

The Gorilla in a Tutu Principle or, Pecan Pie at Minnie and Earl's

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Prior Analog stories set against the backdrop of this very strange period in the history of lunar colonization were "Sunday Night Yams at Minnie and Earl's" (June 2001) and "Gunfight at Farside" (April 2009).

Many years ago—and when a man as old as I am uses the phrase, “many years ago,” he means a lifetime—I told Minnie, “I’m an engineer, not a poet.”

Minnie was a dear old gal of unflinching honesty, with a central role in what follows.

I was in love with her eyes. I don’t mean this in a sexual way. The difference between our ages, and certainly our backgrounds, would have made that grotesque. But her eyes were rich and deep, and filled with an understanding of life’s greatest mysteries, that made them a perfect place to lose yourself when she was pointing out how silly you are. I haven’t seen her or her husband Earl in decades, but I can picture those eyes like it was yesterday.

When I told her I wasn’t a poet, she said, “How dare you. It’s okay to operate under a poetry deficit, but to imply that deficit for an entire profession is dishonest. I’ve known more than my share of engineers, and any number of poets among them. Great engineering *is* poetry.”

I suppose she was right. She was, in most things.

Regardless, I can speak for myself. I’m not a poet, not even in the sense that sweet lady meant. There’s no elegance in me unless you count the elegance of straight lines. Even as an

engineer, I'm a plodder, a practitioner of dogged persistence, the kind of guy who seizes hold of a problem and hammers it until he finds a solution, more from irritation than imagination.

Minnie would eventually suggest that this was why the forces at play in the following series of events picked me as their target, instead of somebody more at home with absurdity or whimsy—because if you're going to harass somebody in this manner, you really do want to pick a humorless bastard, if you can. The snowball gets thrown at the grumpy old guy in the top hat, not the jolly guy you can see already laughing at himself.

I'm not a storyteller either, except for this one and a couple of lesser tales from the days, all those decades ago, when cities began to rise on the lunar plains. You can remind me, someday when I'm not stuck telling you this one, to tell you about the operational merry-go-round I spotted, and still maintain I saw, somewhere that no merry-go-round had any business spinning. (You will hear me say this many times: the Moon was strange, in those days.) But I've learned a number of things from born storytellers, and one of the things they told me is that "closure" is overrated. It's nice to have, when it's available, but more often than not it isn't, and you have to accustom yourself to life's unanswered questions, treasuring any given mystery and the unexplored regions around it as much as you would any full, encyclopedic explanation.

Minnie herself was one of those mysteries, as she would have been the first to tell you. As I'll likely have chance to say as well, by the time I'm done with this.

By the time you get to my age, the age where if you move at all it's to avoid picking up a layer of dust, you'll likely know that when the long sleep comes it will arrive without a cheat sheet, clearing up everything you didn't quite manage to find out while you still drew breath. I'll die, fairly soon in the scheme of things, without answering even half the questions I asked in my life; and I've come to peace with that, as much as a man can while still remaining as stubborn as myself. If you don't make peace with that yourself, you're doomed to die disappointed.

And now that we have that part out of the way, and you don't have to worry about scouring the entire text for an easily summarized thesis, we can stop worrying about me getting to the point and start investigating the path that took me there.

My name's Turpin, and this began about the day I saw *them*.

* * *

This was back when the lunar colonies were still being constructed, and the work of racing about making sure that various forces of entropy didn't get us all killed wasn't very fun. Every job was deadly dull and deadly serious, and as I've heard it said by another teller of these early colonization stories, every chore that needed to get done was the worst job you could ever be assigned, except for all the others.

My job today was to investigate the breakdown of one of the cameras we'd implanted in the route normally traveled between the Chinese project and our own. They've been represented in recent histories as spy cameras, but spy cameras are an awfully stupid thing to plant in dirt when every barge traveling back and forth produces a real-time GPS record of every rotation of its treads, and we could all tell what everybody else was doing anyway. The cameras were no secret, not to us and not to any of the contributing governments. They had a different purpose: recording every moment of every journey, in case some accident occurred and forensic analysis was required later. There was of course instrumentation inside our vessels as well, but that's not a lot of help in cases where, for instance, the screen goes blank immediately after whoever's sitting at the controls says, "What the F—". So we had mini-cams set up every hundred meters or so, along our most-traveled routes, to capture exterior footage of vehicles in transit, and I think this provided critical evidence on no more than two or three occasions in all the years I worked on the Moon; that positive thing, the safety measure that almost never needed to be used.

The camera that had gone black—not "failed," as it continued to ping as active; only the picture had turned black—monitored a bumpy fifty-meter stretch of tread tracks that threaded the needle between two rises too steep for one of our barges to climb. As it happened, the local topography hid this part of the route from every other possible perspective, which rendered our real-time feed particularly important. On Earth, if you find a narrow spot in the road blocked by a rock fall or washed out by a storm or swallowed by a sinkhole or rendered impassable for

any other reason, you don't have to worry about whether you packed enough air to cover the delay. On the Moon, at that point in time, you sometimes did. So I was pulled off my regular work—itself a relief, because, remember, every job on the Moon was the worst job on the Moon—and told to grab and install a spare cam in case the one that had broken down could not be repaired on-site.

It took me three hours to get to the narrow pass, at which point I put the barge into park, hopped down the three stairs from the open cabin, and did the lunar-waddle to the camera, which was still happily mounted on its little pole.

This, of course, eliminated the most likely explanation, that it had been buried from some rockfall, or become otherwise obscured by changes in its environment.

The camera's green light indicated that it was indeed functional, taking pictures as it was supposed to. The connection light beneath it relayed what I already knew, that it was transmitting those pictures and receiving acknowledgment from the home system, back at base. I shone a narrow light at the lens and found it intact, but something about the lack of reflectivity from the glass concerned me, and I took a closer look, peering at it from several different angles before I confirmed that the glass itself had turned opaque.

Extracting the lens, scratching the black surface with the sharp edge of a tool, I drew a transparent line across the layer of darkness.

Somebody had painted over the damned thing.

This was not good. It was, in fact, the very first known sabotage on the Moon, and as I stood there listening to my own breath puff against my faceplate I could find no possible explanation that made sense. It would have been tempting to blame the Russians or the Chinese or even the Indians, all of whom had colonies under construction at the moment, because that would have jibed with every cliché I'd ever learned from spy movies—but the fact of the matter was that this didn't make sense of any kind, because the Russian project and the Chinese project and the Indian project and all the other little contributions provided by other countries that existed in the various orbits of those superpowers and ours were all parts of a vast international effort, that had been sharing resources and personnel since the very day the powers that be had decided that this was work worth doing. We all grumbled about the peculiarities of the representative of the other participating nations. I, for instance, did whatever I could to avoid any meals provided by the Indians, which affected my digestive system in a manner fine on Earth but—because of the subsequent venting—toxic within the confines of a moonsuit. You have no idea. But we had, to this moment, all operated under the assumption that we were in this together, and the last thing I wanted was for that to go away.

Add to that the seeming pointlessness of the act. Why this camera, out of all the others? Why not the one before it or the one after it? What was so special about this one bend in the road, that distinguished it from all the others?

I did what anybody would do in such a situation. I turned around and scanned the ridges on both sides of me, for immediate clues.

And I saw—

* * *

This is where I must take a break.

I want you to know that I am a rational man.

I appreciate that what I am about to tell you makes no rational sense.

I understand that just telling the story makes me look like an idiot.

What's that? You need more?

Okay. If providing context can help you ameliorate things, then I'll give you more. Be apprised that this was a particularly strange period in the history of manned space exploration, and that the Moon in particular had turned out to be a far stranger place than anybody had ever imagined. There were other puzzles, things that I'm not going to get into in this space.

There was the question of that fine old couple Minnie and Earl, who made those early colonization days more joyous but certainly didn't make them any more comprehensible.

There was the question of what had happened to a man no better or worse than any of us,

Ken Destry, during the so-called First Gunfight On the Moon.

There was the question of the thing that Marianne Engel found in the monthly supply drop, that nobody back on Earth would confess to sending.

And here I go, transforming the narrative into a list, when the last thing I ever wanted was this account to become a list; suffice it to say that it was a weird time, and we still don't have the answers to all of it, and because I'm a retired engineer and not a professional writer who makes up crazy stuff for a living, I'm not about to find some unobtrusive way to get all of that into the background when I can just tell you to forget about it and concentrate on the story I'm here to tell.

Context: it was a weird time.

* * *

Rewinding a little bit so you don't get lost:

I did what anybody would do in such a situation. I turned around and scanned the ridges on both sides of me, for immediate clues.

And I saw—

Them.

Two figures in moonsuits, struggling to push a bulky object up the ridge.

They looked like nothing I had seen on the Moon.

Here's the thing about that period of lunar exploration: space was at a premium. We were all shrimps, chosen not just for our qualifications but for our compact size. That way it didn't cost much fuel to send us anywhere, and it certainly didn't take up much space to house us. Astronauts didn't have to let their pants out. Astronauts didn't shop in Fat-And-Tall Shops. Nobody ever elbowed them in the ribs and suggested it was time to lay off the cheeseburgers. It was unheard of for anybody smaller to peer up at them from a much lower altitude and make stupid snarky inquiries about how the weather was up was there. Our suits were tailored to us, down to centimeters, but they all tended to look alike, from a distance; we were standardized, in terms of height and weight.

It was therefore unheard of, at that point in history, to see a fat astronaut.

Peering at the pair up on the ridge, I saw a fat astronaut.

He was not obese, not by the standards of needing a shipping crate for a coffin, but he was likely fifty pounds heavier, in terrestrial terms, than his optimum weight, and it was therefore downright painful to witness him struggling with the additional weight of the shipping crate that he'd tasked himself to carry up the ridge, for god-alone-knew-what-reason. He bore the weight of the lower end; his skinnier companion, farther up the slope than he, bore the weight of the higher end. Their discomfort was palpable, their wobbly knees visible even through the bulky material of their moonsuits. It was impossible to not feel sorry for them, and the Sisyphean task before them: the portage of this crate up the forty-degree slope.

The second thing I noticed, in the split second before the weight proved too much, was that their suits made no sense.

This requires another digression.

Moonsuits are usually white. They may have other design elements, like flags and whatnot, but white has the twin advantages of reflecting heat and being visible against black backgrounds; in that most dangerous of all environments, you want your fellow astronaut to be able to see you, even if you've collapsed from an air leak and the only thing available for him to see is an immobile white dot at a great distance. Once in a great while, I saw other colors, mostly garish ones; we once had that extreme eccentricity, a girly-girl astronaut with a defiant passion for shocking pink, who had painstakingly dyed her suit that other color and was so good at her job that the powers that be shrugged their shoulders and said, "Whatever, knock yourself out." But really, there was no reason to travel all that far from the default, the white so blinding that it should be a sheet hanging from a backyard clothesline.

One of the main reasons so few people have ever believed my story is the very smallest of the unlikely details: the moonsuits worn by both the fat one and the skinny one were black.

They weren't jet-black, like the deepest of lunar shadows; the helmets were still white, except

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for the bowl-shaped objects mounted on both heads. Most of what lay beneath was more like a compromise between black and blue, and I ultimately came to think of that as important, because of other things I found out later. But they were a counter-survival shade, in any event. I could only see them because they didn't stand against the black sky, but against the tan dirt of the ridge, brightly lit under the harsh sun of lunar midday. They were absolutely moonsuits, as anything else would have been crazy, but as the fat man went heave and the skinny man went ho, certain other design elements came into focus and proved, if nothing else, that I didn't need to worry about any other sight ever causing me to drop dead of shock, until I became a very, very old man.

