

---

---

ELIZABETH EVITTS DICKINSON

## The Sea of Tranquility

THE TRANQUILIZERS WORE OFF in the limousine. A dull throb started in the back of Walter's skull as the car pulled away from the airport and the pain soon bloomed to his temple. His wife's friendly chatter hurt. He turned to the window for relief, but it had snowed in Vienna overnight and, absent the filter of benzodiazepine, even the privacy tint couldn't keep the bright world out. Walter wanted to lean his forehead against the cool glass and close his eyes, just for a minute, but he knew looking feeble would defeat the whole enterprise. If he wanted to look his age, he could have stayed in Connecticut and avoided the indignities of international air travel at eighty-four.

"Earth to Walter."

His eyes struggled against the dim interior of the car, and for a brief instant gauzy light haloed his wife. His vision adjusted, and Veronica's composure startled him. Hair in place, suit smooth, fresh-faced as though she'd had a full night's rest rather than a turbulent ride over the Atlantic. She was playing the role she called Wife of Astronaut for the two other passengers in the limo, an act that she had long joked was more arduous than space travel.

Across from his wife sat a young journalist from New York. She'd flown over with them and was here to shadow Walter for a profile in a glossy magazine. Walter's publicist, Arlene, had pulled strings. "Advance publicity for your memoir," Arlene had said. Walter wished everyone would stop calling it a memoir.

The reporter's name was Iris. Or Ingrid. Possibly Isabelle.

Bernard sat next to her. He represented the famous European architect, their host for this trip. When he had introduced himself as the architect's attaché, he had sounded vaguely British, pronouncing his name "Berhn-heard." Walter suspected it was an act. He had the hard-eyed look of a kid who grew up in a factory town. Probably hid a thick brogue and packed a wallop in a bar fight.

They all looked at Walter expectantly.

What had he missed?

"Sometimes, I swear, it's like you're still in outer space," Veronica said.

Iris/Ingrid/Isabelle chuckled, a fake, canned sound. Sitcom laughter. Walter flashed to a very different limo ride—was it 1982? '83?—hard to say, but Reagan was in office, that much he knew, because he'd just left him at the White House and was now regaling a group of black-tie dignitaries as they sped through D.C. to a jazz club on Fourteenth. A platinum blonde in a sequined slip had grabbed at her tiny waist. "Oh god, Walter, stop it! I'm going to bust out of this dress!"

When had hollow chortles replaced genuine laughter? The onset of arthritis, of irritable bowel, of claustrophobia—oh, the irony there—those were indignities enough, but it was this tolerant politeness that really made Walter feel old. Feeling old made him want to punch things, like walls, but the goddamn arthritis made it hard to ball a proper fist, which made him even more pissed off. Enter the tranquilizers. Walter should have pocketed a few Ativan from the carry-on so that he could slip one in his mouth. Pretend it was a breath mint.

"Ingrid asked what you miss most about being in outer space," Veronica said.

*Ingrid!*

Walter blinked.

The reporter poised a pen over her notebook, a taut smile on her face. "Perhaps we should get to that a little later," Ingrid said. "Let's back up and talk about when you first knew you wanted to go to space."

When Walter was five, his father spanked him for the first time. They were at the dinner table and Walter had asked what it was like to be a baby inside of his mother. The impropriety of Walter's curiosity vexed his father, and when vexed, he became authoritarian. The family sat in hushed silence while Walter, bent over his father's knee, counted the ten whacks aloud.

Walter had wanted to know why he couldn't remember being born. It seemed a fair enough question. One day he simply woke up, his consciousness sparking to life like the filaments in a bulb. He already knew things: How to count to ten. The lyrics to "Baa, Baa, Black Sheep." The way to drink carefully from a cup and not dribble milk down his chin. When did this happen? The red flush from his father's calloused hand was his answer.

Walter's father was a tinker. He could mend anything and make it last well beyond its intended life-span. He had a small shop on the edge of Conran, Missouri, where he repaired tube radios and watches and sewing machines. On Fridays he made the rounds, going to people's houses and farms to patch items too big to

transport. Walter would tag along and sit close by, handing his father tools or wiping his brow in the heat of summer. Intimacy made his father uneasy, but here, in service to a job, he allowed his son a measure of closeness.

