

## Lost Sons of the Moon

The airport had descended into chaos and a kind of biblical despair, as if Hieronymus Bosch had set up an easel in Terminal One, and only now was putting the finishing touches to his masterpiece. A category four hurricane was clambering up the Eastern seaboard – the biggest since Katrina, they were saying – and most flights to and from the States had already been cancelled. On the PA system, a breezy male voice offered a hint of false hope before announcing more cancellations. Tense apologies filled the air as frustrated flyers looked up at the sky with murderous intent. You could almost see the steam rising off the bodies.

Luckily for me, Chip Aldrin was flying in from Toronto, and no inbound Canadian flights had as yet been cancelled. When his plane touched down, I made my way over to the nominated terminal and held up a handwritten board bearing his full name. But even as the passengers began to shuffle through, I could tell that something was wrong. They looked shaken, unkempt, as though they'd all just awoken from the same bad dream, and those who were lucky enough to be met by loved ones almost fell into the embraces of their spouses or relatives.

Chip was one of the last to appear, and even though his face was as pale as the other passengers, I instantly recognised it from the images of him I'd downloaded off the internet. He was Buzz's only son from his troubled second marriage, and the one line I had managed to source from either his or Buzz's online biographies had described their relationship as "ambiguous". It took Chip a moment to notice me, and even then he seemed perplexed by the sight of a middle-aged stranger holding up his name on a piece of cardboard.

"You must be Pete," he said finally, shaking my hand.

"Bad flight?" I asked him.

"I've had better."

“I didn’t think the storm had made it that far north yet.”

“It hasn’t,” he said, and looked around the terminal, as though he expected it to arrive at any moment. “Jesus, I need a drink.”

We made our way over to the bar. There wasn’t much room inside, and we found ourselves pressed up against the wall next to some Midwest businessmen whose tans had undergone a slow rinse in the cycle of a late English summer. One of them was talking loudly about his experiences with “Katrina” while the rest listened to him in a way that suggested they’d all heard the story before. Chip rolled his eyes and leaned in close to me.

“War stories,” he whispered into my ear. “There’s nothing the average American loves more than to dodge a disaster and tell a tall tale about it.”

“I don’t think that’s necessarily specific to Americans.”

“Maybe not, but we’re the only ones who can elevate this kind of thing to an art form.”

I caught a barman’s eye and ordered our drinks – a large whiskey for him, a diet coke for me. In the flesh, Chip was even more striking than his father, tall and fair-skinned, with a full head of jet black hair, nothing at all like the young Buzz. By the time the drinks arrived, I could see the colour slowly returning to his cheeks. He took a gulp of whiskey, and told me what had happened on the flight. After the plane hit a deep pocket of turbulence somewhere over the Atlantic, one of the passengers a few rows in front of Chip, mistaking the turbulence for Hurricane Louise, had gone into a tailspin of his own, and started shouting, “We should never have taken off!” and “We all should pray now!” and then, best of all, “I think the tail’s on fire. The tail’s *on fire!*” When a male steward tried to restrain him, the passenger had turned aggressive, lashing out at the steward and drawing blood from a cut to the head before turning his ire on his fellow passengers, at which point some big guy up near the front

unbuckled his seatbelt, sauntered down the aisle, and cold cocked the poor bastard with one pop to the jaw.

“If it had been a Hollywood movie, the other passengers would’ve applauded him back to his seat,” said Chip. “But no one said a word. Not a goddamn word. And then some dude a few rows back starts throwing up into his hand luggage. Over and over again, like he’s treating us to the life story of his lower intestine. Man, I can still smell it on my clothes,” Chip said, sniffing the sleeve of his jacket.

“Don’t they have Air Marshalls on board after 9/11?” I asked him.