They were moonsuits, but they'd been colored to look like old-fashioned denim overalls, complete with contrasting patches on the knees and elbows.

Bowler hats sat mounted on both helmets.

The skinny man, the only one facing me, wore a narrow black tie, hanging loose from the connecting ring of his collar, in stark contrast to the U-shaped whiteness of his upper chest.

My suit recording establishes the intake of breath and the moment when I said, "Hey," but I remember that moment clearly and that was a reaction to the necktie and not to the madness that followed.

Because when I said, "Hey," the skinny astronaut stood up and faced me, somehow locating me at once despite the lunar vacuum and the lack of any deliberate broadcast signal from me. His expression was hidden behind the mirrored faceplate, but I got the impression of a face furrowing in incomprehension.

In so doing, he released the crate to gravity.

The fat astronaut, now bearing the entirety of the weight, dropped his end on his toes. He doubled over in resonant pain and gestured for the skinny astronaut to do something, anything, to help him. The skinny astronaut obliged, succeeding in pulling the crate off his companion's boots and another meter or so up the slope, but letting go again in a mis-timed attempt to improve his grip. The crate began to slide, leisurely in the way that all motion on the moon is leisurely, but still bearing down on the fat astronaut with potentially deadly mass. The fat astronaut had time to wave his arms in a gesture of abject terror, before he did the only thing he could do, flee.

Oddly enough, he didn't dart out of the way, but instead fled straight downhill, allowing the huge crate to pursue him.

Running on the Moon is not like running on Earth. The fat man had the lunar astronaut's comical gait, all coltish hops and gentle landings, but the crate gaining on him was subject to the same physics, and it spent the same amount of time airborne in one hop or another that he did, tracing his steps. If anything, the slow motion they were both forced to respect increased the genuine terror of the moment, in the same way that slow movie monsters, creeping up on a victim one shuffling step at a time, can be more terrifying than the speedy ones, capable of leaping at one's neck from the far side of a room. It was nightmare logic: the fat man racing downhill with both his own muscular volition and the assistance of one-sixth gee to drive him, unable to build up any speed while the monster, in this case a simple crate, followed close behind, somehow not just an inanimate object by a malignant thing, playing with him the way a fugitive mouse is toyed with, by a lazy cat.

It was one of the most ludicrous and most horrifying things I've ever seen.

Then the fat astronaut went down, the crate ran over him, and I began to run, certain that I'd just seen a human being die.

But by the time I got to where he should have landed, both men were gone.

* * *

Phil Jacoby said, "It didn't happen."

These post-mortems took place fourteen hours later, in the closest thing our work module had to a corporate boardroom. It was a cramped space that also served as our communal dining area and our rec center, which is to say that it also had a little basketball hoop for a foam-rubber ball, a chess set, and a computer equipped with all the latest movies and video games, with a fifty-inch screen. Whee.

We also had a gymnasium of sorts, an alcove with a stationary bicycle and a weight trainer, but that was not considered social. This little room was the closest thing we had to anything social, at least when we were on-site; I won't get into what opportunities we had, off-site. As I've said, it was a weird time, and telling you about some of the other more bizarre things that were happening on the Moon at the time would just confuse you. Suffice it to say, that most of the time, this tiny room was what we had. Somebody had dubbed it "Clancy's Bar," a name that had stuck despite the absence of all but medicinal alcohol, or for that matter, anybody named Clancy.

The construction projects ran 24/7, with staggered shifts, and that meant that it was rare for more than a couple of us to be present at any one time, but the alarm I'd raised had prompted a complete work shutdown and a full-scale investigation, which meant that right now we were all full up. Present were George Peterson, Oscar DeSalvo, Carrie Aldrin No Relation (who always had to add those additional two words), Nikki Hollander, and the new guy, Max Fischer, still looking dazed from a little surprise party we'd given him the prior Sunday—yet another story for another occasion. (Repeat after me, children: it was a weird time.) They were all irritated at me because it's not nice to be pulled off other assignments, some quite pressing, to work extended shifts investigating a story that made no sense, and it was even less nice to do so knowing you could not discount the story at once (because on the Moon at that point, even the most impossible stories could turn out to be true; again, weird time, and if you're tired of hearing that, imagine how sick I must be of saying it).

I was facing an intervention, and I knew it.

I said, "I know what I saw."

"We know what you saw. We're only questioning whether you saw something that was actually there."

"It was there."

Phil glanced at Oscar, who he'd given full charge of the on-site investigation. Oscar stepped forward and ticked off the points on his hand. "There's no forensic evidence. No footprints. No sign of a heavy object being dragged up that ridge. No dead or injured astronaut, run over by a heavy object. No sign of any activity that would account for the disappearance of any such heavy object. It's all pristine lunar dirt up there, which is as it should be, because that's far too steep a ridge, and beyond that, too pointless a ridge for anybody to attempt a climb without reason."

"It doesn't make sense to me, either. But I'm telling you, it happened."

Oscar continued as if I hadn't spoken. "I've been in touch with the other bases. All of them. They all say that all their people are accounted for, every single one of them. They offered to provide time-stamped activity data, if necessary; a couple have offered to perform a complete inventory of all the moonsuits on hand, to see if they can locate two altered in the way you described. I told them to go ahead, but see no particular reason to expect any revelatory surprises."

I found myself flailing. "Then maybe an expedition we don't know about. Some nation or corporation here in secret, that's not a signatory to the compact."

He nodded. "We considered that. It's a fragile coalition.

"But even as a hypothesis it still makes little sense given the data we have. Discount the lack of any forensics. The premise that some nation not already understood to have space-flight capability being able to launch a manned vessel without a launch being detected from Earth, land it on the Moon without its arrival being detected by any of us, and engage in activities on the surface for God alone knows how long without being spotted by anybody who's been living and working here—"

"—until me—"

"—without being spotted by anybody until you, especially when they're doing something as attention-gathering as what you describe, where you could easily spot them, is beyond ludicrous. I can't even begin to think of a country I would believe it about."

"The Duchy of Grand Fenwick," said George Peterson.

Moans erupted from several present. I didn't get the reference, but in context understood it to have been some kind of joke.

George produced his palms in surrender. "Sorry."

"You should be." Oscar turned his attention back to me. "Look, I know that we've experienced any number of inexplicable phenomena, Minnie and Earl among them. But to give any weight to the hypothesis, we have to believe that somebody was not only so slick and competent and state-of-the-art brilliant as to pull off an entire covert space program without anybody knowing, and yet at the same time so *incompetent* that when they got here they attempted to push a heavy crate up the side of a hill without using any of the obvious engineering solutions. People aren't brilliant on Thursday and absolutely irresponsible ninnyes on Friday."

"That's not my experience," said George.

Oscar was about to glare at him again when it occurred to him that this was actually a very good point. "True. We're all human and capable of ridiculous mistakes. But by and large, nobody's superhumanly brilliant on Thursday, an irresponsible ninny on Friday, and then superhumanly brilliant again five minutes later. They would have had to be brilliant to disappear without you seeing where they went, or anybody who combed the site since then being able to find so much as a scuffmark in the dirt. It's ridiculous. Ridiculous to the point of impossibility.

"Then there's the issue of what you say they were doing. Forget the ridiculous way they were going about it. I don't have to be a genius writer of spy fiction to imagine any number of sinister explanations for that crate. It's not difficult to imagine why such a thing would need to be installed in an elevated spot, or even why they would want it installed at a location frequented by our people.

"But, first: choosing that particular location, which is useless except as a bend in the road? And second, choosing that particular hour, that particular day, to deliver it, when your own mission there was no particular secret and anybody who wanted to arrange the covert delivery of an awkward crate would have known that you would spot them? What's the point of that?"

I felt like a drowning man. "I know it sounds crazy, but I'm stuck with it."

Carrie Aldrin No Relation seemed to relax. "There it is."

"What?"

Phil said, "Carrie's been tasked with judging your mental competency."

I was not surprised, but it put the cap on my general humiliation. "Really."

"As it happens," Phil said, "I happen to concur with her finding that you're not ready for the rubber room. Would you like her to tell you why, before we proceed?"

I knew what she was going to say, of course. She was going to say that I was a reliable member of the team and a respected professional who everybody here was comfortable trusting with their lives.

She spoke before I could. "It's not because you're a reliable member of the team and a respected professional who everybody here is comfortable trusting with our lives."

"Umm. Okay."

"Reliable, respected professionals screw up all the time. They even go crazy all the time. Sometimes it's because they're vulnerable in ways we couldn't detect and sometimes it's because of environmental factors we couldn't control." She shuddered. "We all remember poor Destry. But I promise we don't think that of you."

"Um. Why not?"

"Because I've been watching you every minute since it first became clear that the facts wouldn't support anything you've said. We can all see that while you've been talking crazy, you haven't been *acting* crazy. Those are two different phenomena. In the real world, whenever a previously stable person goes actively delusional, there are other signs, some of them not even remotely subtle. Cognition suffers. Word choice suffers. There are inappropriate emotional responses, mood swings, changes in eye-hand coordination, and a dozen other changes visible to the naked eye. These can all be hidden by a disturbed person driven to keep his delusions a secret . . . but it's almost impossible to hide genuine disturbance when an insane premise is shared. The most important thing you've done is acknowledge that what you've said sounds crazy: because somebody who's gone nuts is incapable of entertaining that possibility, and anybody who looks at you for even five minutes can tell that you can think of nothing else."

I said, "That doesn't help me."

"No, it doesn't," said Carrie Aldrin No Relation. "Because it changes the question to what other reason you would have for professing to believe in something that clearly didn't happen."

"I'm not lying either."

She nodded. "I know. There are physiological indicators for that, too. And you're not showing any of them, either."

There was nothing I could say to that. It was a personal vindication, of sorts; a very thin one, because the evidence of my own eyes was still in question, and it was hard to believe my testimony about anything ever being taken seriously, ever again; but I was still in a room of highly trained, fiercely rational men and women of science, and I had still been told the bottom line, that I was not crazy. I wasn't about to be sent back to Earth in disgrace, but I would likely be remembered as the guy who claimed to have seen a truly insane thing, and that would be hanging over my head for as long as I remained on the Moon, and likely for many years to come. I spread my hands. "What would you do if you were me?"

Phil glanced at Carrie, who nodded, then approached me and sat in the empty chair beside mine.

"We work here," she said. "We know what it's like. We understand the difference between eccentricity and unreliability. We understand the difference between seeing something crazy and being crazy. Not everybody on Earth does. If you want, we can take this further and let the folks at home know that this was more than a minor equipment glitch. But we can't see them being as patient about it as we've been. Unless you want to go home, and never work in space again, I'd *drop it*."

* * *

Have you ever eaten something indigestible?

I don't mean something that passes through you unchanged, a day or so after you've made the bad mistake of eating it. That kind of thing hurts nothing but your dignity, but once it's out of you, it's history.

I mean the kind of thing that lodges in your center and makes itself at home.

You can't ignore it, because you can feel it, sitting there in your stomach like a stone, a weight that you can neither ignore, nor jettison, nor accept as part of you. It's just a presence, making you uncomfortable in the day and banishing sleep at night.

