

Science Fiction

Still Life

By Barry N. Malzberg



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IN BED, ASLEEP, HIS WIFE

He lies curled in a fetal posture, the joint of his thumb enjambed against a cheek, his mouth open, emitting even curls of breathe. In the darkness he thinks that he hears his wife cry and turns toward her, one hand reaching to curve around the fullness of her back; then he finds her flesh under his hands and grips her as if he were holding a panel of wood. "You shouldn't do that," he groans, "you shouldn't do that, you upset me, I don't know what's really going on here any more," and then runs his hands all the way down the length of her body, lingering on her buttocks, moving around the cup of her

stomach and against her cunt. "Stop it," she says to him, "what are you doing? You woke me up, I was sleeping, you can't do something like this every time you want to," but he does not hear; he is eager now, trapped in his own necessities, and even though Control warned against activities of this sort during the final days before mission, he finds' himself quite helpless, quite stricken, as he rises above to mount her. "Oh darling, darling," he cries, "the moon, the moon," and plunges thickly into her and she says again, "What are you doing?" her voice girlish, high, suddenly pleading as if she were being pinned, against a fence by a gang of strangers but it is too late, far too late for all of that and he begins to work in her; two or three limpid pulls of the prick and he is finished, the orgasm a seizure rather than a culmination, and he falls from her body to his side of the bed. Even though he is still alert, he decides that it would be best for

him to feign passing into an immediate sleep and so he does this, regularizing his breathing, hunching slowly into the pillow, and the stimulation becoming the fact, he shortly does fall asleep, leaving his wife lying quietly beside him, one arm sprawled across his stomach in a gesture that might have had more meaning a few moments ago but which, for her, gives her a feeling of mute tenderness and she strokes the planes of his cheek saying "all right, all right baby, it's all right, now" but for all the good this does him at the present moment she might as well be on the other side of the moon and he trapped in the damned capsule.

* * * *

AT BREAKFAST, A HINT OF VIGOR

They gather for breakfast: it is the first time they have done so in several weeks because, during the last stages of the

preparation, he has had to be on the grounds before 5 A.M., has, in fact, slept in the dormitory several times but now that the training has been completed and the focus of the preparations has shifted to countdown on the great ship, he is able to breakfast with his family again. He has two children, both boys, ages nine and six; his wife is thirty-seven but does not, she is told by everyone, look it and in certain sweaters, certain postures, she can effect the breast line of a very young woman. The boys are restless and beyond discipline this morning, tossing flakes from the cereal boxes at one another, calling in high, taunting voices; it seems that they are still enmeshed in some dispute of a few days past involving, perhaps, theft. His wife attempts to calm them but he says no, no, it is perfectly all right; he does not want to interfere with routine, only try to get back into it and the younger boy says,

“but how can you do *that*, Dad, if you're going to the moon in a week?” He would answer that if he could, but then the older boy says quickly, “don't be stupid, he's not going to the moon, he's just going to fly around it, they won't be ready to go to the moon for six months yet; how can you be so stupid?” and slaps the younger violently three or four times across the head. The younger begins to cry and inverts the cereal box on the table; the older starts an anticipatory cry of his own, perhaps feeling that his mother's punishment will be less if he already seems to be in agony, and his wife, her face streaked and discontent, lunges from the stove to seize both of them in either hand. It seems for a moment that she is going to do a kind of qualified violence, just as she has competently done so many times when the boys have gotten out of hand, but in a quick shift of light, her face changes, becomes remote, saddens somehow, and she

says, "you know, I can't really take much more of this: we're supposed to be some kind of American ideal and yet I can't even control these children, I can't control anything any more, not even you," and she begins to weep and he rises from the table saying "all right, everyone, look lively now, be snappy, because if we have any more of this nonsense I'll sic the moon creatures on you." This has been a very effective line at some times in the past, dissolving tension toward laughter, but this time they only look at him, all three, with glazed and numb expressions, and feeling more than slightly ineffective, he sits again and then, unable to confront the plate of eggs, those blind eyes winking, he lunges to his feet and seizing his service cap and mumbling something about lack of consideration at the worst time, he staggers from the house, reminding himself as he comes onto the street that he will definitely have to buy his wife some

flowers tonight so that they can, somehow smooth the damned thing over.