“That’s only on US flights, not Canadian ones.” Chip shook his head, adding with a wry smile, “If only life was always this interesting, huh? And here’s the kicker. The guy in the next seat tells me that the Samaritan, the one with the iron in his fists, is this ex-boxer who once lost a title shot to Sugar Ray Leonard back in the eighties. Bobby something or other. Even had his own nickname, apparently. At least, that’s what my neighbour tells me, like he’s never seen a b-list celebrity in his entire life. So you know what I say to him?”

I shook my head as he drained the last of the whiskey, and over his shoulder I saw one of the American suits turn away from his compatriots and look in our direction.

“I said to him, ‘Yeah, sure...and my father is Buzz Aldrin.’”

He laughed and punched me lightly on the arm. I just smiled and took a sip of my coke.

“So you think your friends will like that story?” Chip asked me. “What do you guys call yourselves? *The Lost Sons of the Moon...*”

I nodded, feeling suddenly foolish.

“Sure, they’ll lap it up. And you know what’s really ironic? I know you Brits love your irony...” He leaned in close again, his breath smelling of whiskey and the tribulations of a six hour flight. “The irony is that I really...fuckin’...hate...*flying*.”

He laughed again, and I was about to say something when the guy in the suit tapped Chip on the shoulder and said, “Hey, man. Sorry to butt in. But is that true?”

Chip turned to face his interlocutor. He was in his forties, heavysset, with small, credulous-looking eyes peeping out above a wide nose and full, oddly feminine lips – a little bit like the actor Tom Berenger gone to seed.

“Sure it is,” Chip said to him. “I mean, how many of us really like to fly?”

“No...not that. I meant, are you really Buzz Aldrin’s son?”

By now, all the other suits had tuned into the conversation, including the one who’d been shooting his mouth off about Katrina. Their faces were flushed with alcohol and stubbly with an extra day’s growth of beard – a fractious group of men on the lookout for any kind of distraction from their own particular woes.

“What’s this all about?” asked Katrina.

“This one claims he’s Buzz Aldrin’s son,” said Berenger, pointing at Chip.

“Is that so?”

Chip just smiled.

“And he hates flying,” Berenger added, clearly enjoying himself.

Katrina dialled his “I’m Ok, You’re Ok” salesman’s smile up to its full drunken wattage. “Is this for real?” he asked Chip.

“Which part do you mean?”

“Which do you think? The one about your daddy flying round the moon.”

Chip turned to me with a wink, and said, “It’s true. My name is Chip. Chip Aldrin. Son of Buzz. And this here is my good friend Pete Armstrong, fruit of Neil’s loins. Together we’re going to build ourselves a rocket and pilot it to Pluto. Any of you guys care to hitch a ride with us?”

For a moment, I sensed the situation tipping first one way then the other, and had started looking around for the most convenient escape route, when Katrina's face broke into a grin. A second later he cupped one hand round the back of Chip's head and pumped his hand with the other. "Son of Buzz! That's a good one. You want to stick around and tell us all about it?"

"Love to," said Chip, and jerked a thumb at me. "But there's a bunch of this guy's people waiting to hang on my every word."

"Well, if you change your mind, you know where to find us. We ain't going nowhere, are we, boys?"

"It sure doesn't look like it."

I tapped Chip on the shoulder and told him that we should really be making a move.

"Sure," Chip said, grabbing his luggage and firing off a quick salute at Katrina. "You guys take care. Give my regards to Hurricane Louise, if you see her."

The suits laughed again, and we hurried away to the sound of Katrina's drunken voice calling after us: "Hey, Buzz Lightyear, you're a funny guy. And if you see your *pa*, tell him the Moon landings were a fake. Just like you..."

A few weeks ago, my old friend, Joe Bedder, had called me up to say that at our next reunion, Buzz Aldrin's son, Chip, had agreed to make a guest appearance. This was a real coup – the first time we'd have in our midst anyone even remotely connected to the Apollo program. Joe's eldest son, Matt, had set the whole thing up. He and Chip had just finished working on a project together in Alaska on the Chena Flats greenbelt, and when Chip mentioned that he was due to come over to England later that month, Matt said there was a bunch of old stoners who'd get a kick out of meeting him. Chip, who by then was on his third beer of the evening,

said he'd be only too happy to oblige the Lost Sons of the Moon with a few hours of his time, though Matt hadn't mentioned if he was quite as enthusiastic about it the following morning.

