausea, and then with buzzing, rueful darkness.

□

I wake up underwater.

I'm floating, just drifting there. There's no current. It's chilly. I can breathe.

I wake up in space, weightless. My seatbelt holds me politely. My head finds the most natural position in relation to my neck I have ever experienced.

First I examine the seat of my flight suit, in my mind's eye. I did not shit my pants. A good start to a 70% chance of surviving the next six months.

I open my eyes.

There is vomit hanging in the air, at the center of the circle. It floats in perfect little orbs, the liquid, and perfect little chunks. I can identify a carrot. An oat. Altogether it is pale, pearly yellow.

The others are beginning to wake up, or were already awake. They too, are drifting against the moorings of their straps, nobody has kicked free.

We are dressed alike in blue flight suits, an American flag on the pocket over our hearts, our names embroidered on the other, over a lung. They zip up the front and tuck into boots at the bottom. Most of us look ridiculous in them, like we are wearing Star Wars costumes, but would never actually be cast in the film. Yet here we are: chosen, selected, curated, if you will, for this major motion picture event, the reality show of the year. Or, at least, the season.

I lower my head to look at my chest. The straps criss-cross it like a bandelier. I lift my hands to fumble with the buckle but they are like lumps of clay. They blob and bump and bend.

“Hey, let me help you.” It is Zee Forthright Barker, the best of us, surely, floating before me like a skydiver, having shed his fake, lift-off smile for a real one. His hands are already working and he liberates me easily.

“We’re in space!” he says, grinning into my face, “We made it!”

Behind him, the others are stirring, unbuckling, swimming their way to the portals to look out at the earth, which is shrinking behind us, like a penny dropped in a pool.

Beyond them the wall illuminates, full of the admiral’s face. He is grinning, too, and his voice booms through the cabin like the voice of Zeus, “Well done, crew!” he booms, “You are on your way to the moon! Congratulations!”

He sees the floating vomit and scowls. “Who puked?”

No one accepts responsibility.

“Clean that up,” he snaps, “It’s embarrassing to America.”

We all sleep most of the way to the moon. We aren't driving and there is nothing to do. It is enchanting to float through the air like a fish; to see stars brighter than you've ever seen them, staring in the windows, but honestly it gets boring. And the fear never gives up. It gnaws at you. It gnaws you to sleep.

The world is still watching however, so once per "day" (no longer a meaningful measure of time) we gather before the wall screen and smile. Kids send questions like: How do you poop in space! And we Answer: In a long, long tube, with a vacuum at the end of it, so our poop doesn't just stick to our assholes forever. Without the word "assholes". We say "bottom" instead. The kids love it to death.

Among ourselves we have already divided: four are joyous—space!—and full of plans. Bursting with importance. Life on the moon! The information, the opportunity, the privilege! Two are more reserved in their enthusiasm. Two are perhaps having second thoughts. I keep my own feelings to myself, a stovepipe of secrets, a basket of gentle smiles. Don't I have years of training? Yes, I do.

Each day I talk to the members of the crew, one by one. How are you doing? Really? What feelings are coming up for you? Did you expect that? Yes, yes, yes. I give them all little assignments. We get somatic about it.

I don't have favorites, of course, because people are people, patients are patients, and in my experience everyone has a side that is beautifully baked and one that is burnt black, or raw as a gut. But the truth is I do have a favorite, and that's Zee Forthright Barker. His baked side is delicious, a gingerbread of a man, a marzipan fruit, and his raw side, well, it was made with lots of organic eggs, I'm sure. It will shape up into something nice and fluffy, one day.

Zee is the most bursting of the joyous four. He is the face of the mission; an all-American beauty of the new order, twenty-seven and tall with skin like expensive cookware—blemishless! His special skills are a military past and a degree in structural engineering and unlike the other three in the unabridged enthusiasm camp, he is not tickled about the science, or the advancement, or the Next Big Step. He is tickled by the view. He is tickled by being part of history.

“We are part of history, now, Doctor C.,” he says, “Isn’t that amazing? We get to make history happen!” I nod and encourage his encouragement of the others, per my job. He is the puppy we all need to protect, the dream we must defend. He is like the Declaration of Independence, aboard this ship.

□

Truly I should mention that his name isn’t Zee. Or any of the rest of it. I named him after my dead uncle, so I could talk about him here. My uncle won’t mind; he died a long time ago, and his name is just too good to let go to waste. That’s how I know I am suffering from favoritism; the other five are just numbers with a life attached.