* * * *

HIS FACE, THAT FINE PAN OF APPERCEPTION AND DOOM

His face is long and brown, slightly inverted at the eyebrows where the crest seems to go in the wrong direction; his mouth a smooth, hard line that will curve easily upward toward laughter but which fails to fold under duress. His nose seems to haunt the mouth, jutting over it at an angle a quarter of an inch short of being parodic and his cheeks are particularly fine, seeming to be etched over that intricate, delicate bone structure which is his most distinguishing characteristic. He sneezes a shade more often than the average but always has a handkerchief at ready. His eyes are deep brown and unusually penetrating. His chin is directly in proportion to his mouth. His ears contain no wax. The

first time he kissed his wife, many years ago, she said that in the dimness he reminded her of a god poised to take her, but they were, of course, much younger then.

* * * *

IN THE CENTER, A SECURITY CHECK

Entering the huge gates he is stopped by a guard. "Don't you know what the hell is going on here, baby? Let's see your identification," the guard says and then an older guard standing behind says, "you idiot, he's one of the astronauts," and the younger man pales and says, "yes sir, yes sir, I'm sorry of course, go right through. I didn't recognize you for a minute; you looked like someone whose picture I saw in the newspapers and who wasn't supposed to be here," and the older guard laughs and he would laugh too but because he didn't know what the joke is (or who it is on) and is very careful not to feign

involvement, he only walks through with a slightly confused expression, wondering if the day can possibly be as strange in the full as it has been in the beginning.

* * * *

TECHNOLOGICAL EXTRAPOLATION. EXPOSITORY DETAIL. He is the third man on this expedition, the one who will stay in the so-called command ship while two others, younger personnel both of them, will conduct the module within three miles of the satellite. The most recent voyage, enacted by other men, brought the module to within four miles and the next, also scheduled for others, will take it within two; in short, his is the third mission before the lunar landing itself which will probably take place somewhere around Easter Sunday if all goes well. Goes well. At first, when he learned that he would be the man to stay behind, he felt vaguely shamed as if his inadequacy—or, at

any rate, his lack of facility—was being exposed to the media and by implication the nation but now he feels somewhat differently: is, in fact, afflicted by fantasies about what might happen to him and the others were he to lift the ship out of orbit at a crucial time, leaving the others stranded. He knows that this falls so far from sanity that he has never discussed it with the psychiatrist, nor does he really take this fantasy seriously, knowing that were he to succumb to it, his career would probably be over. Nevertheless, he knows in dreams occasionally what it would be like: an impression of wind in the windless spaces, a sensation of flight in immobility, the cries of the abandoned men like bird shrieks in his headset, and as he came back all the way alone he would use the radio to tell all of them in and out of the project exactly what he thought, a performance of one to the largest audience in history. He knows

that it would make his name, and there is a small chance, he sometimes admits, that he might actually do it, except that he thinks he knows better—were he to attempt anything so irrational he would be cut off by mission control and would have only himself to rave to and the auditor in the silence; a portrait of madness which even a person as phlegmatic as he cannot bear. On the other hand—

* * * *

HE GREETES THE OTHERS: THEY SAY GOOD MORNING

In the briefing room the two men who will accompany him are already waiting, sitting on a bench, reading newspapers. He nods hello to them and they nod back, then resume their study. He has never been to their homes, nor they to his, but they were picked, among other reasons, for compatibility and therefore he knows that his feelings of unease with these far

younger men come only from anxiety and that once the responsibility of the voyage has settled upon them, there will be no problems whatsoever.

* * * *

WHILE WAITING HE HAS A RECOLLECTION

He joins them silently then: today there are to be some simulated gravity tests and also a long discussion, with a board of engineers and officers who will submit to them a series of requests for special duties to be performed in orbit ... but the schedule affecting their activities has relaxed since the emphasis has shifted toward machinery and he knows that there may very well be a fifteen- or twenty-minute wait before they are called. In the meantime he folds his hands and finds himself remembering the way his wife had responded, to his announcement to her, three years ago, that he had made the

team after all. "What is it going to do?" she had asked, "what is it going to mean? They're going to fill you full of statistics and tell you what to say and make you do their tricks, and at the end of it—if you live—they'll give you a medal and a parade and put you into public relations or something like that. It's not as if you're going up there on your own, they won't even leave you alone for an instant. I know. I know." she said and began to cry; one of her most afflicting characteristics is this tendency (to this very date) for emotional outbursts out of all relation to cause and without any apparent means of pacification; she must cry herself out at her own pace toward her own outcome. Futilely he had held her, feeling, as always, clumsy and somehow irrelevant to an inner tragedy so stark and compelling that by comparison nothing which ever affected him had any dimension whatsoever ... and finally she stopped and said, "well, I guess I'm not being