Joe had hired a function room at a hotel about half an hour's drive from the airport. The plan was for Chip and I to drive straight there, Chip to stick around for a couple of hours, say a few words, answer a few questions, and then head back to London, where he was due to attend a conference on clean energy the following afternoon. In all, more than fifty Lost Sons had promised to attend, I explained to our guest of honour as we drove out of the airport. Almost twice the number who'd shown up at our previous gathering.

"Fifty guys," said Chip. "I take it they're all guys. No Lost Daughters."

He was sitting with his arms tightly folded and his eyes squeezed shut, like a man who was anything but at peace with his world. In a couple of years, I thought, he would be the same age his father had been when he and Armstrong took their first few steps for all mankind. I wondered if Chip had started to think about this too.

"With a few exceptions, yes," I said.

"Then all I can say is that you must be easily impressed."

It had started back in college, when a group of us would come together in the student union block and watch the Apollo missions on the communal TV. At first, it was just me, Joe, and Joe's cousin, Harry, who had a habit of making childish jokes whenever a commentator spoke of a successful re-entry. But with each new mission, our numbers increased, until by Apollo 17 the whole thing had evolved into something resembling a society complete with its own name, lingo and even a rough code of conduct. When the Apollo program finished, and we had all dispersed from college into the wider world, I guess most of us believed our plan to keep alive the spirit of the Lost Sons would go the same way as all those future manned missions to the planets. But the society continued to flourish, a bunch of us meeting up every two or three years to reminisce about a time when clean-cut men with square jaws and

unfashionably short haircuts circled the moon in ships that looked as if they'd been put together out of baking foil by their kids earlier that same morning.

“So I take it you don't do this kind of thing very often?” I asked Chip now.

“Oh, you wouldn't believe the number of requests I get to talk about something that happened to my father six years before I was born.”

“Joe said that you did it as a favour to his son,” I said, ignoring his sarcasm.

“That's right,” he said. “I did it for Matt. Call it a moment of weakness.”

“You two are close?”

“Not really. But he did some really good things in Alaska – went those extra couple of miles, and then some. I guess I felt I owed him.” He looked across at me. “Will he be there tonight?”

“I don't think so,” I said. “Family commitments.”

“Right. He and his father don't get on, do they?”

“They're not exactly cut from the same cloth, if that's what you mean.”

Chip laughed. “Matt doesn't understand it *at all*. Told me that you're all stuck in the past, in some lost or imaginary Golden Age. I mean, ‘The Lost Sons of the Moon’. What is that? Some kind of cult?”

“If we're a cult, then we're a benign one.”

“That sounds exactly like something a cultist would say.”

I shrugged. “It's just something we call ourselves. It's not supposed to mean anything.”

“It's okay,” Chip said. “I'm just messing with you, Pete.”

I brushed away his attempt at an apology, told him it didn't matter. “Besides, Matt probably has a point,” I said. “These days I seem to spend more time leading up to these reunions thinking about how I'll feel about them afterwards. I've spoken to Joe about it, and

it's the same with him. My own son says that we're the kind of guys who get nostalgic for things that haven't happened yet. He even has a phrase for it. Calls it advanced melancholia."

"Advanced melancholia," said Chip, and laughed. "I like that. Sounds like some profound disease of the soul. So what's the cure?"

"Who knows? Don't grow old. Don't attend reunions under any other name. Don't call yourself a Lost Son of the Moon."

The way my son, Toby, saw it, Joe and I were only ever truly ourselves together whenever we fully inhabited our younger identities. The rest of the time, it was like we were following some crappy made-for-TV script.