After a repair, they'd be offered a slice of cake or a cold drink. His father always said yes. "Never deny a kindness," he'd told Walter. Mrs. McCleary was the first to present a cold pop from a refrigerator: electric appliances came to the kitchens of Conran even during the Depression. Walter's father found the new contraptions unnerving, representing as they did a kind of progress. Progress might threaten the skills he used to pay the banknote on the house.

Their house sat in the bootheel of the state, not far from the Mississippi River. The New Madrid fault line, a fissure of Biblical proportion, snaked below. Walter's great-great-grandparents had survived the earthquakes of 1811, and each generation had been weaned on tales of the devastation. Walter's father had heard bedtime stories about the land roiling to life so that the trees danced and split in two. Earthenware shattered; windows burst; houses splintered. And then the Mississippi rose in mighty waves to swallow whole swaths of shoreline. The river, he was told, flowed backward. Walter's father learned that the ground could open its great maw at any moment, rattle you senseless, knock you to your knees. They lived atop an irreparable rift, temperamental like God's own anger, coiled and waiting to shake in judgment of man. So Walter's father had set to work repairing what could be fixed and praying for what could not. When a minor tremor clattered the windows, Walter's father gathered the family in the living room for a reading from Isaiah. "The earth shall reel to and fro like a drunkard, and shall be removed like a cottage; and the transgression thereof shall be heavy upon it; and it shall fall, and not rise again."

Later, Walter would tell reporters that Flash Gordon made him want to leave Missouri and explore outer space. It was a half-truth. Walter did keep a stash of Flash Gordon comics buried in a box under his bed. He imagined that he could get into a rocket ship and travel at the speed of light, not to the far-off planet of Mongo, but to that dark terrain before consciousness kicked in. He and his sidekicks Dale Arden and Dr. Hans Zarkov would discover a secret vault that held the answers to all of life's important questions.

Sometimes, in the dishwater light of dawn, when Walter was still in that nebula between *asleep* and *awake*, he felt on the verge of a deeper truth. He wanted to linger there. But then the smell of frying bacon or his brother stirring next to him would jolt Walter back into the drafty Missouri bedroom. He would lie very still

and challenge his slippery mind to pin down its earliest memory. He is a baby on his back in the white crib, the one used for all five of his siblings. There is a mobile above him. He wants to touch the mobile. *Up*, he remembers feeling. *I want up*.

His mother disabused him of the memory. "You were hardly a year old."

"So how come I remember it?"

"Don't sass your mother," his father said.

Not long after the spanking, Walter sat on his bed engrossed in one of his comic books. He looked up, startled, to find the door open and his father standing over him. "What do you have there, son?"

Walter figured he was in trouble. He told his father the story. Flash Gordon and Dale were in a rocket with Dr. Zarkov on their way to save Earth from a comet.

"You can read that?"

"Yes, sir."

His father pointed to a panel with a picture of a rocket ship plumed in smoke. "What does this say?"

"With a deafening roar, Dr. Zarkov's rocket ship, with Flash and Dale aboard, shrieks into the heavens—"

His father looked at Walter the way he did Mrs. McCleary's Frigidaire.

That fall, Walter's father enrolled him in first grade at the parochial school one town over. He refused, however, to break the routine of morning chores and drive his son. Walter covered the miles on his bike, no matter the weather.

Walter graduated with honors. College was interrupted by a tour of the West Pacific during the Korean War, but when he returned he was top in his class. He got to NASA in 1962 and spent the next few years watching spacecrafts take off from the control room. Walter got his turn at the age of thirty-six. He climbed into the stomach of a command module and was shot into space. The sky went dark blue and the horizon bent like a sickle as he hit the speed of sound. A day later, he climbed out of a hatch, cocooned in a space suit and tethered to the ship with an umbilical of oxygen. He was 160 miles over Africa. Lightning sparked over the Andaman Sea. The curve of the earth was visible; so, too, was the terminator line that split the planet into darkness and light. *Asleep. Awake.* Walter and the ship moved at 17,000 miles per hour, yet he felt a deep stillness.