What I'd seen on the ridge was like that.

I have to give full credit to the rest of the team. They didn't hold it over me. Once I agreed to drop the matter, they never mentioned it again. But neither did they forget it. For days on end I lived with the awareness that I had become the object being studied, the subject of offhand asides that began the instant I was out of earshot. I couldn't escape the knowledge that we were no longer one group but two, one side made up of everybody who had not seen *the thing that never happened* and one side populated only by myself: a tribe of one, living as outsider among those who had previously trusted him utterly but who were now obliged to watch me for further iterations.

And then, of course, there was a further iteration.

Twelve days after the incident on the repair run, there was another broken camera, on another track some forty kilometers from the last one, connecting us and the Swedish team; and again, I was alone at the controls of a barge, where there was never anything to do with the part of your mind that wasn't occupied with making sure you didn't steer yourself into a hole. The free time gave my head time to spin in resentful circles and replay that meeting in Clancy's Bar, only this time with me taking the smug denials of my friends in stride and tearing them to logical pieces with arguments proved I was right. In those re-creations, I was every smartass detective who ever dazzled a roomful of suspects with the power of my superior mind. It didn't help, of course, because every thirty seconds I spent massaging myself with that scenario was followed by minutes of being slammed by the insistence of that dread memory, that it hadn't happened that way and couldn't have happened that way and that I was still, in the cold light of lunar daylight, the guy who remembered something that hadn't happened.

I was less than fifteen minutes from the Swedish facility when I spotted a glint of light coming from a small but steep outcropping up ahead, perceived some movement taking place on and around it, and—not connecting it to my great professional embarrassment—radioed ahead to tell whoever it was that I was in the vicinity in case they needed to catch a ride.

They didn't answer me.

Then I got a little closer and said, "Oh, crap."

It was *them* again.

The outcropping was not as tall or as steep as the prior ridge had been, but it still rose a good twenty meters above the surrounding plain, and the two of them were again involved in trying to get their crate up the hill. Once again, the pair was ignoring all common sense in performing this pointless task. They hadn't laid down a ramp to make it easier, they hadn't set up a pulley system to make it safer, and they hadn't brought more personnel to maximize the available muscle power: they were still going about with what little brute strength existed between them, this time with the fat guy carrying the upper end while the skinny guy brought up the rear. Again, as before, the impression given was that of an immense weight, straining the limits of their mutual strength; again, as before, it was an accident waiting to happen.

I watched their progress, fuming, as the barge chugged along its preset path.

As I did I pulled out a camera I'd been bringing with me for two weeks and began to film.

I need to point out this much.

I know I keep saying that. I'm not a storyteller. I'm not into holding back big revelations for their moment of greatest dramatic impact. I was not the slow learner you see in movies, who never quite gets that the phenomenon only he can see will not allow him to share any evidence of it with others. I was already operating under the assumption that even if I did get my two mystery men on video it would not be wise to spring this video on everybody without first confirming that it presented the scene I wanted it to capture. I was fully prepared to have the rug yanked out from underneath me.

I therefore establish out of sequence that when I returned to base with the video of what I saw it had not picked up anything but the rock formation ahead of me, craggy and sun-dappled and utterly unpopulated by any clumsy morons carrying a big unwieldy crate.

I establish because you're a million miles ahead of me that the video did not capture the moment when a third astronaut—this one wearing a top hat on his helmet—descended the sheer wall of the slope and stood there, expectantly, waiting for the fat one and the skinny one to get out of his way so he could continue downward.

Nor did my video capture that he did not do what any sane or reasonable person would have done and take a detour of three or four steps around the pair struggling with the unwieldy burden; not a single pixel of recorded image showed him fulminating with frustration at continuing to have his way obstructed.

The argument between the two with the crate and the one trying to get past them grew even more heated.

Then the fat astronaut knocked the interloper's top hat off his head.

In the days to come, I would grow obsessed with what happened next, because to my mind it seemed to establish that I was not observing a play put on for my benefit but something rather more significant. That hat didn't tumble to the ground in some manner consistent with lunar gravity, but rather caught the nonexistent wind. It swooped and sailed, with choreographed grace, teasing the incline, but dancing above it, in a balletic mockery of the astronaut who had lost it, not coming to rest until it had landed in the shallow tracks of any number of barges that had passed this way before me.

It landed brim down, no longer the third astronaut's hat, but the road's hat.

Whereupon it was instantly run over by an antique lunar rover that just happened to be passing by at that particular moment.

Now, those of you following this narrative may not know this, but we didn't use rovers, those recreational dune buggies of early lunar exploration, in those days. We had a couple, and they were beloved in the way that people love white elephants, but the fact of the matter is that they

were of next to no use for anything we needed to use them for; they had no range, they were of no use for hauling freight, and it was far too easy for some silly ass having too much fun making the thing bounce to do something like blunder over a cliff or into a crater while going off-road for the sheer delighted joy of it. Tractors hauling barges were slower, steadier, and a hell of a lot less fun, but a lot more practical after the routes from one outpost to another got standardized. So seeing a rover that had no business being out near that particular outcropping toodle up the path just in time to flatten that top hat beneath its treads as it passed by, and then critically disappear as soon as it turned the corner and never make its presence known again—well, that was another impossibility added to a stack of them already piled up way too high to support its own weight.

All of this happened in far less time than it takes to tell it, just enough time in fact for me to stop the barge at the base of the outcropping. The audio record documents by this point I was making incoherent noises. I halted the barge at the base of the rocks and hopped up, intent on scrambling up the slope myself, to confront these buffoonish madmen and document my sanity once and for all. I note for the record that I had the camera in hand and filming as I ascended, capturing a jittery, useless, nausea-inducing series of images with no consistent horizon; I might have done better if I'd thought of taking a far less unwieldy helmet-cam, of the sort we had in limited supply, but even that would have established only that I was attempting to scale a slope that was never meant to be climbed by a panicking man in a moonsuit. It certainly would not have captured any evidence of astronauts transporting a crate above me.

Because by the time I reached their elevation, I naturally did not find them. I wouldn't even find the hat.

I stood, high up a slope that all my training should have discouraged me from even trying to scale, overheated in a way that only a man who'd just overexerted himself in the heat of the lunar day could be overheated; there's only so much that even state-of-the-art insulation can do to mitigate such foolish behavior, and so the interior of my suit felt like a sauna and smelled like a gym sock. My helmet displays included the blinking question mark with wavy lines that represented a gentle suggestion that I get under cover or back inside an enclosed environment real soon. I also had the option, which we tried not to use, of flushing the heated air in the suit with me, and ordering an entire emergency inflation from my reserves, which would bring my temperature down as long as I didn't pull off any stupid maneuvers like panicky races up rock walls. I was fortunately not in crisis and not far from either the secondary tanks in the barge or the shared atmosphere I could get a fifteen-minute drive away. The safety warning was just that: a rap on the knuckles, underlining just how stupid I should feel.

I didn't feel stupid, though; not as I descended, not as I got back on the barge and piloted it the rest of the way to the Swedish installation.

I was fuming.

Once was an anomaly. Anybody could be tormented by the inexplicable.

But twice is persecution.

Twice is somebody, or something, screwing with you personally.

* * *

I'd already been advised to just drop it, but if one is a responsible human being living in a demanding and dangerous environment, one does not just drop incidents that call one's own sanity into question.

I told Carrie Aldrin No Relation. This time in private.

Giving her credit, she listened until I was done.

"I agree. Someone is screwing with you."

(She didn't actually say "screwing.")

"But," I said.

"But," she confirmed, "at this point, any concerted effort to track down the agencies responsible for this event is just going to make you look worse."

"That's what I'm afraid of. But that's not the worst problem I have. What if this really is not an elaborate hoax or practical joke, but a test?"

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that if a man gets laughed at every single time he reports the giant pink bunny he keeps seeing in the company break room, and can find no other witnesses to confirm the evidence of his own eyes, he will sooner or later get to the point where when he sees that giant pink bunny he will keep that observation to himself. As long as it’s not an imminent danger to anyone, it’s safer and less embarrassing to just keep quiet about the experience nobody else will ever understand. But then, if outside confirmation arrives—let’s say, two dozen of his friends and neighbors all reporting encounters with that bunny—then it’s safe to raise his hand and confess, *me too*, because by then he’s no longer the only person saying so.”

“I got you. And?”

“And that discourages anybody not insane from reporting the insane. But what if the insane is true? What if the platypus is an actual living animal and not the fake the first western naturalists brought a stuffed specimen imagined it to be? What if there really are two guys in spacesuits dragging a heavy crate across the landscape for my amusement? Isn’t it important that I let people know? That I feel safe letting people know?”

She thought about it. “I counter that with an infamous legend about twentieth-century police brutality.”

“This is going to be good.”

“I no longer remember where I heard this story. It could have come from a novel, it could have been an anecdote told in a bar about some whacked-out stunt pulled by a guy this other guy knew. I can’t say for sure that it’s true. But I happen to believe it is. Either way, I think you’ll find it profoundly illustrative.”

“I’m listening.”

“There was a certain police precinct still following the philosophy that some criminals are so heinous that it was okay, once they were in custody, to, ah, tune them up a little. Please understand that I am not defending this belief or the procedure I’m about to describe, just using them to illustrate a principle.”

“Okay.”

“So there was this one malefactor, actually a monster in human form, who had committed crimes of great brutality against children. I happen to know what they were, in more detailed iterations of the story, but won’t specify, because they’re irrelevant. Suffice it to say that you, yourself, would find it difficult to keep your own vengeful hands off him. The cops had him in a holding cell, awaiting transfer to county, and the thing was, with the case against him iron-tight, the guy saw no reason to be circumspect about what he had done. He taunted the cops with the rancid details, taking pleasure in being as vivid and as sickening as possible.”

“Like a serial killer bragging about how he killed his victims.”

“Maybe even exactly that. I’m not saying. Again, this is not about whether he deserved what was coming. It is about the evidentiary ramifications of what they did in response.”

“Okay.”

“So at one point they brought him back to the interrogation room, told him to wait, and let him cool his heels for a while, wondering what fresh hell this was all about. And after about half an hour the door opened and in walked a gorilla in a pink tutu.”

“Excuse me, what?”

“A gorilla in a tutu, or rather, a police officer in a gorilla costume that happened to also have a pink tutu around its midsection. It opened the door, glided in with as much in the way of balletic grace as is possible for anybody in a gorilla costume to achieve, performed a full circuit of the room while our bad guy watched with gaping jaw, then broke his nose with a single powerful punch, and just as gracefully departed.”

“Jesus.”

“I told you that police brutality was coming, and I am not saying I approve of it.”

“I know, but . . . look, I’m missing the relevance to my own situation.”

“Wait. We now fast-forward to the felon’s first appearance before a judge, with two black eyes and a nose that has seen better days. The judge is not pleased to see the clear evidence of gross

misconduct on the part of the police. She asks the officer on hand, what's the meaning of this? That officer says, it's self-inflicted, your honor. He smashed his face against the table in the interrogation room. The felon starts screaming, no, he's lying! That's not what happened! And the judge says, very well, then. Tell me what happened. And the dirtbag said, I'm telling you, your honor, I was in the room just minding my own business when in comes this gorilla in a pink tutu ..."

I laughed out loud.

