

## LUNA'S FIRST HEROES

I have a fading color photograph of my three sisters and myself on the night of July 20, 1969. The photo must have been damaged in the camera. There is a swath of white obstructing the bottom of the picture, yet the image clearly shows the four of us lying on the floor of our parents' bedroom watching TV. At three, even the youngest of us is fixated with what appears to be a blank screen. What's playing is no mystery, though. It's Neil Armstrong about to become the first human being to set foot on the Moon.

Tensing Norgay and Edmund Hillary reached the summit of Mt. Everest three years before I was born. They were heroes to my father, but their deed seemed as distant to me as Roald Amundsen's 1926 expedition to the South Pole. As a twelve-year-old, I could appreciate their valor, just as I could appreciate the ultimate price paid by George Mallory and Robert Falcon Scott in their quests to push the bounds of human endurance and discovery. Still, these deeds were all acts of history, their outcomes were known. They weren't going to keep me up half the night tingling with excitement.

At four and five, I'd been too young to grasp the enormity of Yuri Gagarin, Alan Shepherd, and John Glenn's accomplishments in space. At twelve, I was caught up in the mania for the first voyage to the Moon that swept most of the United States.

My friends and I all had our favorite Beatle and our favorite Star Trek character, and I'm sure we each had a favorite astronaut as well. Michael Collins, the man with the loneliest job in the solar system, was mine. Solo and sometimes out of contact with the other astronauts and Earth, he would be the one piloting *Columbia*, Apollo 11's command module, around the Moon while the other men claimed the surface and the glory. Family lore held that we were related by his marriage to a distant cousin.

Still, despite my loyalty to my alleged cousin-in-law, it was obvious that the two men with the most exciting jobs in the universe were lunar module pilot Buzz Aldrin, and mission commander, Neil Armstrong. The commander later said, "I always knew there was a good chance of being able to return to Earth, but I thought the chances of a successful touchdown on the Moon surface were about even money—fifty-fifty. . . . Most people don't realize how difficult the mission was."

The public was concerned with their safety. We were worried that the *Eagle*, the lunar landing module, would sink into mounds of Moon dust, or fail to lift off for its assignation with the command module. The astronauts and NASA all appeared so confident and competent, though, that mostly we were reassured that the men would be returning to Earth without incident.

Along with the rest of the world, I have waited breathlessly to see human ingenuity, bravery, and perseverance successfully rescue Baby Jessica from a Texas well, and thirty-three Chilean copper miners from their sixty-nine day ordeal under ground. In 2002, I burst unexpectedly into tears when I picked up my newspaper and learned that after seventy-eight hours, all nine coalminers had been located and rescued from the Quecreek mine in Pennsylvania. These events may be the only ones in my conscious lifetime that carried the same emotional resonance as watching NASA put men on the Moon and safely bring them back home.

There are big differences between waiting for unfortunate people to be rescued from unforeseen circumstances and watching the Apollo astronauts explore the Moon. The astronauts were on a well-planned adventure. They had bravely chosen their lot and their voyage was the result of the work of thousands of well-trained scientists and engineers. In the wake of Apollo 13's ill-fated journey and

the *Challenger* and *Columbia* disasters, we are more aware of the hazards of space travel. Yet, even in 1969 we knew these men were heroes. Space and the Moon were a huge unknown. Anyone willing to be strapped to a Saturn V rocket and blasted into orbit had to be among our most courageous.

Eventually, I had a chance to meet the gregarious Buzz Aldrin. The retired astronaut had co-written a science fiction novel, *Encounter With Tiber*, with John Barnes. Soon after it came out, Colonel Aldrin attended the Science Fiction Writers of America's annual New York reception for authors and editors. It was a thrill to shake hands with a man who had left his boot prints on the Moon.

Alas, like nearly everyone else, my path never crossed Neil Armstrong's. Upon his death last summer, his family released a statement that said he was "a reluctant American hero who always believed he was just doing his job. He served his Nation proudly, as a navy fighter pilot, test pilot, and astronaut." They added, "While we mourn the loss of a very good man, we also celebrate his re-

markable life and hope that it serves as an example to young people around the world to work hard to make their dreams come true, to be willing to explore and push the limits, and to selflessly serve a cause greater than themselves."

I have always thought that NASA chose well the first man on the moon. When reporters repeatedly asked whether Edmund Hillary or Tenzing Norgay was the first person to summit Mount Everest, Colonel John Hunt, the expedition leader, answered, "They reached it together, as a team." Millions of people watched as Neil Armstrong became the first person to walk on Earth's traveling companion, but this daring astronaut always seemed to recognize that his great achievement was due to a tremendous team effort.

Humans have been enchanted by Luna since the dawn of time. The passing of Neil Armstrong gives us one more opportunity to celebrate a hero and to honor everyone who pushed the limits and successfully transported our astronauts from the Earth to the Moon.