Walter met Veronica in New York a few months after the space walk. It was 1967 and his face was on the cover of *Life* magazine. He glad-handed his way through a NASA gala at the Waldorf-Astoria when a voice stopped him in his tracks. He

looked up to see Veronica, singing lead in the all-girl's a cappella group hired to entertain. She looked like a young Rita Hayworth.

She said yes to dinner at the hotel restaurant after the concert, said yes to a second bottle of champagne. Walter got her as far as the elevator bank to the guest rooms before she said no. She stood on her tiptoes and sang softly in his ear. "Stars shining bright above you . . . Dream a little dream of me."

Then she left. Watching her walk away was like watching the moon shrink on his descent back to Earth. He wanted more time in that orbit.

They married in the grand ballroom at the Waldorf a year later. After dinner, he took her hand and led her to the dance floor. He gave the small of her back a squeeze as they danced to "Dream a Little Dream of Me."

"Tonight, I'm getting you in that elevator," he said, and she threw her head back and laughed.

"Yes, I believe you are."

Two years later, Veronica was pregnant and Walter walked on the moon.

The limo pulled up to their five-star hotel. Bellhops in red vests ferried luggage from the curb. Inside, the marble lobby had a pair of grand staircases flanking a hotel bar. It was 3:00 PM, *kaffee und kuchen* hour in Austria. The bright, acrid promise of coffee wafted from an espresso machine, while around the lobby, men and women drank from delicate cups. Walter pictured his neighbors back in Connecticut, jeans and muddied rain boots, clogging the steaming innards of the local Starbucks.

"We've booked you in the Ambassador Suite, on the top level. The best views of the city." Bernard gestured toward the elevators. "Shall I accompany you?"

Walter clapped him on the back. "Nothing doing, young man, you've done enough already."

Bernard kissed Veronica on each cheek. He shook Walter's hand and left him with a manila envelope. "Your itinerary."

Once they were certain that Bernard had left the hotel, Veronica made arrangements to move from the penthouse to a room on the second floor.

Walter waited for her on a bench. He opened the envelope and looked over the schedule. Cocktails that evening in the hotel bar, followed by dinner with VIPs. A bus tour of Vienna's historic architecture early the next day, and then the big event, the grand opening of the Future Tower, now the tallest building in Vienna. Walter was the guest of honor for the ceremony.

Skyscrapers became a lucrative gig for Walter when the mine-is-bigger-than-yours wars kicked off in the Middle East and spread around the globe. Developers enjoyed the symbolism of an astronaut at the ribbon cutting.

“Careful, folks. Any higher and we might lose gravity.” Cue laughter.

“If we can send a man to the moon, we can build the world’s tallest building in the desert.” Cue applause.

And for tomorrow’s opening of the Future Tower, this: “Trust me when I say that standing here today is as close to the moon as you can get with your feet still planted firmly on Earth.”

Walter hated himself every time he said such things.

Walter had floundered after the moon shot. He’d stayed at NASA for another decade, believing at first that he’d get a chance to go back up. He never could settle into a desk job the way some others did. He left and tried his hand at consulting, earning obscene salaries with positions at aeronautics companies. He loathed the corporate world, so he quit and started teaching, only to find the politics at prestigious universities far worse than the politics of a boardroom. All the while he deflected suggestions that he start a foundation for extraterrestrial exploration or to educate kids on the potential of space travel. Walter wasn’t interested in some futuristic vision of colonies on Mars or in cheerleading the next generation of space explorers. Walter was an astronaut. He had no clue how to be a former astronaut.

A few years into retirement, Walter opened the door on Halloween night to find a snot-nosed replica of himself on the doorstep. A little space cadet. He slammed the door in the kid’s face. He had already settled into Scotch by then.

Walter reconnected with an old buddy from the Korean War, a crass son of a bitch who’d stayed in the military and made three-star. There were all-night card games in Georgetown and last-minute trips on the general’s private jet to Palm Springs. Walter would sweep on board, Veronica on his arm, and once airborne, crack: “Can’t this thing go any higher?”