"And that was so clearly bullshit," said Carrie Aldrin No Relation, "that the judge just naturally deferred to the alternate explanation, that the damage was self-inflicted."

"I . . . Jesus, Carrie, that's not right."

"Like I said. I present it because it illustrates the effect going any further with this might have on your career. You are right. This might be some kind of psychological test being run to check your willingness to report the inexplicable. Given the existence of Minnie and Earl, and what happened to Destry, that's certainly a working hypothesis. But I offer you another one, a reason why you absolutely have to be sure of yourself before you bring this up again."

"Yeah?"

"It's also possible that there's a gorilla in a pink tutu."

I waited. But that appeared to be it.

"Sorry," she said.

* * *

So I went back to keeping it to myself, but neither did I let it slide. I became Ahab, and those two idiots my own Moby Dick. I volunteered for more camera maintenance duty, took the long way around in cases where I could have taken a shortcut, revisited the prior two locations, actually dreamt about them more than once, and endured an absence of further corroboration for a period just long enough to halfway persuade me that the status quo had returned.

And then, again while I was out alone, with a camera mounted on the control panel to record everything I saw, I found them.

It was one of my longer routes, out past the zones claimed by the various colonization projects: a place that we only kept an eye on to make sure the absence of activity expected in those places remained an absence of activity. (It was not only a stranger time on the moon, but a more paranoid one.) A jagged ridge shielded about two kilometers of the drive from any observation, and I should have known that if the two inept astronauts and their friends were going to appear again, it would be once I entered that little stage; but, as would turn out to be wholly appropriate, they did pride themselves on their comedic timing, and so it was just when I was not thinking of them that I passed a certain blind spot and saw two barges, just like mine, parked head-to-head. There did not appear to have been a collision, but from the gesticulations of the three people standing around outside, there was certainly a clash of personalities.

This is what I saw as I drew near.

The barge on the right was occupied by several figures in moonsuits, seated in the unpresurized cabin and not participating in the altercation below. One of the riders appeared to be injured, his left leg in a brace that prevented it from bending, the foot itself wrapped multiple times in what looked like, but could not be, a plaster cast. It was like he'd broken his foot, and they'd applied bandages directly to his moonsuit, which of course made no sense whatsoever. He sat with a visible air of impatience, his injured leg extended at the angle of a Nazi salute, and resting on the open window frame of the barge's protective cage, as if out of the belief that this was a fine way to air it. Two other figures shared the cab with him, their faces not visible through the mirrored glass of their helmets. It was impossible to tell anything about them except that there were deeply interested in the progress of the altercation between the fat astronaut and the skinny astronaut, both still wearing their derby hats atop their helmets, and the driver of the other barge.

The injured rider—I didn't know who he was, or even if he was a he, but for some reason the name "Edgar" popped into my head—made no sense, of course. Not in the way his bandages were applied, not in the way the familiar pair ignored him as they had their argument with the

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driver of the other barge; honestly, there are just so many things that could go wrong with somebody suffering injury in a sealed moonsuit that the normal procedure would have been to waste no time getting him back into some pressurized environment, but nobody was paying attention to him at all.

Not even when he shifted that foot and eloquently mimed pain.

All this, I noticed by the time I was close enough to halt my barge and just watch the developments.

The lone driver arguing with the fat and skinny astronauts must have decided he'd had enough, because he bent over and picked up a rock. He dusted it off, weighed it in his hands, and flung it against one of the barge's running lights, which disintegrated with a visible, if naturally not audible, pop.

The fat astronaut looked at the skinny astronaut, adjusted the derby balanced atop his helmet, then bent over and picked up another rock the same size as the first.

He, too, made a big show of dusting it off.

The driver of the other barge regarded this with only casual interest.

Then the fat astronaut threw that rock at one of the other barge's running lights, shattering it.

Fat and Skinny gave each other deeply approving nods.

The other driver gestured for them to wait.

By now, it was not all surprising that, in what can only be described as madness, they gave him time to take his turn.

The other driver climbed aboard his barge, rustled around in his cargo bed, and came out carrying a canister of compressed glass. This is an emergency item we carry in case of blowouts. It comes out in a foam and, upon a few seconds in vacuum, hardens to the consistency of rock.

It's a lifesaver, one I've used myself, but if you're in a lunar environment and a sane adult human being, you do not play around with it.

The driver came out brandishing the canister, a moment I would have considered ominous but which the fat astronaut and skinny astronaut watched with purely academic calm.

He regarded the fat man's faceplate.

He considered several angles.

Neither Fat nor Skinny made any attempt to put any distance between themselves and him.

Then he squirted a huge blob of instantly-congealing goo in the center of the fat astronaut's faceplate, sculpting it into a bulbous nose.

The fat astronaut and the skinny astronaut spent a beat regarding each other.

Then the skinny astronaut nodded, gestured for the other driver to wait, and hopped aboard his own party's barge, barreling toward its own cargo bed on the narrow walkway outside the passenger cage. On his way, he bumped into Edgar's protruding foot and prompted another paroxysm of agony.

Skinny didn't see what he had done, or at least didn't pause, but proceeded to the cargo bed, where he obtained another compressed glass canister.

On his way back, he bumped into Edgar's foot again a second time, to equally catastrophic effect.

Rejoining the altercation at ground level, he showed his canister to Fat and to the driver of the other barge.

The other driver did absolutely nothing to attain distance, just continued to watch with perfectly academic interest.

Skinny pointed at his canister. Nodded. Pointed at the other driver's faceplate. Nodded.

Still, the other driver did absolutely nothing to avoid what was coming.

Skinny positioned his canister and began spraying. He did not aim for the faceplate. He aimed for the top of the helmet. He made a left antler and then a right antler, while the other driver stood there not reacting at all. He then repositioned the nozzle, aimed it at the other driver's face plate, and over the next few seconds made a canine snout, protruding a full four inches. He spent so much of the highly valuable substance in those few seconds that he

emptied the canister, and after a couple of depleted squirts, shrugged and handed it to Fat.

Now tormented beyond all endurance, the other driver flung his own canister at Skinny's head.

Skinny ducked, permitting the canister to sail on and add yet another painful bruise to Edgar's bandaged boot.

Fat threw the canister at the other driver's head.

The other driver ducked, and the impact took out another of his running lights.

What followed was outright war, neither side doing anything to protect their own vehicle, each doing everything they could to destroy the other's. Within seconds they were no longer doing minor damage to running lights but were using tools to uncouple the treads, an act of downright murderous sabotage given the consequences of being stuck this far from any of the construction crews, without air or any other means of transportation that could get them to air. I was watching maniacs murder each other with sabotage, a spectacle so senseless and so horrifying that my immediate working hypothesis could only be some contaminant in their air supply, one capable of driving people into psychotic rages. This hypothesis fails to make sense all these years later because it would have been a psychosis that struck all three of the participants in precisely the same way, driving all three into the same kind of oddly inexorable, meticulous form of hostilities, including their bizarre willingness for a time to stand still and wait for whatever retribution their opponents were set to provide next: but at the time we were only a few years removed from the air-supply contamination that actually had made a delusional killer of that wholly reasonable, wholly level-headed engineer named Ken Destry, so the hypothesis actually did seem to make a form of sense. All I knew was there were passengers on the barge represented by Fat and Skinny, passengers who included one apparently wounded man . . . and that I was the only one who could evacuate them in time.

I unstrapped myself and hopped down to the surface, where, as it happened, the angle at which I'd stopped momentarily hid all the insanity before me from view.

You've got to understand something about working in a vacuum in a place like the surface of the Moon. If you are twenty paces from absolute chaos on the scale of three insane people doing whatever they can to dismantle each others' vehicles, even if that madness would make an ungodly din on Earth, then the silence that shrouds everything else continues to shroud this. You do not hear a sudden cessation of all sound when that spectacle vanishes. You therefore don't have the additional cue to warn you when you emerge from momentary cover expecting to see the same drama before you, that you saw before that interval of a second or two when it was all hidden from view.

So when I came around the front of my barge and did not immediately see them, the only reasonable assumption was that I'd gotten turned around somehow, but all the nonsense was still taking place somewhere just outside my field of vision, that all I had to do was pivot, and pivot, and keep pivoting.

And I remained the only human being in sight, standing beside the only lunar barge in sight, reacting to something that had seemed to real to me as my own arm.

I felt angry. I felt confused. I felt lost. More than anything else, I felt persecuted.

I had to do something.

And so that's when I took the problem to Minnie and Earl.

* * *

This is a story involving any number of things that one would normally never expect a listener to believe, and so this is the point in the narrative where I have to establish one of the strangest.

I have told you repeatedly that this was a very strange time in the history of lunar colonization.

I have also mentioned Minnie and Earl.

What I also need to tell you is that Minnie and Earl were not astronauts, not representatives of the United States lunar colonization program, nor that of any other competing program then on the Moon.

I don't know what they were. Nobody does. I told you right away that there is no closure in this story, certainly not with my own situation, and I tell you right now that there is also none with them.

It is possible that they were gods, representatives of some advanced alien civilization, or just a couple of amiable pensioners who had found some way to retire on the Moon, using technology unknown to any human agency.

The only explanation we were ever to come up with is that they were good neighbors, and terrific confidantes for anybody who happened to be bothered by an insoluble personal problem.

If you needed to see them, or even if you just wanted to, you begged the time, requisitioned a vehicle, and traveled into one of the hilly regions not being developed by any of the international teams, following well-worn tracks that had been traveled by any number of visitors before you, and finally over a ridge that provided a panoramic view of relative flatlands on the other side. The workers of the time made a habit of bringing newbies on precisely this journey, telling them that they were about to see something that would change their entire lives, without providing a single actual clue until they topped that last ridge and it became possible what waited down below, a sight that could not be picked up on any earthbound telescope.

It was a rectangle of green lawn, surrounded by a white picket fence, all framing a friendly-looking white clapboard house with a mailbox and a front porch.

More often than not, as you descended that ridge, you'd see Minnie and Earl themselves, a pair of beaming old white people sitting on their porch swing waiting for you, more often than not with a pitcher of lemonade waiting.

The first time I saw it, my mind cracked and continued to crack even as the colleagues taking me on this journey piloted our barge to within a few paces of the swinging door in that picket fence. It went on cracking even as I was escorted past that swinging door to those few acres of temperate, fully pressurized atmosphere, which was somehow immune to decompression even though the only barrier between what appeared to be some small-town homestead in Ohio and deadly lunar vacuum was that white picket fence; and it came damn close to splintering when the big goofy golden retriever, Miles, came running up to pant his condensation-breath on the faceplate of my moonsuit.

I know how this sounds. It sounds like I'm either deluded or the biggest liar in the history of space exploration. All I can tell you is that once you were introduced to them you were provided the intelligence that they had been in contact with humanity since at least the days of Armstrong and Aldrin. They had framed photos in their house documenting that their friends among the unambiguously human included Ray Bradbury, David Bowie, and Malala Yousafzai—some of whom look dazed and startled in the images. While nobody had quite gotten a handle on who or what they were, they were at least uncommonly friendly and inviting, the best neighbors anyone could have had.

You want an example? On my second year on the Moon, we received news of fatalities on a classified expedition out near the asteroid belt. Somebody had made a mistake, which is the usual first line of any death notice in space exploration. The math didn't work out, and two big rocks came together with a man between them, and he was reduced to particulate matter, on camera.