□

Three days in space might as well be three years. Three years of sleeping, answering kid questions, Actively Listening.

On the third day we land on the Moon.

Everyone straps in again, and the world watches, but less of it, and there is little drama.

The Moon in every way appears to be low drama. No atmosphere; no weather; no seasons; no life, except what we force to remain here. What we trick into believing the Moon is a habitable place, low risk, high reward. Tricky dicks are humankind. They get you every time.

The Moon station is empty. It feels strange, like coming into someone else's house while they are out. Crew members 1 and 3 know the workings of such things and have the generators up and running, the balloon-structures billowing with oxygen and moisturized air in less than twenty-four hours. Then all the rest of us can follow them down.

This is not the first Moon Colony Mission. This is just the first Moon Colony Mission that America knows about. The first one was not a success.

The colony is on the peak of Malapert Mountain at the south pole of the moon. The sun never leaves the black sky. To the west is darkness, and an endless basin of pale dust that stares off into the black. To the east is a moonscape, battered and dented by the debris of space, undisturbed by the incorporeal howling of the solar wind.

The colony is shaped like a many-legged fat spider, with a dome-body in the middle and little tubular walkway legs with a bulb at each terminus. We inhabit the bulbs and converge in the center for meals. In different bulbs, we work. From my office-bulb I can see a range of mountains in the distance. My mind likes to tell me they look like mountains in Utah, at night, though they do not. They stretch and spike unlike any Earth-mountain could, untethered by the gravity of a large, lava-hearted body beneath them. The Earth hovers above this claw horizon, sometimes sinking out of sight, then reappearing, as the two bodies wobble and spin titanically. It gives me vertigo to look at it. It makes my stomach flop and my asshole flutter. I know it makes other members of the crew feel

similarly, because they tell me in their sessions, if not in so many words. We all work on adaptive techniques.

On the Moon there is gravity again, but not much of it, and everyone bounces and toddles around like half-deflated balloons. It lends a comedic mood to tasks, or a dream-like horror; the one in which you try to run but the air is like water, frictionless, and you flail, panic, but the only escape is waking.

On the Moon there is no escape, but there are endless tasks. If there are no tasks, we make them up, for an idle mind will quickly align itself with the vacuum of space and collapse pretty much the same way a lung would, when exposed to nothingness.

In my office there is a curtain divider. One side is visited daily by the crew, singly or as a group, and is equipped as comfortably as is possible in space, which isn't very comfortable. The other side I hope to never use. The crew was carefully selected for their physical health and prowess, after all.

The crew is kept busy with research. Geology, astronomy, chemistry and engineering. I keep watch on them all. I feel like I am waiting for something to go wrong, and try not to. We have learned from the past, haven't we? Old errors loom large. Disaster sings like a siren from the rocky shore of human nature.

The first conflict is between crew members 4 and 6. They come to blows in the mess hall and it takes four hours to bring everything down to zero in my office. Zee has to physically restrain 4, who is larger than 6. There is a bruised eye socket but nothing worse. Neither can identify the cause of the fight beyond vagaries: Crew member 4 is an idiot. He was staring at crew member 6. He was hogging the runner. He was thinking about crew member 6 in a sexual way.

"I heard you talking!" says crew member 6.

Crew member 4 vehemently denies.

In the end we can all agree the mission comes first. We can all agree that we are under a lot of stress.

I give mild tranquilizers all around and the colony sleeps. I stay up, the Earth watching me from beyond the spindly mountains, and write an incident report. It is the seventh day on the moon. Survival rate 100%. We are making history up here in the dark.

□

On the twelfth day Zee comes to me with a dream. He reports it off-handedly, during his daily session, leaning back against the inflated plastic couch and looking as comfortable as cotton in his flight suit, one booted foot propped on the opposite knee.

“I had a funny dream last night,” he says.

“Funny as in humorous?” I am always pushing the crew to be specific and accurate in their language. Miscommunication is the number one reason for conflict.