One morning Walter came home at dawn, stinking of single malt and so drunk that he was sober. Veronica sat him at the kitchen table, put a glass of orange juice in front of him, and said, “That’s about enough now, don’t you think?”

They sold the town house in D.C. and moved to the farm in Connecticut. It wasn’t long before Veronica flushed out his supply. She found flasks in desk drawers and tackle boxes and the barn. She threw bottle after bottle of Scotch into a wheelbarrow, the metallic clang and shatter of glass, the biting stench of alcohol spraying her clothes and hair. She scooped her sundress over her head, stood in her

bra and underpants, and thrust the Scotch-soaked cotton under his nose. Her face contorted with rage. “This!” she screamed. “I will never smell this again.” Walter loved her fiercely in that moment.

He disappeared to a sunny facility in the Arizona desert. Veronica lied to the children, who were adults by then and scattered. She said that their father had an extended business trip.

At seventy-eight, Walter found himself cutting the ribbon for a grocery store outside Trenton. Arlene cornered him by the gourmet cheese case and pressed a business card in his hand. “You were a fucking astronaut, Wally. Never forget it.” Walter fired his publicist and signed with Arlene. The woman took no bullshit.

Arlene booked his first skyscraper gig in Abu Dhabi. As his motorcade sped through the alien, dust-clogged streets, the impossible height of the steel-and-glass structure rising in the distance, Walter had felt a brief, familiar rush of adrenaline. In the afterglow of the trip, Walter yielded to Arlene’s badgering. He took a meeting with an editor in New York and agreed to write a book about his life in the space program.

Veronica touched Walter’s shoulder. “We’re all set.”

They ascended the stairs to the second floor and found their luggage already waiting inside the room. Walter dug out a pill bottle and slumped into a chair. Veronica brought him a glass of water. She helped him into pajamas and kissed his cheek. “I’ll wake you when it’s time to dress.”

Walter climbed under the down coverlet and slept without dreaming.

“Tell me. What is it *really* like up there?”

Walter guessed the woman was in her sixties, her doughy cheeks rouged from too much grüner veltliner. A crowd had packed into the hotel’s marble atrium for a cocktail party. Every breath, every cough, every shoe scuffle amplified and bounced off so many hard surfaces. It registered as pure aural chaos. Luckily, the small band had just taken a smoke break. When they’d first begun playing earlier in the evening, Walter had grabbed Veronica’s hand. “This must be what it sounded like going down on the Titanic.”

Walter leaned across the table and looked the party guest in her rheumy eyes. “Can I tell you a secret?”

The woman leaned in. “Oh, please!”

“The moon landing never happened,” he shouted over the racket. “The conspiracy theorists are right. We staged the whole thing on a Hollywood set.”

She swatted his arm. A voice behind Walter's head asked: "Will you admit to this in your memoir?"

Ingrid. She had that way that journalists do of suddenly appearing, armed with questions.

"It's not a memoir."

Ingrid sat down.

"It's more a study of man's relationship to the cosmos," Walter said.

"I'm writing a profile about Walter," Ingrid told the older woman, "and I'm here to get him to open up about the contents of the book. This is proving uniquely challenging, because Walter, while quite the public figure, is very private about his life."

"Hardly private. Six hundred million people watched me float out of my office."

"I've been told that the memoir will include details about his formative years. Of course, I'll know more once I get my advance copy." She turned to Walter. "When will that be?"

"Soon. But first," he shook his empty water glass.

Walter stood and blood rushed from his skull. An oceanic hum filled his ears. He dropped the glass on the table and steadied himself on a chair.

"Are you OK?" Ingrid's lips seemed to mouth the words, her voice swallowed by the din.

Walter scanned for Veronica. He let go of the chair and bobbed unsteadily through the crowd. The heat of so many bodies made him dizzier. His lungs went shallow and he gulped to fill them. He spotted the white of Veronica's silk jacket, and the desperate relief of seeing his wife made him feel childish. Veronica stood with the famous architect. He walked over, and Veronica placed a steadying hand on his arm.