It was not the first or last time this happened. Space travel is dangerous. People get smeared on the highway system, in terrestrial conditions. You had better believe they get smeared in space.

What did matter is that the deceased was the fresh husband of one of our colleagues, a man so shattered by his bereavement that he was judged unfit to work. Without Minnie and Earl, we would have shipped him home. What happened instead is that they offered him their guest room for a week, and his duties were distributed among the rest of us while he spent that week sleeping late, wearing civvies, playing pool, wrestling with Miles, and having any number of heart-to-heart talks over just how one goes on moving past such incomprehensible loss. He returned to work with a somber edge, but ready to go on: certainly not the emotional basket case

he had been, before they did whatever they did to buck him up.

I suspect it was just showing patience.

I can testify: if there was one thing Minnie and Earl were exceptional at, it was patience.

* * *

Minnie and Earl had no telephone nor anything analogous to a radio, though I suspect that whenever none of the early development teams were around they must have been on the horn with somebody, even if that somebody had green skin and a half-dozen legs. For us, there was no way to call ahead. But it was understood that they kept a welcome mat by their front door and that they were at home for anybody who had a problem, at any time. If it took me this long to see them about my problem, it is because those of us who worked on the Moon at the time exercised reciprocity and did not abuse the privilege.

I let the front gate slam behind me, and with the usual amount of *I-Can't-Believe-I'm-Doing-This* hesitancy, unlocked and removed my helmet. I did not die of asphyxiation as I should have, out there on the lunar surface. Instead, I tasted an intoxicating rush of all the smells one misses in the lunar environment: freshly cut grass, unrecycled air not tinged with body odor and generations of stale farts, the unmistakable tang of trees and a whiff of somebody's backyard barbecue. A second later, as an excited tongue baptized my face, it was something else, dog breath: Miles, doing what dogs do and demonstrating that his day was made by my arrival.

The screen door slammed, and Minnie came out, wiping her hands on her apron. They were dusted with flour halfway up to the elbows, granting her perpetual light tan the appearance of clown white. The side of her face became a collection of nested parentheses, the way it always did when she smiled. "Why, Ben Turpin. I didn't expect you today, apricot." She peered past me at the barge I'd parked on the other side of the picket fence. "And you're alone. Not part of tonight's dinner party at all."

"No," I said. "My turn's not until a week from Friday."

Everybody on the Moon at the time had a standing invitation, but there were so many of us, between all the countries in the coalition, that we had to take turns. With the arrival of the Saudi and Ethiopian expeditions, the population had recently grown to the point where nobody could be fitted onto a guest list more than once every four weeks.

"You are looking frazzled, though. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I said truthfully.

"But something's bothering you, yes?"

"It's not a crisis. Nothing like that."

"That doesn't mean it's insignificant, honey. Every problem we have is the whole world to us."

I smiled. "Oh, it's bothering me, all right. I'm just saying, it's no life-shattering emergency."

"Well, that's a relief. Earl's away right now, but you can come sit on the porch with me and have yourself some fresh pecan pie if you'd like."

And that's one reason everybody loved Minnie and Earl. They had things like pecans that for years had been hard as hell to get on Earth, due to drought restrictions.

It would have been easiest to just keep the moonsuit on, as I didn't expect to be around for all that long, but there were some things one didn't do around Minnie, and that was stand on ceremony. She went inside, the screen door slamming behind her, and I undertook the time-consuming but etiquette-respecting task of removing myself from the bulky gear that would have been the only thing preserving my life just a few short feet away. By the time I emerged in the bilious blue-green uniforms we wore around the habitats, Minnie had returned bearing a tray with a pitcher of iced tea and a slice of what I already knew would be one of the sweetest pieces of pie I'd ever tasted.

I climbed the three steps to the porch, followed her to the little square table with the chess grid on it, and sat opposite her smiling face.

"Where *is* Earl?" I asked, mostly because I couldn't remember a time when he'd ever been out.

"Oh," she said, waving an airy hand, "you know the way he is."

This, of course, answered nothing. "Is everything okay?"

"Honey, you know the way it is. Everything's always okay, except when it's not."

"... okay."

"Oh, don't look like *that*. He's got his little personal business, sometimes, just like I do. When I tell you I fully expect him to be back by tonight's gathering, as he always is, I mean that it's nothing you need to worry about. Unless what you came to talk about is some kind of male problem—oh, dear, it's not that, is it?"

I laughed out loud. "No, it's not."

"Then I suspect I can help you just as much as he would."

"I appreciate that."

"And I appreciate you appreciating it. Now have yourself at least one little taste of my signature pecan pie before you utter so much as one more word."

I used the fork she'd provided to amputate a bite-sized chunk and can only say that if there's anything in life that cannot be effectively expressed in prose, it is the joy to be found in an exquisite homemade pie, and that this pleasure is multiplied to infinite degree if you eat it under a sky dominated by the big blue marble, while contemplating that the delicacy in question has no more rational explanation than the porch you're eating it on, or the house that porch is a part of, or the lawn, or the golden retriever at your knee patiently beaming into your head the canine message that it wouldn't object to you dropping a piece, not at all.

"Wow," I said.

Minnie beamed. "I make a caramel to mix in with the maple before I add my bourbon. Now, most people using that recipe would just add the maple straight, and you get a perfectly fine pie filling when you do that, but I for one never saw the point in cutting corners, not when that could spell the difference between a perfectly fine piece of pie and an absolutely superb one. We all eat more than enough average pie in our lifetimes. If you can help yourself there's no reason to add to it."

It was certainly no average pie. It was so good that it felt blasphemous to sully its consumption with the reason I was here, and so I lingered over it, chatting with Minnie about the things that were always joyous to discuss with that amazing old woman, which is to say nothing at all.

Afterward, with Miles licking the plate, and an oversized mug of rich, flavorful coffee mocking the swirl that was the best we got back at the base, she said, "Now, why don't you start from the beginning, apricot, and tell me what's got you so bothered."

So I told her everything I've told you.

Minnie asked questions only to obtain clarification on those few points where my narrative was vague or unclear. She commented not at all, not to express disbelief and not to express amazement, but midway through a certain twinkle came into her eye and she said, "Oh, my." I said, "What?" and she shook her head, "Just go on." At about the three-quarter mark the twinkle was incandescent, and by the time I was almost done, she was beaming.

She collected my empty mug, went back inside to get me a refill, and returned with the report that she'd doctored this one up special.

When I took my next sip, I realized she'd spiked it with rum.

"Sorry about that," she said. "I figured you might need a little kick before we get any further into this."

I did. Another sip and I felt the burn. "You have an explanation?"

"No, apricot, I do not. Not in the sense you mean the word. I don't know who these contentious figures are, who they represent, or what they believe they're communicating to you. There are any number of extant parties they could be, including a number with the resources to pull off this trick who I would not immediately suspect of doing anything this wildly eccentric, without point. It has, however, always been my philosophy, and dear Earl's, that in the absence of any visible hostility, it is most helpful to assume friendly intent, and because of the specific behavior being replicated here, I remain confident that they are no worse than mischievous."

I said, "You recognize *something*, though."

"I certainly do, dear. I'm afraid I'm not surprised that your friends have failed to, in part

because so much time has passed and some of your common cultural referents have become less universal in the wake of further incoming noise, more's the pity. But I would be more actively disappointed were it not for the other impediment to translation: that you're just not that evocative a storyteller."

"I never claimed to be."

"No," she smiled, "you did not. Telling me what happened, you did what you probably did when you told everybody else what happened. You reported it like you would report any other unusual phenomenon: like a series of events, captured in chronological order without any specific emotional weight given to any of them. The summary came as absurd because the events were absurd, but you did nothing additional to express how that absurdity felt, nor how it was likely meant to play. In specific, you never really captured its most obvious characteristic, that it was funny. Nothing you said expressed that, and so nobody capable of remembering the clear referent—a percentage of your generation that is already in the minority—drew a line between what you reported and behavior that had already been recorded for widespread consumption, more than a hundred and fifty years ago."

I was dying. "What behavior?"

"The genius comedy of Stan Laurel and Oliver 'Babe' Hardy."

My mouth fell open. After a while, I closed it.

She said, "Please don't torture an old woman by saying you haven't heard of them."

"I think I may have seen some of their stuff, at some point. But not since I was a kid. I was more of a fan of The Three Stooges."

"Bless your heart," she said, in the manner that the phrase has traditionally always been meant to be taken, judgmentally.

"And . . . Laurel and Hardy . . . they're . . ."

"Again, honey, I don't know who's doing it. But that's what you've been seeing, reenacted in moon suits. The first two incidents invoked bits from their only Academy-Award winning film, *The Music Box*. In that one they played deliverymen assigned to carry a crated player piano up a long flight of stairs, and various mishaps ensue, among them the flattening of the hat. The third sounds an awful lot like another early work, *A Perfect Day*, or I suppose it could be *Big Business*, or even *Tit for Tat*. In any event, it's clearly Laurel and Hardy, performed by people who love their work, studied their work, and can adapt it for the lunar environment."

I said, "That's . . . crazy."

"I'm surprised at you, Ben Turpin. *Crazy* is never a useful way to describe baffling behavior, even if actual mental illness is involved—at least not if you want to understand it. It's more profitable to assume a thought process that functions according to precepts alien to your own. Or to put it another way, there was an important early science fiction writer named Stanley G. Weinbaum, dead about a century before you were born, who in one of his stories had a friendly alien named Tweel explain, of yet another species encountered for the first time, 'One-one-two—yes!—two-two-four—no!' Which was his way of saying that the beings he was trying to explain were capable of thought . . . but that their higher thought processes ran on a logic other than the one the narrator understood."

It was difficult to escape the impression that I was being piled up with homework. After a moment, I said, "And you think this is true of the people pulling these stunts?"

"I have no way of knowing that, dear. They're likely human. Even if not, they do seem to be humanoid, enough in category to love Laurel and Hardy, and that *must* mean there's room for communication. But it's also true of the characters Stan and Oliver played. They weren't funny because they were stupid. They were funny because they were, to coin a phrase, differently brained. For any task where a human being has to come up with the easiest possible way to do something, their approach was always, 'One-one-two—yes! Two-two-four—no!' The joke was always that this model of thinking failed, often with catastrophic effect."

She put a hand on my wrist. "Which I know doesn't help much, if you're trying to narrow out who's doing this to you. You're still left with that question. If I find something out, I'll let you know. . . ."

She had left me with avenues of investigation, and so I investigated.

The instant I had some time to myself, I obtained and read the Weinbaum story. I had absolutely no trouble believing that the author died a century before I was born. The prose was antiquated, the characterization—of among personages a man with the surname Putz—even more so, the portrait of an inhabited Mars so much at odds with even the science of its time that the only way I could finish was to posit a planet of that name with some cosmetic similarities to the one we know, but not in our Solar System. This has long been my problem with science fiction.

But I found the references to basic arithmetic as models of degrees of alien sapience, including Tweel, who was a thumb's-up affirmative one-one-two, and a later species who he woefully informed the narrator was neither one-one-two nor two-two-four. It didn't seem to add much to my dilemma, beyond establishing something I'd known going in, that Minnie knew what she was talking about.

I put the story aside and proceeded to the next part of my research, a survey of the short films of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy.