"Is your boy going to be there?"

"Toby? Sure. He never misses one of our gatherings if he can help it."

"Another lost son?"

"Only if you say it with capital letters."

"Excuse me?"

"Everyone your age who was into that stuff has a favourite, especially when it comes to 11," said Chip. "It's like everyone has a favourite Beatle. So which one was it? Were you for Buzz or Neal?"

"Come on, Chip. That's not fair. You think Julian Lennon goes around asking strangers if they preferred John to Paul?"

"I just figured that if I'm to face all those awkward dumbass questions at this party of yours, you should get to answer at least one yourself."

"I'm just the driver," I pointed out to him. "It was Joe's son who brought you here, not mine."

"Joe's not here. Or his lost son. But you are. So answer the question, Pete."

"Well, if you insist...I was for the *program*, Chip, not individuals."



“Spoken like a true politician,” said Chip, and looked across at me. “You’re not a politician, are you?”

“No, I’m not,” I said without further elaboration.

Chip wasn’t about to let it go. “Ah, the unspecific denial. I take it yours is not the kind of vocation that has documentary crews beating a path to your door.”

“Not unless they want to make a film about accountancy,” I told him.

“You’re an accountant?”

“I know...it’s hard to believe, isn’t it? Here you are, being driven to a hotel full of space nerds by a real live *accountant*.”

I looked across at Chip and, without giving it a second thought, gave his leg a quick paternal squeeze.

“You’re fucked up, Pete,” he said. “You know that?”

“Sure,” I agreed. “But at the very least I can console myself with the thought that my son won’t ever be asked to talk to a bunch of old farts about what it was like to be the son of a number cruncher.”

We were only a few miles from the hotel when Chip said he needed a rest stop. Just twenty minutes, he said. The Sons would understand. I pulled into the next services and while Chip visited the bathroom, I ordered a couple of coffees and took a seat at a table and checked my phone messages. There was one from Joe saying there were a bunch of guys about to turn blue, and to call him if there were any problems, and an older one from Toby saying there was a chance he might not get to the reunion, after all, but that he would move heaven and earth to ensure that he did.

Chip returned from the bathroom looking refreshed and wide-eyed, and I wondered if he'd taken a little something extra while he'd been in there.

"Feeling better?" I asked him.

"Mucho mojo," he said, by way of reply.

He picked up the cup of coffee and swirled it around without actually drinking any of it.

"I'm sorry about your flight," I told him. "If it's any consolation, I hate flying too."

"I keep hearing him, the maniac on the plane. 'The tail's on fire, the tail's *on fire*'. Jesus, he was really freaking out the rest of the passengers." He looked at me and shook his head, as though something had just occurred to him. "That guy who laid him out, the boxer. I realised who he reminded me of while I was in the bathroom. It was Armstrong. Right down to the way he calmly walked up to the guy and put him on the seat of his pants without uttering a single word. If that had been Armstrong, he'd have done it the exact same way."

"That's one small punch to the chin," I said. "One giant reprieve for the cabin crew."

Chip laughed and pounded the table with his fist. "You should write this shit down, Pete."

I just shrugged and looked at my watch. We were running late.

"He fucked it up, you know," said Chip.

"Who did?"

"Armstrong," he said. "The speech. Or should I say... The Speech. It was supposed to be one giant leap for *a* man, but he got it wrong. Missed out the 'a'. That pause you hear between the two sentences – according to my dad, that's Armstrong thinking, *Shit. Just two lines for posterity...and I screwed it up for all mankind.*"

"I prefer it the way it came out," I told him.

“Yeah, me too,” said Chip. “That’s another thing about Armstrong that used to bug my father. Even on those rare occasions he got it wrong, it still always seemed to come out all right in the end.” He took a sip of the coffee, grimaced and pushed the cup away. “What’s also true is that you Brits still don’t know how to make a decent cup of coffee.”