"Your lovely wife was just telling me about the rock samples you collected from the moon," the architect said. "I'd love to hear more."

"Nonsense! You just designed the tallest building in Austria."

Walter had become adept at deflecting questions about his time in space. People who cared to notice mistook it for modesty. In truth, it pained him to reminisce.

Growing up, Walter's mother had one good kitchen knife. She used it for the tough work, breaking down the chickens, hacking thick potato. Over time, the blade dulled. She would pull out the polishing stone and expertly whittle the steel at an angle until its edge returned. After many years of daily use, there wasn't enough meat left on the metal. "It's just not the same," she would say, to no one in particular.

Walter thought stories dulled in a similar way. In the beginning, his account of the moon landing was fresh and sharp. Soon it became rote. He knew where to pause for awe, where to insert the same joke. Every retelling whittled away at the greater truth of the experience and dulled it into anecdote. Now, forty-five years on, it felt like so much jargon. The more that Walter talked about space, the farther away it felt.

Walter's claustrophobia first struck six months before the trip to Vienna, during a paid appearance in Las Vegas. He got into an elevator at the MGM Grand, and his chest seemed to collapse in on itself. His heart lost its proper beat. Strong pulses erupted in his neck but died at the wrist, leaving his hands white and tingling. He could feel the horizon line of his own skull. It was like suddenly discovering that he lived inside of a snow globe.

He had assumed the arterial stents in his heart were failing. The emergency room doctor asked a barrage of questions. Was Walter sleeping? Was he keeping active? Did he ever feel blue? Walter never lied to doctors, a habit held over from NASA, when a minor medical fib could have cost him his life. The doctor finished and said, "Walter, you had a panic attack."

"A what?"

"Are you anxious about something?"

"Sure. I'm eighty-four. I've got one foot on the proverbial banana peel."

Walter wanted to say more: That the list of the dead had long ago surpassed that of the living. That any person with a modicum of sense couldn't help but feel distressed from time to time at the startling beauty and brevity of life. But he kept his mouth shut and accepted the sheet torn from the doctor's prescription pad. He told himself the pills weren't a breach of sobriety. No doctor had ever prescribed him Scotch.

When Walter had stood on the moon—had watched the white surface dust rise in slow-motion circles from the movement of his boots—he had believed in epiphany. He felt that same promise of understanding when the images from the Orion Nebula were first fed through Hubble. Colorful plumes of gas and dust pressed in a dance of ultraviolet light and emerging gravity, and there, 1,600 light-years away, the ember of birthing stars, the embryos of forming planets. A universe in the making. With enough time and the right technology, the astronomers had said, we will see the beginning. We will see creation.

Now, when sleep eluded him, Walter would leave the farmhouse, the screen door thwacking in his wake, to roam the property. Fifteen acres of farmland parceled by lace walls of quarry rock dug out and stacked long ago. They had a modest orchard, a few cows and chickens, Veronica's meticulously preened clipping garden. Walter would lie on his back among the peach trees and watch the night sky. Perhaps death was like awareness clicking back off again. *Awake. Asleep.*

What, then, became of his consciousness when he died? Would it rise out of his body with his last breath, an invisible energy ascending to rejoin the cosmos? Would it fall back down to the earth like pollen, alighting the surface of things before scattering, diffuse and fertile?

Walter had felt on the threshold of some great understanding for much of his life, but the limits of what he would know were clear to him now. And that, more than anything, felt like death.

Walter started feeling ill an hour into the bus tour of Viennese architecture. It was running long, as sight-seeing trips are wont to do, and Ingrid was there at every pause in the tour guide's excited patter to pepper Walter with questions. What did he think about the privatization of space travel? What about the critique that he hasn't done enough for the space program after leaving NASA?

"I had retired," Walter said. "Rocketing out of Earth's atmosphere has a limited career span."

"But don't you believe, as one of the few human beings to walk on the moon, that you owe the public something? Some debt of service in return for the billions spent to send you up there? If only to champion the space program in the midst of so much defunding."

The group stopped for lunch at a small café. Walter stepped outside for fresh air and to escape Ingrid. He pulled out his cell and dialed Arlene's number in New York. Voice mail.