very nice about this; it's a great honor, of course, and the boys will be very happy. At least, when they get a little older and know what it means, they'll be proud of you. But I just don't see how when you come right down to it it's going to make any difference at all, because it isn't anything more than them using you to put a body up there," and he had tried to explain to her then that the whole point and purpose of the selection was to arrive at the men best suited for individual initiative and intelligence and projecting a good image—because otherwise why have a selection process at all? Why not merely open it to applications, first ones taken?—and that he thought she misunderstood the program. He reminded her of the many previous astronauts who had gotten into trouble in orbit in one way or the other and had had to save themselves through clear thinking and strong wills and that very likely he would have to

do the same at one time or another. "Oh no, you won't. it isn't anything, the challenge is only manufactured," she had said, but she was calming down by then and he had been able to put the pieces of the evening together by pretending for her that he knew what she said had only come out of her fear for and dependency upon him. He had broken the news to her at a restaurant, the boys being baby-sat by a local college girl, and when they came home, they awakened them and told the news. "I guess that's good," the older had said while the younger had stood, his whole being curled around the thumb he was sucking, and only the baby-sitter had responded at last by saying, "Really? is that what happened? Oh, that's wonderful, I'll tell everyone, I'll tell my boyfriend," and out of gratitude he had tried to kiss her when he drove her home, feeling her slight, hard body move against his and the curve of her spine as it

fitted into the palm he sunk toward her back. For a moment he had passed into an illusion of copulation in this very car as being a temporary and total culmination of what had been vested in him earlier, but after a moment the girl tensed and spun in his grasp, her face darkened, and she said, "I don't want to do it any more; I didn't think that you people were anything like this," and then she left him, forcing him, to drive back ruminatively all the blocks of his voyage, and he knew that to the extent that he had gained a space program he had lost a baby-sitter. (Even now, in retrospect, they seem to be very much of the same thing.) When he came into the house, the younger was screaming again and his wife was sitting in the center of this, her face perfectly white, looking at nothing, twisting her hands. At that moment he had another of those familiar emotional seizures composed of rage, pain and despair

during which he asked for nothing but the strength to get past the next ten minutes, after which things would be permitted to go on at whatever cost, but he was afraid to look at his wife during this small, desperate prayer because he feared that if he did, he would strangle her.

* * * *

A BRIEF LECTURE

After some time the doors open and the major general who is nominally their direct supervisor comes in, nods at them and motions them to his office where they sink, three abreast, onto a large couch while he sits behind the desk and, to indicate that this is an informal discussion, puts up his feet. "I'm going to caution you today," he says, "on the fact that you're a credit to the nation and a spearhead or vanguard of the fight to freedom and so on, but what I'm supposed to lead up to is that there is

supposed to be no cursing in the capsule during the trip." On the previous expedition, of course, the junior crew member had said *fuck* while describing a land-mass and although the seventeen-second transmission lag should have left ample time to kill it, the engineer on the belt somehow let it go through and there was a small flurry in the press, as well as a series of larger convulsions at the television networks, with a subsequent promise by the agency that such as this would never happen again.

"You do understand," the general says, "that everything you people will say is being monitored: it's being picked up, everything that comes out of that ship becomes part of the public record for all time, and it's important to keep the scatology out. They can hold back transmissions, of course, but it wouldn't do us any, good—would it?—to have gaps of time

when they can all have the opportunity to wonder what you're saying. Now, you're grown men; all of us here are grown men, and maybe we think that's asinine, but it's the way it is going to be. We cannot, after all, permit something like this to go on as a matter of course. One thing leads to another thing, and you know what happens eventually; we'll be in the same goddamned soup that we were in three years ago, only worse, because there are more witnesses all the time. I'm supposed to couch this in soft soap, of course, and tell you it's taken for granted you wouldn't want to think of cursing, but I'm laying it right straight on the line. That's really all I have to say about this," and one of the younger men says "yes, I see what you're saying, but how realistic is this? I mean, isn't it kind of not telling the truth, being dishonest to the experience, if we can't say it as it is?" and the general leans forward in a kindly posture and says, "listen,

this program is in big trouble, it's been in trouble from the start, and it's only going to get worse, because people, somehow, cannot believe that any of this relates to their ordinary lives—if you follow what I'm saying—and they don't think in terms of abstractions, only of the money. so we've got to take a straight line. Cursing is just looking for public-opinion trouble,” and finally he wants to say something; he says, “but wouldn't that have as much to do with good public opinion as bad public opinion? I mean, there must be a lot of people who wouldn't mind hearing the real stuff come over on transmission, and besides that the kind of people who don't like cursing are exactly those people who don't want the program in the first place,” and the general appears to think about this for a moment and then cocks his head at a different angle and says no, no, he doesn't want to hear about it any more, the point isn't relevant and in

any event the word has come down from the high level, the administration itself very possibly, and so there's little that can be done other than to implement it. The astronaut finds that somehow this fills him with depression, but it is not, after all, unexpected so he has nothing to say and after some time the general passes into a brief, routine reiteration of the log of the flight and then directs them towards the briefing.