Much of it was available via hytex—that system, then new, which replaced the internet. I downloaded what there was, to watch at leisure. *The Music Box* played out as described: a pair of fools hauling a piano crate up a steep flight of Los Angeles stairs. I noted multiple similarities between what the performers did on film, down to specific gestures, and what my fat and skinny astronauts had done in moonsuits. Some of the gestures were exact. The same was true of *One Perfect Day*, *Big Business*, and *Tit for Tat*, which all seemed to have contributed equally to the scenario I'd experienced later. I watched each of them multiple times, rapt, but not particularly enjoying myself, except in the way that I always did, whenever working on a problem.

This went on for a few days.

It didn't change until later in the week, when I was in Clancy's Bar, coming down from sixteen hours working on the solar array, and once again watching *Big Business* on my pad, in search of the grand moment of comprehension. The boys were happily vandalizing the home of a character played by an actor I gathered to be their most frequent foil, James Finlayson, when I gradually became aware that somebody was standing behind me, watching even as I watched.

After a minute, Carrie Aldrin No Relation said, "I love these guys. They're hilarious."

"I guess."

This was generous. In all my watching, I hadn't laughed once. I'd treated their works as a problem to be picked apart and analyzed for clues that could help with my specific dilemma. I'd noted where the jokes were and recognized them as jokes, but hadn't gone so far as to connect with them, in the way that the audience for any joke must, in order to complete the transaction.

She said, "I'm tired of watching over your shoulder. Let's put *Towed In a Hole* up on the big screen."

That was one I'd never heard of before. I'd only been watching the ones Minnie had told me were related to my mystery. "Okay."

So we turned the lights down low and commenced.

This one featured the pair as partners in business, plying a trade that I had never suspected ever existed: mobile fish salesmen, who drove around town cheerfully calling to pedestrians that they had "fresh fish, just caught in the ocean this morning." I was immediately distracted by the practical problems this represented, including among them the requirement of finding random passersby who just happened to be in the mood to buy fish from unlicensed strangers who called to them from passing cars. Hardy's character beamed, "For the first time in our lives, we are a success!" By this point, Carrie Aldrin No Relation was already chuckling. I was profoundly dubious, and the mental energy I devoted to trying to parse how such an enterprise would work got me past the first few slow minutes while the central action was still being set up.

Stan Laurel, the more obviously *No-two-two-four* of the pair, introduced to Hardy the bright

idea that if they just bought a fishing-boat and brought in the morning catch themselves, they could “eliminate the middle man” and make even more profit. The logic of this escaped me, as I wondered how the boys could possibly both catch enough fish to vend and then drive around all day hectoring strangers to buy it—the many problems being just when they would maintain their boat, let alone sleep. Still, this was Laurel’s big idea, and with this minimal setup they soon arrived with a boat that had seen better days and commenced renovating it to make it seaworthy.

As someone who had seen only a few of their films, I already knew that this would lead to big trouble. You didn’t want to give these guys a complex task to do, ever.

As the inevitable chaos played out, Carrie began to titter. I’ve learned since that it had long been an accepted truism that Laurel and Hardy were a guy thing that most women just don’t get, and I can’t tell you just how accurate that might be, because as Minnie said, they weren’t as well-known even in those days as they were at their height. I had too wanting a sample size. But Carrie tittered throughout, with every disaster Laurel inflicted on Hardy, with every way in which their simple shared task was reduced to catastrophe. When she started to guffaw, I watched with unfiltered incredulity.

And then, near the end, something happened.

Hardy was on a ladder, painting the ship’s mast. Laurel was down below, having been banished from active participation for his contribution to regular disasters. Through a series of mishaps he managed to get his head stuck between the shaft and the corner of the room. He was trapped, and to his miniscule brain it seemed a fully reasonable solution to saw himself free. And this he started doing, as one deck and a ladder above, Hardy began to narrow his eyes with the suspicion that something was wrong.

Something began to tickle my belly.

The mast gave away. Hardy’s face contorted in terror as he rode it to an ignominious landing. Whomp!

I didn’t know the belly laugh was going to come out of me until it did. I had never been a man who laughed much. It wasn’t that I was incapable of amusement, or that I didn’t appreciate a good joke. It was that, since childhood, my deepest form of release had always been a quick grin and the simple acknowledgment, “That’s funny.” This was not that. This was an absolute explosion, the release of years of hoarded laugh-energy, feeding on itself until I couldn’t breathe. It was one of those laughs where the person you’re laughing with cannot stop, and that means you cannot stop, and any even momentary eye contact makes you start up all over again.

It was when I transitioned from treating them as a problem to be solved to treasuring them as a legacy to be loved.

Afterward, Carrie Aldrin No Relation said, “You ought to do that more often.”

“What?”

“Laugh. I didn’t think you were capable of it. You’re always so stern-eyed and serious.”

Generally, people accused of being humorless think they’re the lives of the party. “I am?”

“It’s a nice laugh. A contagious one. You ought to surrender yourself more often. What brought on this Laurel and Hardy binge anyway?”

There was no particular reason to refrain from telling her, but Minnie aside, I was still operating from prior advice including Carrie’s that I should avoid further mention of my particular phantoms. “Minnie prescribed them.”

“That old gal,” Carrie said, with deep contentment. “She’s never wrong about anything.”

* * *

Later, over Sunday night dinner, Minnie said, “Better than the Three Stooges, eh?”

She also said, “Maybe this was all about getting you to laugh, just once. Flotillas have sailed off to war on flimsier pretexts.”

And it’s true; the story could have easily ended here.

In some ways it did. I produce this memoir with ambitions of having it sealed until after my death, as I am aware not only that if I were around to witness its release I will have to endure being considered a liar or a fool. I would be spared speculation about possible dementia, a

horrifying condition once common to old age that I've lived to see banished to the history books. But foolishness still exists, and people will qualify for that diagnosis for as long as this species still stands, and I'd rather not have to hear that said of me, by people who have somehow read all the prior caveats and still think I'm cheating them by providing no closure.

So let me repeat what I said at the beginning. You won't ever find out exactly who or what I encountered playing out Laurel and Hardy routines, all those times.

That said, if you're just reading this account now, either printed out or on a screen, you have some way of knowing how much of it still remains. You know that while what remains may not be revelatory, it is still, by some measurement, *more*.

So here it is:

I did not see them again for another fourteen months.

I existed on tenterhooks, eager for a recurrence. It didn't happen. I worked my shifts, both in the excavators and on the surface. No Laurel and Hardy. I participated in a couple of personnel exchanges with the other nations in the coalition, and was once stuck behind what you could call enemy lines, an effective prisoner of the Japanese, during one of those ridiculous diplomatic kerfuffles over nothing that in those days sometimes came appallingly close to plunging the human race into final war. That blew over, shame-faced apologies were exchanged, and everything went back to normal. No Laurel and Hardy. We weathered our funding crisis when the latest bunch of terrestrial advocates for keeping Mankind earthbound forever almost succeeded in shutting us down, which for a day or so got so bad that it looked like those of us with American passports would have to rely on the charity of others in order to get home. That got squashed at the last minute, and the work went on. No Laurel and Hardy.

I had a few minor close calls and adventures to tell my grandchildren about—and eventually, I did—but it was all stuff that could be explicated, things with absolutely no whiff of the unexplained about them. I began to relax and think of my encounters with the fat one and skinny one as just one of those bizarre things that happen to you in life, that you never do get a handle on, and that you must at long last put aside in order to move on to whatever happens next. You may have never had anything that made you question your sanity, but you have had that.

Oh, and I got married.

It was not to Carrie Aldrin No Relation as some of you may overconfidently predict from that brief moment of chemistry following our joint viewing of *Towed In a Hole*, but to a mission specialist named Jonequa Cort. She had been picked for the crew not only because she was certified in multiple fields—as most of us were—but also because she was a landscape painter, and all other things being equal it was judged damn well past time somebody with that skill got to go to the Moon and did with her eye what the old astronomical artists had done with imagination and whatever data was most current. I admit being dubious about this argument when I first heard it, less so when I saw her for the first time, and no longer even a bit after I spoke with her for more than five minutes at a stretch. It's easy to recount why I fell head over heels for her, less so why she reciprocated so quickly—but it happened, and after about eight weeks of carving out a courtship in whatever tiny slivers of time we could eke out, she popped the question.

The reception was held in Minnie and Earl's roomy backyard, with about 80 percent of the current human population of the Moon attending. If I told you the name of the band that showed up to play—in the prime of their lives, mind you, even though it's also a given that all four of them had been dead for decades—you would never in a million years believe me; some would demand to know whether the event was also disrupted by Blue Meanies.

Nor would you believe me if I ever told you who Minnie and Earl got to perform the ceremony. He was also long dead, having passed a generation before I was born. And he was both hilarious and heartfelt, a gray harlequin of off-the-cuff brilliance.

Honestly, what I'm already asking you to accept is way too much. Suffice it to repeat what I've said several times before, that this was a very strange era on the Moon, and agitating for explanations could be of profoundly limited utility.

What I should tell you is that one of those evening get-togethers at Minnie and Earl's did not follow the usual loose party plan, of folks just showing up for dinner, hanging out and enjoying

one another's company until the time came to put our moonsuits back on and return to the everyday slog. No, at this meeting Earl announced that he was putting on a special program in my honor. He went down to the basement, came back up with a movie projector at least a hundred years old, pulled down a screen and showed everybody a selection of Laurel and Hardy shorts, among them *Busy Bodies*, *Brats*, and *Towed in A Hole*.

One of the ones he showed was *One Good Turn*, which he preceded with the information that it had been made as a gift for Laurel's young daughter, who was still too young to understand that screen life was make-believe, and who had been driven by exposure to her father's work to fear of her doting "Uncle Babe," the man who the movies always showed slapping her dad around. Out of sheer love, the boys made this film, the only one that ends with Laurel completely losing his temper and whaling on his partner at extreme length. Earl informed us that this repaired the little girl's relationship with Babe. He said, "Never forget that these two men, so different in real life, so separated in temperament, loved each other, and that they were always destined to be joined by an ampersand, wherever fate took them." And by then, like so many who had adored their comedies over the years, I was capable of getting misty-eyed over that.

Which is, I suppose, another place the story could have ended.

But more was still coming.

* * *

Minnie told me, "We've talked to them."

This was at one of the nightly dinner parties. It was actually my goodbye party. My time on the Moon was nearly up. I was being cycled back to Earth, as per the medical requirements. Walking around with weights on my legs, for at least four hours a day, could not totally prevent the atrophy that goes with one-sixth gee. I had to go back and feel Earth weight again. I was not looking forward to returning to the world we on the Moon sometimes called "The Chandelier," and not just because the physical therapy would be painful; but because Jonequa would not be following me for six months. I would be living as a bachelor again, in a world where free time existed again, and the prospect did not strike me as anywhere near as fun as that sounds.

Most everybody was in the next room, recovering from their tryptophan comas. Earl was downstairs leading some of the still mobile in a pool tournament. I had joined Minnie in the kitchen and was washing while she dried. (It may seem odd to you that a couple whose very existence in their lunar environment implied a technology far above any we knew washed their dishes by hand, especially when they threw their dinners nightly; but if it's the least among the things that bother you, consider it just a palate-cleanser. Minnie once explained to me that in her view the clearing of the meal should be as social an activity as its serving and consumption, and from that day on I had never shirked the responsibility: something Jonequa would later say she wanted to thank the old bird for, once she also got back to Earth.)