"Arlene, I know it's early there, but we need to talk. I'm on some infernal sight-seeing tour and I've got a barnacle of a reporter on my ass. I don't know what you and her editor discussed, but her questions are all wrong. Call me."

Lunch didn't sit well. Walter's stomach grumbled and he felt hot, even after they moved inside the cool expanse of the historic Karlskirche. Their guide halted under a fresco from the 1700s. *The Intercession of Charles Borromeo Supported by the Virgin Mary*. Plump cherubs lounged on beds of cumulus. The Virgin Mother

admired the beatific face of a mortal priest, the future Saint Charles. The guide had a lot to say about dear old Borromeo and his heartrending life on Earth. Famine. Plague. Attempted assassination.

*Jesus, Walter thought, I need my own intercession.*

He excused himself and went to the bathroom. Veronica found him there, twenty minutes later, lying facedown on the three-hundred-year-old stone floor. She knelt and touched his forehead. "I know you haven't fainted, because your eyes are open."

"It's cool down here."

"I'm calling a doctor."

"No, no, I'm OK."

"Then get up. Everyone is walking to the bus."

Veronica. His beautiful, practical wife. While he'd been searching the universe, she'd been teaching their children to be thoughtful human beings. She looked worried, so he got up.

Back on the bus, Ingrid dug in again. "When can I expect to see the memoir?"

"It's not a . . . forget it. Soon. You'll see it soon."

The thing about the book was that there was no book. The only person who knew this was Jack Barstow, Walter's editor at the publishing house.

Walter had started the manuscript the previous fall, when the farm was heading into the silence of winter. He commandeered a one-room clapboard building at the crest of the property for his office. It had once served as a schoolhouse. That first day, he walked from the house with a thermos of coffee and a tin of muffins from Veronica. Inside, he stoked the woodstove and sat in a chair by the window. Veronica dropped a basket of sandwiches outside the closed door for lunch.

For the first week, he stared out the window. And then one day he rolled a sheet into the Royal typewriter and began pecking, slowly at first, then with momentum. He worked at a fevered pace, well into the night. He finished the book on a cold spring morning, snow dusting the lace walls. He carefully packed the pages in a briefcase, and traveled by train to New York.

Jack was surprised when Walter showed up at the office. "We could have sent a messenger for this."

Dressed in a slim dark suit, Jack reminded Walter of a younger version of himself. He was tall, athletic: a marathon runner, even in his early fifties. It's why Walter had signed with him. Jack felt like a friend.

"It's ready, Jack. The book is done." Walter presented the briefcase.

"I've got a packed schedule . . ."

"I'm at the Waldorf. I'll stay until you've read it."

Jack called the next morning, and they met for lunch. "I'm too damn old to be pulling all-nighters." Jack flagged the waiter. "A carafe of coffee. High-test."

The waiter looked to Walter, who shook his head. He was amped already. "So what did you think?"

"Let me start by asking you a question, Walter. What were your goals for this first draft?"

"To write an honest account of man's exploration of space."

"And do you feel that you have achieved that here?"

Walter's heart sank. "Jack, I'm having flashbacks to Sunday school. You're asking open-ended questions, but I've got the sense that there's only one right answer. So how about we cut to the chase and you tell me what's on your mind."

The waiter delivered the carafe. Jack poured coffee into a cup, then cream, with studied precision. "I want—the readers will want—a more personal story. I want you to tell us how you got from a modest upbringing in Missouri to the surface of the moon. I want to understand the pressure of winning the race against the Russians, of being shot out of the atmosphere, of being one of the first human beings to set foot on another planet."

"Not a planet, per se. A celestial body."

"You know what I mean."

"I'm not sure I do."

"Walter, I want bookstores to shelve this under Memoir. Right now, it's not a memoir. It's more a dissertation on man and the universe. It borders on philosophy."

"Jack, this is the most honest thing I've ever written."

"Yes, but will people read it? That is the question I am always forced to ask." Jack sipped his coffee. "I'm going to suggest something, and I want you to hear me out. I think we should pair you with a ghostwriter. Someone who can help you find the locus of your story. I have a fantastic candidate in mind."