* * * *

SITTING HE DREAMS: DREAMING HE SITS

Listening to them, the unnecessary voices, he has a vivid apperception—one could almost call it prescience—of what his life will be like thirty or forty years from now, should he live that long; he will be sitting in a place very much like this, a small enclosure with dense walls and the murmur of men in the background, and he will give his opinions on a full range of

matters which he does not understand and then for a long time will listen to facts that do not interest him, simulate acts that do not involve him; a kind of perpetual dusk of the soul, in short. The fact is that he is sunken so deep into the mechanics of the program as it presently exists that he cannot conceive of a life apart from it, something which he himself does not grasp of course but which will have a large effect upon him as days go by.

* * * *

WAS IT A SOB?

“The day passes quickly enough after a time, and he leaves promptly at 1700 hours; at the auxiliary gate this time the young guard knows him and salutes him with a:’ wave, but as he walks by he hears a sound; he does not look behind him to see what it is—he is not that kind of man—but as he walks

rapidly to his car he is not sure whether the guard was laughing at him or whether it was merely a vagrant sneeze that overcame the man and forced him into that high, choking sound. He prides himself of course upon not being so reflective or sensitive that such things might bother him, but finds, driving home, that he is unable to quite dig this sound out of his consciousness. He does not understand what the guard was trying to express but in some way is convinced that like it or not it all has something to do with, him.

* * * *

QUICK FLASHBACK: MODERN WRITING Leaving the compound he had said goodbye to his crewmates. "Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye," they all said to one another, and to the astronaut it is little more than a prefiguration of what he will hear as the lunar module separates from command and begins

its muddy descent into the lip of that satellite. "See you again," he had said, but this only after he had long passed the guard who wept.

* * * *

HE RETURNS HOME: MORE INTIMATIONS

He comes home to find himself in the middle of a serious disruption; his older son is telling his mother "no, no, no" in a loud voice and at least as loudly she is saying "yes, you will!"; before he can ascertain the difficulty, there is the sound of a slap in the hidden kitchen and then shrieks, and his wife comes into the room, her face curdled, her features receding slowly in a gelatinous mask of grief and she says, "I simply can't stand him; I can't do a thing with him, he won't ever apologize, he won't ever cooperate," and slightly desperate himself, the astronaut strides into the kitchen and seizes the boy (his younger is sitting

in a high chair, eating pablum and industriously working again on a thumb) and says "you apologize to your mother or there'll be terrible trouble here, I'll beat the living shit out of you, I mean I'm entitled to a little peace and consideration in my own home," a little ashamed of his language, of course, but then, after all, this is not command post. The boy subsides from sobs to an exhausted contrition which the astronaut finds oddly moving and without a word walks in front of him to the living room, confronts his mother by the television set as some abysmal cartoon continues to squeak away, and says, "I apologize." "No you don't." she says, "no you don't mean a word of it, so don't bother me." "Yes I do!" he says loudly and "no you don't!" she screams at him and "yes I do!" he bellows, beginning to cry, and the astronaut would if he could hurl himself through the thick panes of his window for peace, but there is none, none

at all, so he only sits down in a bewilderment of loss, not even sure what the thing is that he knows he will never have and watches the figures whirl on the screen, rockets with eyebrows blinking their way through the starry night, animals with smiles riding the rockets high into the unperceived dark.

* * * *

INTO THE SEAT OF MEMORY THEY LUNGE, WATCH THEM
STAGGER

Much later, the children are in bed; his wife sits stricken on the couch, calms down and tells him that she cannot possibly think of sex this evening or even the morning for that matter, she is too tired, the tensions are too terrible. "You had it last night," she says, acknowledging that for the first time, "and maybe you forget but I don't and besides that who do you think has the real tensions here, who do you think is really putting up with the

strains? Not you, baby, not you; it's me." He reaches forward clumsily to touch her, to let her know somehow, with his fingers that he understands and that she is still and always the girl he married but when his fingers meet her flesh it has the consistency of sweaty dough and in a vague fit of revulsion he eases her away from him, slowly, however, not to hurt her feelings. "I understand," he says, "I'm too tired myself, they take everything out of you; let me tell you the nonsense we heard today, you want to hear somethin, they told us that we couldn't even curse in orbit," and goes on to narrate all of that for the first time feeling that passionate and surreal horror that he knows he should have felt hours ago but now too late, too late, for his wife's eyes are, closing and he knows that before him an old, cunning habit she is miming the need for sleep so that she will not have to listen.