I did not catch Minnie's reference right away. This happened to be fourteen months after my last encounter with the fat and skinny astronauts, so the subject had receded some distance into the past. Also, Minnie had buried her big announcement in the middle of more mundane chat about my plans once I got home, without any segue to indicate that what came next was of any pressing significance. So I said, "Who?"

"Your friends."

"What friends?"

"The ones who had you so worried, this time last year."

Two full seconds of incomprehension, while my RAM searched. Then I almost dropped the current plate. "*Those* friends?"

"We asked around."

Now I had it. "Minnie. Asked around *where*?"

"Here and there. What, you think our lives began the moment you moved into the neighborhood? Please. We have an entire far-flung social circle we're still in touch with."

"Who?"

"They're no one from any of your development crews. They're from, let's say, outside the neighborhood. Harmless comedy fans, into what can be best called role-playing."

You need to understand this much: Minnie and Earl were welcome presences, regarded with more or less uncomplicated affection by everybody up the NASA chain of command. But they had been under more or less constant investigation by all of us on the Moon for as long as there'd been a human presence here. We had taken samples of the food they served (the same way everybody did back then, in Tupperware), of Miles's shed fur, of every inch of their little homestead with every surveillance method we could employ while remaining some value of neighborly, and we were under strict orders to continue doing so, in part because their presence still made some planetary-defense types nervous and in part because, like those men in derbies who had harassed me, they represented not so much a grand scientific mystery but an itch, like one of those really bad ones directly under your shoulder blades that you can't reach except with a long stick or a very indulgent friend. The only reason they were still not officially counted as a First Contact with an alien civilization is that they were so human in appearance and behavior if not in technological capability that their origins could not be proved with certainty one way or the other.

The decision had come from up on high that we should not jinx what appeared to be a good thing and just enjoy them.

We were all also under instruction to keep our ears open in case any hard data slipped.

Minnie, in her own gentle way, had just handed me a thunderbolt, and here I was, wrist-deep in suds.

She said, "We talked a little bit about what they had done to you, about how it amounted to an exercise in teasing the rubes. I explained the havoc it had played with your emotions, and they felt bad: bad enough that they wanted me to relay their willingness to meet, if that's something you're willing to do."

I almost said *Shit, yeah*, but stopped myself, a good thing as Minnie had always frowned up certain language in the house. "I . . . yes, I would appreciate that, Minnie. Thank you."

"It won't be a long visit, I'm afraid to say. They're not in the neighborhood often, and when they are it's just to blow off steam. They said they'll be leaving in a couple of days, and I said, that's fine, you'll be leaving a couple of days after that. But Earl's given them a stern talking-to about what's polite and what's not, and so they said that if you can clear an hour, they'll be where you saw them last, at around eight P.M. on Tuesday night."

I was working then, as it happened, but then that was the default truth about any appointment one could possibly have on the Moon; we were always working. This close to my departure, it would not be easy to pull some strings, call in some favors, even just plain insist on a change of schedule, if I had to. It would be a small price to pay if we were really talking about unambiguous first contact. "I could do that."

"They said that they'd answer any questions you might have, but that you'd have to be on time, because they'll have to be hitting the road by nine. Otherwise they'll miss their ride."

I managed, "And I just bet that ride has a very narrow launch window, right?"

"I wouldn't know, dear. It wasn't that long a conversation." She sniffed, showing the first real disapproval I'd ever seen Minnie express for any living thing. "They're flighty."

"Honestly, Minnie, I could kiss you."

"You had better, dear. This night's our farewell."

And as soon as the dishes were done I complied, giving Minnie a chaste but not-at-all-just polite peck on the cheek. She colored and tittered just like a little schoolgirl, gave me an appreciative "Oh you," and then urged me back into the other room, where everybody just happened to be warming up for a killer round of Battle Scrabble. I got QUARTZ on a triple-word score and blew up the enemy fortress in the same move, and while that's pretty impressive by the rules of the game, it was, again, as close to closure I was going to get. The Moon was strange in those days. But it was also unforgiving.

* * *

The big project that week, that our team was all supposed to be working on fifteen hours out of every twenty-four, and that was therefore difficult to beg out of, was the opening of one of the lunar lava tubes for development. It was many kilometers long and a made-to-order

subterranean—or, since that word is not quite accurate, sublunarian—space perfect for the housing of an imported ecosystem, which once established could make a larger human presence possible. Various practical problems had prevented us from opening it up to development earlier, slowing us down for enough years to summon the ritualistic chanting of the word “boondoggle” among our opponents in the Senate, but now at long last we were about to take that historical step, as important in the grand scheme of things as the driving of the golden spike, or the one small step for Man. Or so the hype said.

Arranging the time off was not easy. The negotiations were epic.

You can imagine them.

Why would you want to do this NOW?

“Because I have to.”

You have to give us a reason.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you. You’ll have to trust me.”

Can’t you tell us anything?

“Only that this is as important as anything any of us have done on the Moon and that this is the only chance I’ll have.”

You do know you’re not giving us enough to go on, with such short notice.

(With an inner exhausted sigh). “Ask Minnie.”

...really?

“Yes.”

Well, now you’re not playing fair.

That’s not the exact transcript, but it is the sense of a negotiation that at times devolved to wheedling. The bottom line was that I’d invoked Minnie. If she said it was okay, it would have to be okay. My immediate supervisors drafted one of the Israelis for the operation, all the while wagging their fingers that they sure as hell wanted a complete report once I was done, something I promised and would, as it turned out, be unable to give.

Explaining myself to Jonequa, in the cramped quarters we now shared, was almost as difficult. She was tired as hell from her own double shift and not rich in patience, especially not when I went back to the beginning and told her about my various encounters with the fat one and the skinny one. Her most common sentence, as I went on, was, “Okay, now you’re *really* bullshitting me.” But I got to the end, the point where I was again obliged to render the ridiculous plausible by invoking Minnie, and I saw that moment where the truth of it all came flooding in, blowing the mind behind those beautiful almond eyes.

“Jesus,” she said, at last. “You really *are* evading the opening of the tube in favor of a field trip to meet Laurel and Hardy.”

I spread my hands. “I know it’s crazy, but I’m stuck with it.”

“And you didn’t tell me you were sitting on this craziness when I asked you to marry me?”

I could only offer an apologetic shrug. “I’m sorry. It didn’t exactly seem like the right moment.”

It hadn’t been. I’d been nonverbal.

“Or at any point since then?”

“Honestly,” I confessed, “I thought it had receded into the past. The last thing I expected, at this point, was closure.”

There’s that word.

She nodded, still searching for some place to fit it on her mental shelf of things that would just have to be accepted, and then she punched me in the bicep.

I said, “Ow.”

Did you know that at that particular point in history, and beforehand, there was a dismissive phrase people actually used in conversation, without irony? “Punched like a girl.” Try to tell the younger generation that and they won’t believe you. This girl punched hard enough to leave a bruise that could last days.

She said, “That was for even once saying you liked The Three Stooges more.”

Minnie had only given me a *bless your heart*. I hadn’t known when I was getting off easy.

At 19:57 Tuesday night, minutes from the rendezvous, I was chugging along in the tractor I'd managed to requisition, still several minutes from turning that last curve before the ridge where I'd seen the fat and skinny figures wage their escalating battle against the occupants of the other barge. I was cursing because I was late. I was not late enough to endanger the meeting, just late enough to ramp my personal tension up to just below boiling. My plan had been to arrive no longer than 19:40 and therefore witness their arrival, if possible: see what vehicle they traveled around in, though part of me insisted it would have to be a lunar version of one of those 1930s-era automobiles with a hand crank. (Of course, a flying saucer would have been equally appropriate, and that if nothing else underlines the depth of the weirdness that had come to consume my lunar career.)

19:40, as opposed to 19:30 or 20:00, would have also been perfect etiquette. You know how it is. When you're meeting people new—and these were “new,” even if they dressed and acted like figures from vintage film—it's always good to show up a few minutes early. That's a lesson instilled in me in childhood that has long served me socially and professionally, and I couldn't imagine a reason why it wouldn't also apply to First Contact with an alien civilization, even if it happened to be a silly one. Too early, I knew, could translate as creepy, which is why I hadn't planned for 19:30. 19:40? Yeah, I know that's earlier than you said, but I just wanted to make sure I got there.

Alas, it had taken longer to prep the vehicle and hit the road than I'd expected, and the tractor was a much-repaired original model that ran at about 5K an hour slower than I'd budgeted for, and on top of that I'd had to make an unexpected detour in order to bypass a route that, it turned out, was now buried by a recent rockfall. I'd arrive late, between 20:07 and 20:10 if I didn't suffer any more delays, so it wasn't a total loss, as long as—and this was what made the sweat pool in the small of my back—they didn't decide I wasn't coming, and pack it in early, leaving me with a story I'd never be able to confirm to anyone's satisfaction.

In the meantime, I was hooked into the common channel, listening to news of the dig. I'd expected to hear of the lava tube's opening by now, but in the manner of big projects, the scheduled time came and went, with various notifications that the critical blast had been delayed five minutes, or ten. There was talk of a twenty-four-hour hold, for additional calculation: nothing out of the ordinary, but understandably frustrating to everybody who had been working toward this moment for weeks, and unavoidably repetitious as all the chatter kept rebounding to, *We don't know a anything yet.*

At 20:04, Jonequa called on our private channel. “Ben.”

I grinned. “Neek. How's it going?”

“I guess you've been listening. It's been going the same way these things always go. Hurry up and wait. They've moved the last blast back ten minutes. We've all already moved outside the safe perimeter, but there's been some kind of glitch and they've had to send a team back in. All boredom, in other words. What about you? Anybody throw a pie yet?”

My reply was automatic. “Strictly speaking, Laurel and Hardy only committed one pie fight to film. *The Battle of the Century*, 1929. Also the film debut of Lou Costello, of ‘Abbott and . . .’ Over two thousand pies were thrown. The most of any film until *The Great Race*, 1965, which involved four thousand.”

“You really need a vacation from that stuff, hon.”

“I'll have one soon enough.” Truer than I thought.

“Okay, say hi to the boys for me. I—”

There was no static, no pop: just the sudden arrival of silence, mid-sentence. I thought nothing of it. We've all been known to hang up a heartbeat too early, from time to time. I've done it. You've done it. It doesn't necessarily mean anything.

I came up upon that last blind spot, the one that fourteen months earlier had hidden the war of the two barges from me, until the last moment.

At 20:07 I passed it.

And yes, there they were up ahead.

There were only two of them this time, the main two, their supporting players evidently skipping this rendezvous in favor of prepping their departure. The two of them were engaged in furious activity behind a long narrow workbench. As I drew closer over the next minute or so, I recognized it as a version of the set of *Busy Bodies*, a plotless romp in which the boys cause each other no end of difficulty during their day of work at a sawmill. The key thing I remembered about it was that Laurel manages to shut Hardy's fingers up at both the top and bottom of a window-frame his partner's constructing, only to cause significantly greater chaos trying to free him. And there the fat man was, with his fingers stuck at the top and bottom of the window-frame, and the rest of his moonsuited body being forced into more and more uncomfortable positions as the skinny man jockeyed for some way to free him.

I had to remind myself of the working hypothesis provided by Minnie, that these were alien sentients and that they had come untold light-years in order to reenact this lunacy more than a hundred and thirty years old. It was crazy, or would have been if I hadn't been primed with the concept of differently brained.