On the train back to Connecticut, Walter watched the landscape speed by and thought about his father. Walter pictured him in church on Sunday, broad-shouldered and scrubbed, hair combed and oiled, smelling of pomade and sweat. His thick, calloused fingers interlaced in prayer, lips moving in a fervent repeat of the gospel. His father bowed in deference to the great mystery of life, a mystery

he believed he was not allowed to interrogate. Where his father had believed in a mighty god, Walter believed in the intellect. His father took to his knees and prayed, the unknown becoming bearable through submission. Walter raised his face to the sky and invoked the power of curiosity, of science, of exploration. Now here Walter was, his life in retrograde, and he feared that he was no better off than his father. They were binaries, each with their version of faith.

Veronica met him at the train station with the car. "How did it go?"

Walter buckled himself in. "He loved it."

"See? All that worry for nothing. Your instincts were right." She pulled out of the parking lot and they drove in silence for several miles. "The suspense is killing me, though. When can I finally read it?"

"Soon."

Back at the hotel, there was no time for a nap, just a quick bath and a fresh suit. Walter lied and told Veronica that he felt better after the incident in the church. She insisted on applying bronzer to his face in the bathroom mirror. "Are you sure that you're up for this?"

Walter didn't tell her that he'd upped the dose on the Ativan. And taken a few Klonopin for good measure. Today would be the first elevator ride since Vegas. He could hear Arlene now: *You can hardly avoid elevators on the skyscraper circuit, Wally, so get your ass in that box.*

"Have you heard from Arlene today?"

"No." Veronica swept at his face with a large, soft brush. "Stop talking. You're messing up the makeup."

"I think she's avoiding me."

"You could always let her go and be done with all this."

"And do what?"

"Take a vacation. Spend time with your family. Relax."

"Paint portraits of dogs like George W."

"Walter, I'm serious." Veronica set the brush on the counter. "I look at you sometimes and I see that little boy on his bike in Missouri. You're putting as much distance as you can between you and that life. And you got there. Against all of the odds, you got to the moon. So maybe it's time to stop."

"Notecards."

"Excuse me?"

“Don’t let me forget my notecards. For the speech.”

Veronica snapped the compact shut. “Honestly. I don’t know why I bother.”

Bernard picked them up in the limo and they drove across town to the Future Tower. The glass-and-steel building came into view. It was impossibly tall, fatly cylindrical, and rounded at the top. Walter thought it looked like an erect penis wrapped in a tinfoil rubber.

Bernard nodded to the skyscraper. “A bit like a space shuttle ready for takeoff, wouldn’t you say, Walter?”

“That’s one way of looking at it.”

People were already gathering in the lobby. Walter struggled with small talk. The pills had kicked in. Smiling faces floated in and out of his field of vision. Ingrid arrived, this time with a photographer. Walter blinked from every jarring flash of the photographer’s bulb.

The group moved toward the bank of gleaming elevators that would ferry them to the uppermost floor for the ceremony. A familiar panic rose in Walter’s chest. His legs jellied and he stumbled. Veronica grabbed his elbow and put a hand on the small of his back. For such a petite woman, Veronica was strong. She was the strongest person he knew, and he wanted to tell her that but the words refused to form in his mouth. She spoke instead. “Tonight, I’m getting you in that elevator.”

He smiled for her, even as his chest tightened and his heart strained to circulate blood through his body.

Guests crowded near the elevators, a pack of lemmings heading up instead of over. Walter caught his ghostly reflection in the mirrored doors in front of him. The cheeks on his wan face blossomed two perfect circles of bronzer. He looked like an aging Howdy Doody.

The doors slid apart, breaking his reflection, and opened onto a daylit box. An attendant held the door. Walter hesitated then stepped carefully over the threshold, Veronica alongside him. She guided him to the glass in back, so that he could face out and see the city.

“Breathe,” she whispered.

“I’m working on it.” This time the words formed.