"Well," he says, "bed then."

* * * *

IN DUE COURSE FACTORS GRIND ON TO THEIR
ACCUSTOMED CONCLUSION

He watches them in the radar, a dot and a swing, fifty miles below, listening to the communications belt that has now excluded him. One of the men is telling a long, labored joke and Mission Control is listening with interest, encouraging him from time to time to continue. The joke is aseptic and somehow, to the astronaut, unbearable. He is not sure what he does next. All that he knows is that the module is streaming, streaming, all speed in the darkness, a feeling of tearing and lurching working at him and he imagines in this moment that he can see himself from a great distance, a gnome in a cube speeding at enormous velocity toward the earth. It was how he had always pictured it.

"You son of a bitch," he hears Mission Control say, and then the man at the desk catches his lapse and gasps, "What's wrong? We've lost you. We have you heading earthward. Did you—" and the man's voice in a high, heavy squeak against the walls, the dim lights, the three urinary receptacles that move uneasily on the floor—"did you fire the retro-rockets? *Did you?*"

"Yes," he says, "I am coming-home." He tries to shut off Mission with his left hand but the connections are one-way; they are, as the general warned them, constantly audited and the controller says, "what are you doing? What are you doing?"

"I'm going home," he says. "I've had it. I won't take it any more. You cannot program the universe, you sons of bitches, there are things going on outside of all of this which you cannot envision let alone understand and there must be an end to this

banality: do you understand that? It has got to end sometime. The universe is vast, man is small, you fucking sons of bitches."

"Crazy," he hears Mission Control say, and he hears the word respectfully, enjoying its admirable precision, its principle of summation, its relevance to the situation in whole. It is the first relevant thing that Mission Control has ever said to him. "Oh, you sons of bitches, there are stars out there you haven't even discovered yet; how did you think you could do this to us? We're human, human, do you understand that? Oh, you bastards," the astronaut says and even for the degree of excitement invoked, his voice is remarkably level, "let me tell you there must be an end to all of this and it better not be equivocal."

Below him, far below him, he can hear the voices of the two men; they are no longer telling jokes, they are no longer describing sites, they are only, in a painful high bleating not un-

reminiscent of the characters in the children's cartoon, begging the astronaut and Mission to tell them what has happened to them. The astronaut flicks on the proper interconnection and says, "I figured I'd take a little jaunt home and then get you on the return trip. Oh, you bastards. You bastards."

He will not get them, of course. The module, computer-controlled, invariable to the last, will go all the way it has to go and stagger into the Pacific and there will be a recovery crew for him—because he is no less important than he ever was, maybe more so—but for the moment, the admonition itself is enough. He folds his hands over his stomach, closes his eyes, feels the slow surge of surfaces coming over to him.

"It would all be a good deal if I could get fucked," he says then.

* * * *

SEEN AS IN DISTANT FRIEZE LIKE BABYLON OR THE HOLY
ROMAN EMPIRE

Much later than all of this the astronaut has a dream; he dreams that he is a character in a story which I am writing about him and as he opens his eyes to confirm what for him can only be a monumental nightmare he sees me staring at him, infinitely patient, infinitely wise, infinitely hurt, knowing everything that he will never understand, and he says, closing his eyes, "but why are you writing all this? It isn't even the present, let alone the future; it's the past, it all happened a long, long time ago, it's as far in the past as Babylon or the Holy Roman Empire; don't think of me, think of Centaurus, think of the moons of Ariel. I'm only a damned anachronism; why bother, why bother?" and I say to him then, putting the paper away and leaning back into my own couch of torment, "Of

course, of course, but don't you see, you're the future, too—the future and the past intermingled—and there's no understanding one without the other because we are all linked together; you, history, myself, the possibility, the two of us touching for a moment in that simulation of motion known as narration, and what else is there? In the long run, everything is history,” and the astronaut says, “That's too much for me, I don't understand anything you're saying,” and falls quickly back to sleep falling, to his muddled perception, into a long, long spiraling tunnel and at one end of this tunnel is the center of the earth and at the other is the moon and somewhere between the two he whirls in orbit endlessly, seeking, the fine tensors of his eyes guiding him unerringly to the other side of the planet.

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