I pulled to a stop, replaced the hose that connected me to the tractor's air supply, activated the feed from my suit, and hopped down from the cab, to approach them.

My heart was pounding. My thoughts were churning. Beyond the silliness of the moment was also its world-shaking importance, and beyond its importance was the sense that, if I really wanted to respect the art form being reenacted here, I really should be saying something one of the team's foils would have said, while barging in on their mischief: "Say, what's the big idea?"

This was always a highly risky way to approach the pair on screen.

The pair before me halted their buffoonery mid-gag and came around the workbench to meet me halfway. I tell you now what you can probably already guess: that allowing for the strange bounciness of the gait we all had on the Moon, I knew those walks completely. Their faceplates were opaque gold, so it was impossible to tell what they really looked like, but that was all right: my head supplied the faces. You know which faces. I found myself spookily certain that were those faces visible, they would not be the alien grays of the old alien-abduction stories but that of two men, one raised in England, one raised in the American south. Both would be smiling, in the affable way they had. The fat one with that endearing tinge of bashfulness, the skinny one with the guileless idiot grin that to me always said that while he might not fully understand what was going on, he was nevertheless fully up for it.

At three meters apart, we both stopped and looked at each other.

The overall impression I got, during that pregnant pause, was that they wanted to be friends.

My throat had gone so dry I could barely speak. "Hello. I'm . . . Ben Turpin."

In a heartbeat I would have gotten some version of their signature greeting,

Good evening. My name is Mr. Hardy, and this is my associate, Mr. Laurel. Or the extraterrestrial equivalent: Good evening. My name is Zglrmpf, and this is my associate Rxpgrfx.

It would have been that one thing I've always told you I never got.

And then my helmet speaker, silent up until now, flared with a burst of *something*, static or similar noise, so sharp and so loud that it nearly bowled me over. For an instant, I thought it was coming from them. I thought it was one of those cases famous in pop culture where somebody foolishly approaches the alien monster, trusting it, only to be slammed with a vicious surprise assault. Clearly, they were going to eat my brain or something!

Then that signal resolved as dozens of voices shouting at once. It only lasted for a second or so before it cut out again, but in that second I recognized a single word that planted a sick knot of tension in my gut.

Blowout.

Then the signal cut out.

We were joined in silence again, those two visitors and I, staring at each other through opaque faceplates.

I only had another heartbeat or so with them, but I can tell you that I didn't imagine what I registered in that time, despite everything that hid us from one another. Without moving a muscle, they were different. They were no longer in character. They were whoever they really were,

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and not who they had so long playfully pretended to be. All jokes, all play, had been put on a shelf alongside with everything else there was no longer any time for.

A new voice came through my helmet speaker. One I knew, one who I heard any number of times imploring his associate to *help* him.

"It's all right. Just go."

"I . . . can't. I won't get there for hours."

"Just go."

I hesitated again. How could I not? But my friends and colleagues were in trouble. Jonequa might be in trouble. In mortal danger, even. Distance had protected me from whatever had happened and I might be the only uninjured person available. The length of time it would take was irrelevant. The *Carpathia* sped to the site of the *Titanic's* final hours knowing that the ship and most of the people on it would be on the floor of the Atlantic long before anybody could get there. They still went. There was no choice.

I said, "I can't . . ." and then I turned away and hurried back to my cab and plugged my suit back into the tractor's air supply, and I began to back up, my grand missed opportunity still standing on the road before me, the opportunity I wanted to miss draining my hopes with every fresh second of calculation. The tube was a few hours away, on the opposite side of base. To have enough air to make a difference, I would have to stop to supply up. That would take time I didn't have, but if I didn't I would arrive without enough bottled air to make the return trip; I'd be making myself part of the problem, not part of the solution. But if I did stop it would be with a price in human lives. In the way humans have of picturing the most awful outcome imaginable in the most nightmarishly vivid terms, I pictured myself arriving in a debris field filled with rubble and body parts, searching and searching until I literally stumbled over one slight, supine figure who would never move again, unrecognizable except for the name patch identifying her as Jonequa Cort, and oh God I'd go crazy if I let my thoughts continue to flow in that direction. But where else could they go, while I chugged across the lunar surface in this antiquated wreck that couldn't even go at full speed?

My suit recorder establishes that I went so far as whimpering. I didn't break down blubbing or anything. But a whimper did escape my lips.

Then something happened.

No recording exists of the next thirty seconds. There is no elapsed time between my whimper and my next exclamation, "Holy shit," my reaction to once again finding myself in a recognizable landscape, three kilometers from the blowout site. It's certainly no patch of Neil Armstrong, but then he had his immortal statement in hand all along, and blew its delivery even so. I'll take the Holy Shit when for the thirty seconds that immediately preceded it, I was not anywhere I recognized, or for that matter anywhere I could recognize: a place where, I later said helplessly, everything was circular but everything still had corners. The overwhelming sensation was that of movement. If hyperspace exists, that was it; if teleportation exists, that was it. Either way I was *sent* from where I was to where I needed to be, or sufficiently distant from it that I wouldn't materialize inside someone and make a mess.

The shared channel blared in my ear, clear enough to befit the negligible distance between us. "... unknown number of injured! We are not receiving and do not know if anybody's getting this transmission! Repeat! Major blowout at tube opening! Send assistance at once!"

I recognized the voice as my wife's and almost recorded a whoop of joy for posterity.

"Turpin here."

There was a pause. "Ben?"

"Just hold on. My ETA's within three minutes."

"ETA . . . here?"

"Affirmative."

"Last I checked, you were hours away. How is this even possible?"

The suit did not record that I was beaming. "This qualified as the finer mess."

* * *

We are almost at the end, a truly aggravating place to interrupt with some more biographical

information about Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy.

I promise, it matters.

The key thing you need to know is that they were not the people they played on screen. They used their real names as their screen names, and this was an act of pure venal genius, insurance that they'd always be able to take those names with them, if they changed studios. (Which they eventually did, a creative disaster for reasons I don't need to get into right now.)

With that act, they ensured that their real selves would always be mistaken for the characters they played. But they were not the characters they played. For instance, they were friends, but for many years not as close as their film personas. They were merely affectionate coworkers, not becoming as close as brothers until 1953, when they and their wives took a cruise to Europe. Their movie fortunes had waned in America; though they didn't know it yet, they had in fact already made their last film, a terrible one like most they'd made since losing creative control around 1940. Their plan was to get some stage bookings. But as they arrived at the port in Cobh, Ireland, they found a harbor clogged with boats, and a dock teeming people saw a vast multitude gathered at the dock. What was happening? Was some member of the Royal Family on their ship?

Then the church bells started playing, to the cheers of thousands, and the real Laurel and Hardy recognized the tune as their theme song.

"They love us," Oliver managed, as the two men were reduced to tears.

You can imagine the screen Laurel and Hardy experiencing the same moment, but it would have played out differently. In their lives, the cheers would have *actually* been for a member of the Royal Family, and the two friends would have made fools of themselves preening, under the assumption that the locals were just being friendly.

This is significant, I think. Their screen personas were that of a pair of stupid (or if you prefer, differently brained) men, of which Laurel was, by a significant degree, the stupider. This was not even close to truth. In real life, Laurel was the creative genius. He came up with most of the gags and was often still at work for hours after Hardy decamped for the golf course.

This is not the impression you get from their movies.

They were *like* who they played, but not *actually* who they played.

The existence of that critical difference will turn out be relevant, I promise.

To start with, I didn't walk away totally empty-handed. My suit had recorded our brief interaction. I did get the voice of somebody who sounded an awful lot like Oliver Hardy saying, "It's all right. Just go." When I played it for our superiors, that recording was analyzed and compared with audio and video of the real Oliver Hardy. While the relatively primitive communication technology of the time does render it impossible to say that the being I met was the same person, the best official verdict was that it was as close to being the same person as can be measured, within the margin of error. Nobody has ever wanted to say, for the record, that the being in the suit was Oliver Hardy, any more than they've ever been willing to say that the skinny figure next to him was Stan Laurel. The working premise has always been that the parties responsible for pranking me for so long had advanced audio technology that won't be outside our own reach for more than another generation or so—though why they would go through so much trouble, just to mess with me, remains a mystery.

So there's that.

My location was recorded by the tractor's systems throughout that failed summit, and it did confirm that I somehow traveled from there, to the site of the blowout, in less than thirty seconds.

There's that, too.

Two people died in the blowout, and a dozen were injured, but my speedy arrival was something of a miracle in that some of the wounded got tended in time to make a difference. I ended up extending my time on the Moon by six weeks to help make up for the resulting personnel shortage, and that minimized my separation from Jonequa, also a plus. When she rejoined me on Earth a few months later, we both said that we'd had enough space travel for one lifetime, and joined the Earthside support teams, which was also lots of hard work, but which also offered us enough time for other things, including a pair of wonderful daughters, Laurel and Olivia.

That was the biggest plus of all.

We're now both old and healthy and thinking of a vacation at one of the lunar resorts that have sprung up where we used to work; not that we feel nostalgia for those days, but we are a pair of old farts and figure it would be nice to have some time with renewed spring in our steps.

Sometime in the intervening decades, Mankind has lost track of Minnie and Earl. Nobody knows where they are. I refuse to believe they're dead. They're somewhere. They were a pair of friendly neighbors at a time when Man on the Moon needed it, as well as a living example of the Universe's capacity for whimsy that did us some good when we needed that. Maybe we'll eventually know who they were, and when we do, I don't think we'll be disappointed.

But key to the point, key to what I guess I learned, is that closure can be overrated. Sometimes it just plain takes the magic away. Data's great. Data gets applied to solutions and solutions get applied to the collection of more data. This is all something we need. But occasionally, the mystery is better. Occasionally, the mystery is itself where you find the truth of things.

So I sometimes find myself grateful that I never found out what was behind the faceplates of the two figures who I went to meet that day. Maybe they were aliens. If so, I think, we'll meet them eventually. Or rather, meet them again. I think the circumstances will be kind. You cannot immediately suspect malice of anyone who loves Laurel and Hardy.

Other times, I have a different idea entirely.

You see, I absolutely believe that when they engaged in all that buffoonery on the lunar service, they were performing as those fictional characters "Laurel and Hardy." I don't know why they were, except for the sheer goofy joy of it, but also remember the moment when the emergency came up and the fat one told me, *it's all right. Just go.*

At that moment, the comedic mask had been put aside in favor of the real personality wearing it, a being who knew when it was time to get serious and show some competence.

At that moment, he offered me full disclosure.

He was no longer "Oliver Hardy."

But as I've already established, he still spoke in the voice of the actual man, Oliver Hardy.

I know he wasn't playing, any more. Neither him, nor the skinny man standing next to him.

Don't ask me how. I know that it's a differently brained thing to believe. As I've been saying, it was a strange time, for those of us living and working and building a future on the Moon.

But I will happily go to my grave believing that I know exactly who that is I got to meet.

* * *

This one's for Harlan.

Adam-Troy Castro has twenty-six books to date including four Spider-Man novels, three novels about Andrea Cort, and six middle-grade, dimension-spanning adventures of young Gustav Gloom. Adam's darker short fiction for grownups is highlighted by his collection, Her Husband's Hands And Other Stories (Prime Books). He has won numerous awards and lives in Florida with his wife Judi and either three or four cats, depending on whether Gilbert's escaped this week.