The elevator began its ascent with a startling whoosh. The city splayed out in front of them, a man-made mass of buildings that looked geologic as they rose above it. The Danube snaked below. Walter remembered training at NASA for their

post-moon shot water landing and the burn of his lungs as he swam against the current in the Gulf of Mexico. *In and out, breathe in and out.* His ears popped. The fuzzy chatter of the other passengers exploded in his ears. The voices were heavy and close, and he thought he might suffocate from so much off-gassing.

He closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against the glass. "Vee. I make it through this and I promise you: I'm calling Arlene and telling her I'm out."

"We'll take a vacation."

"Somewhere tropical."

"With bungalows. No more high-rises."

An eternity passed before the doors swooshed open again. Veronica waited for the car to clear before turning Walter back around. She took one of his clammy hands in hers and squeezed. "We made it."

They entered a room with walls as transparent as air. The salted glow of a winter sun moved through flawless glass so that it appeared as though light itself framed the building. Walter watched as Vienna's well-clad elite ventured to the edges to press foreheads against glass, thrilled by the dizzying heights and the sensation that a mere inch of material stood between them and the sky. Walter had actually broached such boundaries. He had rocketed free of confine and into the uninterrupted expanse of space. Now, Walter felt the folly of this building, of men in fine suits and women in silk dresses pushing themselves against the firmament. They were all ants trapped in a maze of constricting structures. His claustrophobia swelled again despite the intended vastness of the skyscraper's observation deck.

The feedback squeak of a microphone announced the ceremony was about to begin. People claimed seats in front of a stage with a lectern. Walter joined the other speakers on the dais. He reached inside the breast pocket of his suit jacket for his notecards. They weren't there. He tried to remain calm as he patted himself down, checking the outer jacket pockets, then his pants. Veronica, seated in the audience, tilted her head in question.

"My notes," he mouthed.

She shrugged and shook her head.

Walter heard his name announced. He stood amidst a smattering of applause and moved to the microphone.

"I don't . . ." He cleared his throat. "I don't understand . . ."

Walter reached for a glass of water waiting on the lectern. His hand shook. He took a sip, careful not to spill liquid down his chin. The room was dead silent.

“I don’t understand . . .” he started again, but he couldn’t wrangle his thoughts. The architect shifted in his chair as though he might intervene. “I don’t understand how we build such miraculous creations.”

Walter swept one arm to take in the room. “How do we manage it?”

His mouth had moved too close to the microphone and his voice boomed over the PA, causing a woman in the front row to flinch. Walter eased back on his heels, but overcorrected, and nearly toppled backward off of the stage. He steadied himself with both hands on either side of the lectern. His eyes narrowed as he searched his brain for the notes he’d written on those cards. He couldn’t pull them up.

*Screw it.*

Walter took a deep breath.

“Yesterday, someone asked me what I miss most about being in outer space.” He took another sip of water. “Let’s start with what I don’t miss. I don’t miss the hours of grueling physical training, or the inside of Langley’s Reduced Gravity Walking Simulator. I certainly don’t miss what passes for food in the lunar module.”

Walter paused for laughter and he got it.

“So why did I do it? Why did I put my mind, my body, my poor wife, through the paces?”

Walter looked to Veronica. A shaft of late-afternoon light fell across her face. Earth tips ever so slightly on its axis. Walter had seen the tilt when he was in space, had seen Earth’s relationship to the sun. The geography of the seasons writ large. It would be time to sow the spring garden when they got back to Connecticut. The kids would arrive in a few months for their annual summer visit. The grandchildren would chase fireflies at dusk while Walter puttered in the south field. He would walk back to the house, soil under his nails, toward the honeyed lamplight in the windows and a cake cooling in the kitchen.

Standing on that dais, watching the sun warm his wife’s face, Walter willed himself to settle there, to live and be satisfied in this moment. But an all-too-familiar ache eroded the calm. In his mind, Walter was forever poised over the basalt basin of the moon’s Sea of Tranquility. His clean boot had not yet left the stair of the lunar module to imprint the downy surface below. The horizon was close, the diameter such that you could never mistake the moon as flat. A quarter-million miles away, Earth watched. There was the growing landscape of his wife’s belly, his first child inside. The universe was a glorious mystery to be solved, and it was all still ahead of him. It was all still possible.