“Strange,” he amends without annoyance. Generally speaking, the crew was well selected for their equanimity. “I can’t really decide if it was scary, or wonderful.” He leans forward. “It started out here, on the Moon. I was outside in my suit, on the mountain. The Earth was half-illuminated. I was walking towards someone, also in a suit, and I think it must be one of the crew, but as we get closer I can see through the visor that it’s my fiancé. She’s here on the Moon! We are walking towards each other, smiling, when suddenly the Moon’s gravity just—let’s go. Just goes away. And we are floating up, off the ground, still facing each other. I’m looking across at her, and she’s smiling, looking up at the stars and the Earth way off in the distance. It’s beautiful. It’s the infinity of space, but with nothing

between us and it, no ship, no moon, nothing. Up and up we go, the Moon's getting farther and farther away, and then I reach out for her, and she reaches for me, but our fingers don't quite touch. And then I woke up."

He smiles and shrugs. "What's it mean, Doctor C.? Do I miss my girlfriend?"

□

On day fourteen crew member 7 tells me about a dream she's been having.

"It's starting to bug me," she says.

It is Zee's dream. No mistaking it, except in crew member 7's version her husband occupies the other suit. I double check my record of Zee's session just to make sure. They sound like they're reading from the same script.

Falling up. Reaching out. Waking.

The dream spreads like a fever. First two are having it, then four, then six, only I am uninfected, and I wait for it to come for me, a little excited and disturbed. Who will be my companion for that final fall? Then it arrives. It was only a matter of time.

At first the dream is a curiosity; the crew laughs over it, calls it Moon-fever. They tease and poke. Over time they grow quieter; the dream takes a toll. Every sleep session it grows longer and longer, they tell me, the falling. It takes on a nightmare quality as they strain and pant to reach their lover, mother, father, child, whomever they have chosen. The vacuum of space holds them tightly, keeping each on the course they set when their boots left the Moon dust, keeping them on parallel trajectories forever.

Zee doesn't smile when I see him. "Can you help?" he says.

I take everyone off the tranquilizers, but it makes no difference to the dream. I try my hand at hypnosis sessions, have everyone switch bunks, meditate before bed. It makes no difference. The dream only grows stronger.

The crew stops sleeping. I stop sleeping, in dread, now, of the dream coming for me. I write a report, detailing our struggles. The response is a video conference with the Admiral, mandatory, no exceptions.

“Pull it together, Moon Team,” he says sternly. We sit slumped like children under the paddle of his rebuke. “You are American space explorers. You need your sleep. Nightmares are to be expected in high stress scenarios. You cannot let fantasy and fear rule you. You cannot give up. Never give up!”

His bucking up complete, he signs off, leaving us alone on the Moon. We were alone the whole time.

□

The crew is afraid to go outside. The Moon’s meager gravity has been called into question, with so many incidences of it giving up, letting people off into the void. Going outside is risky.

I try to be reasonable with them. Something that happens in a dream won’t happen in real life, I tell them.

“Is this real life?” crew member 3 asks me keenly, black crescents like a second set of eyes staring from her cheeks.

It is a measure of the extent of things that I pause for a long moment before I say, “Yes.”

□

Every time I close my eyes I see the dream. I'm outside. It's light, but moon-sunlight, that white, wide-eyed glow. A figure in a space suit is walking towards me, float-stepping along, leaving fresh tracks in the Moon dust. I never learn. I walk forwards to meet him, and then I am falling, slowly, upward, until up becomes down, and then slowly directs are revealed as utterly meaningless. The face across from me, across that small but impassable field of space is Zee Forthright Barker. The real one, from long ago, smiling at me in the halo of LEDs that ring our faces in lonesome blue.

□

I am a normal person. I myself would caution others against using descriptives such as “normal” and “abnormal”. They are subjective, without fixed meaning, and typically pejorative. But I use it for myself. Pejoratively. I am contemptibly normal. Maybe this is what recommended me, over my highly educated colleagues, for a mission to the Moon.

In school my lack of a History always felt like just that: a lack. My privilege to be unbattered, unabused and unneglected felt like its own cross for bearing, and shamefully I longed for just a little trauma, just a nibble, a swallow, a tiny wound to watch fester, so that I could join the club. So that I could Know Firsthand.

I scabbled around my life for something to process. I hunted dusty corners of my youth, but there was always only this one thing. This one event, to which I could tie a tiny sail and float, out onto the lake of analysis: the death of my Uncle, Zee Forthright Barker.

□

At the Moon Station, tasks are going undone. Deadlines pass on data transfers, and the tiny, choking plants in the hydroponic greenhouse finally asphyxiate, folding over and hanging head down, like dead warriors over a battlement.