“I shouldn’t judge all English coffee on the basis of this one. It’s not exactly the gold standard.”

“You’re right about that much.”

I was about to say something else when my mobile phone rang: Joe wanting to know if “the Eagle had landed”. Despite the note of nonchalance in his fifty-something voice, he still managed to sound like a kid asking his date’s best friend if she was really going to show up. Over the past forty years, the composition of the group had changed dramatically, and now included some of our own sons, and even a couple of grandchildren, but Joe and I had remained the two hard constants (the last we heard of Harry, he had moved to Paris after successfully achieving re-entry with his second wife, a twenty-four year old air hostess).

I told him everything was fine. There had been a slight delay at the airport (God bless Hurricane Louise, I thought), and we would be there as soon as we could.

“Has Toby made it?” I asked him.

“Yeah, he’s here. *Alone.*”

“No lingerie model in tow?” I asked him.

“I thought you said she was a buyer,” he said.

“I did?”

“Shit, I *knew* you were lying. You’re going to have to introduce me to her mother one time.” He laughed, and then lowered his voice, as though there was someone listening in at his end. “So what’s he like?”

“Who?”

“Chip,” he said. “Is he ok? I mean, we haven’t made a mistake, have we?”

“Where’s this coming from?”

“It’s just something Matt said to me the other night.”

“What is it?”

“It’s probably nothing.”

“What did he say?”

“I can’t tell you now. Just tell me if he seems ok to you.”

“Joe, he’s sitting right across from me,” I told him.

“Forget I mentioned it,” he said. “It doesn’t matter. Get your arses over here and let me know if there any other problems. I’ll see you shortly.”

“Joe,” I started to say, but he had already rung off. I put the phone in my pocket and apologised to Chip.

“So what did he want to know?”

“Just the usual stuff,” I said, and took a sip of the coffee. Chip was right. It was terrible. “Was your flight delayed? Will we be on time? Are you a crackpot?”

Chip smiled, seemingly not offended. “So what would you have said...if I wasn’t ‘sitting right here, Joe.’”

“I’d say you were doing ok...for someone who’s just stepped off a bad flight.”

“Good answer, Pete. You really should have been a politician.”

I looked at my watch again, but Chip didn’t seem to be in the mood to take the hint.

“You and Joe go way back, don’t you?” he asked me.

“Forty years,” I said, and told him how we had watched all the Apollo missions together - at least the ones from 12 onwards - in our Student Union on a tiny black and white portable set whose picture had a habit of breaking up whenever something dramatic seemed about to happen.

“My son being born and the day of my wedding day are my own personal Apollo 11 moments,” I told Chip. “But I’d have to say those days and nights in the Student Union were the only time any of us believed that everything was possible, that all our big questions were up there waiting to be answered in zero gravity...”

I trailed off. How could I explain to Chip how a project so epic in its conception, so far off the scale of previous human experience, could stir up such intense and personal emotions in everyone who observed it?

“What about 11?” asked Chip. “Why didn’t you watch that one with the Lost Sons?”

I shook my head. “It was July, the summer before I started University. I was still living at home then, so I watched it with my father.” I paused before adding, “Just the two of us.”

Though that was not strictly true – we didn’t watch it together. What happened was that my father and I were in the same room with the TV set on. The most momentous event of the twentieth century and I don’t recall either one of us saying a single word – not even when Armstrong went down the ladder. I do remember thinking that the lunar surface seemed a more hospitable place than our living room right then, and that I would gladly have swapped places with any one of those three men...even Collins, stuck up there in the Command Module fifty thousand feet above the lunar surface. He couldn’t have felt any more remote from what was happening than I did on that warm summer evening of July 20, 1969.

“I don’t even know why I stayed home that night,” I told Chip now. “I had friends who were watching it. Relatives, too. Truth is, I could’ve knocked on any stranger’s door and shared a more profound experience. But I didn’t. I stayed and watched it with him. I’m not even sure why. I was still a kid. Eighteen years old. Maybe I did it to give myself one final and irrevocable reason to despise him. If so, it was mission accomplished.”

“What about your mom?” Chip asked me. “Where was she, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“She died in sixty-seven,” I told him. “Lung cancer. The two of them smoked like a couple of chimney stacks, but he never quit, not even after the way he saw my mother die. And the old bastard made it to ninety two without suffering as much as a chest infection.”

I told Chip that even before she passed away, my father was a remote figure in my life, no more than an adjunct to my mother; that I hardly ever saw him for the first ten years of my life, and those times I did, he was just a face at the dinner table, a body slumped in front of the TV, a shadow passing across the surface of my life. He was never outright violent, but after my mother died ‘cold’ and ‘bitter’ and ‘tight-fistedness’ were added to his repertoire, and he stopped trusting anyone, if he ever had. After I left home, he moved from house to house, never settling anywhere for more than a couple of years, or leaving me a forwarding address, forcing me to trace his whereabouts through other relatives.

“Did he ever try to get in touch with you again?” asked Chip.

“No, not once,” I told him. “As far as I know, aside from the social worker who used to pop in to check up on him from time to time, and a couple of old stalwarts from the local church, no one attended his funeral.”

“That’s harsh,” said Chip. “That’s no way for a man to die. For a father...”

I looked at Chip, son of Buzz, and said, “So what is it that Joe isn’t telling me about you? I think I should know if we’re going to go through with this thing.”

“It’s nothing.” Chip shrugged, looked down at his hands on the table. “I’m bi-polar, if you haven’t already guessed. I may have mentioned it to Matt when we were in Alaska, or maybe he just worked it out for himself. Either way, sounds like your buddy is concerned that I’m going to crash and burn, spoil the party.”

“And are you?”

“I honestly don’t know,” he said, and smiled. “But if I do, I promise you, Pete, you’ll be the first to know about it.”

Just before we arrived at the hotel – one of those vast, corporate structures on the edge of an industrial park, with groups of businessmen scattered around its cathedral-sized lounge like loose change – Chip turned to me and asked if I thought it was all worth it. The Apollo Program. The Space Race. The billions of dollars spent hurling a few tin cans at a useless lump of rock. Was it worth all those cuts to the other science budgets, the curtailing of some many worthwhile, humanitarian projects, just so men like his father could take an ego trip to the Moon?

“You weren’t there,” I said, forgetting for a moment who I was talking to. And even though he was the son of a famous astronaut, even though he could look up at the sky on a crisp clear night and think, *My father once took a stroll up there*, still he couldn’t really know what it was like to be a young man looking up at that particular Moon on the that particular night, not really. How it felt to watch those guys do something that would have been inconceivable to our own parents when they were our age, to be in at the start of something that felt bigger than anything that had happened before. Matt, who didn’t understand it at all, thought we were all lost in the past, in an ersatz Golden Age, but I think my son, Toby, who had apparently moved heaven and earth just to spend a few hours with a bunch of old Moon junkies, had gotten closer to the real truth. We were not stuck in the past, but struggling to cope in the absence of a future that had been promised us, just like Aldrin and Cernan and all those other guys. We were young men who had kidded ourselves into believing the best was yet to come, before sloping off to careers in marketing, accountancy and local government. Now most of us had wives, kids, homes in the suburbs. Some of us had grown fat or lost our

hair or developed mysterious pains in our lower backs. Still, we believed ourselves to be happy and content, the lucky ones. While our younger, nobler instincts took solace in the knowledge that those twelve different sets of footprints would always endure on its surface, we grew wise to the fact that the world continues to shrink the older you get, and that the Moon is slowly spinning away from the Earth year by year.

So if you ask me, Chip, was it all just a waste of money, I'd say yes, of course it was. The whole thing was a *fabulous* waste of money.