Somehow the language of written messages from home seems mangled, as if the intervening space scrambled them into code. I stare for a long time, circling this letter, that, but I can't decode them. The sounds are distracting.

Some of the crew are gone. There is a lot of shouting one night and I try to investigate but it takes me an age to find the door; it keeps sliding away to a new wall. At last I get a grip on it and go out into the hall.

In the big dome at the center there is a mess. Crew member 4 and 3 are on the floor, 3 is weeping, pumping his legs up and down slowly, like two pistons needing oil, and 4 is dead.

I take a closer look and feel one moment of relief, that he truly is dead, not wounded, and I won't have to use the instruments behind the curtain to carve at him, cut and stitch, attempt to revive. I can stay out of it.

I try to comfort crew member 3. Later, he seems calm and slips into the dream, but the next day he is gone, though we search the compound thoroughly.

"He went outside," Zee says, holding up 3's spacesuit. He looks out the window for a long time, and suddenly I think of Zee, sprawled in the Moon dust, all of his warm fluids leached away, his face burnt, frozen, his body bloated and bent, stuck to the surface of the Moon forever, a landmark alongside the lunar lander, the American flag, and the Moon Base, abandoned to the solar wind.

I take him to my office-bulb and lock the door behind us.

□

They found Zee Forthright Barker in a lake. It was winter, and the water had frozen, fast, a Montana cold snap. He was suspended in the ice alongside some equally unlucky fish, his eyes open, upside down. The woman who found him saw the soles of his shoes below the surface, as if he was standing upright in some other, inverted world.

They had to chip him out with axes, bit by bit, and it took days.

I have only one other memory of my uncle. I was young and we were climbing a pine tree in the yard. I climbed only a little way up, but he kept going, higher and higher.

“If you go high enough,” he informed me, “You won’t fall. You’ll fly.”

He climbed so high I couldn’t see him anymore in the branches. I waited a long time; I got cold and it began to rain. I climbed carefully down and went inside.

That was not the day my uncle died, so he must have climbed down, later, but I don’t remember it. For years I was convinced he climbed to the top of the tree and flew away.

Years later I realized how inappropriate a comment this was to make to a child, impressionable and as full of credence as a choir.

□

Outside my room the spheres jangle, or sing. We can both hear them; the music that has always been there, beneath. The melody of tiny bodies striking in the gloam of space.

Zee rubs his eyes and reads the messages from Earth.

“They want us to come home,” he says.

We try to bring Earth online, to make a video connection, but the task is beyond us. The equipment is sly.

In the end we are exhausted and lay down on the inflatable couch. It is low on air and we slump together, groin to groin, face to face.

“Where do we end up?” Zee asks, his eyelashes caught on mine. I know he means in the dream. I know he means the trajectory, the lonely parallel, into space. Is there a destination that the Moon had in mind, the moment it loosed us in that passive launch? Or is it just putting out the trash, to slowly freeze into two more astrological objects, adding the chiming of their passage to the chorus?

I think about the first Moon Mission. I no longer consider 70% a failure. How did they do it? Did they manage to angle themselves somehow? Create thrust in the vacuum? Somehow, they pointed themselves home.

We fall asleep wondering.

We fall into the stars, towards them, them towards us. Over one shoulder, the sun is fabulous. Over the other the Earth slowly passes into the light, slowly falls behind.

We are standing outside on the peak of eternal light. Now, now we can hear the solar wind, whipping. If wind chimes were knives. If knives had blades of protons, arrowing across a million miles in an instant. If hydrogen atoms crashing, cracking out their yolks of helium and fury, that breaking and binding of particles into energy, made a sound like wind.

We can hear the wind blowing from the sun; we can feel it. It touches our skin as white light; it collects there in crystals, growing inwards and out simultaneously, spearing us with light. Any tears are boiled dry. Any words are desiccated and disappear.

We are walking towards each other across the dust; our footprints black behind us.
We are walking towards each other in the gentle grasp of the Moon. Feel: her fingers are loosening. I'm reaching out. You're reaching out. Somewhere overhead there is a storm on the sun. Somewhere overhead there is a storm on the Earth, there is a sunny day, a tree, a thousand trees, a baby, a thousand babies, sleeping in the night in which we walk, moonwalk, secretly.

This time, our hands are touching. Our crystal shells snap; they flash in the sun.
This time when we fall, we fly.