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Moondust

In Search of the Men Who Fell to Earth

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Extract

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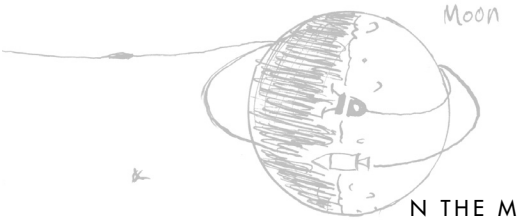
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PROLOGUE

THEN THERE WERE NINE



IN THE MORNING of July 9, 1999, I set out to meet Charlie and Dotty Duke in the bar of a London hotel. It was to be a brief encounter for a small magazine article of a type that I normally avoided, but even at a glance the Dukes were too intriguing to pass by.

What I knew about them was that in April 1972, Charlie had become the tenth of only twelve human beings to gaze back at the Earth from the surface of the Moon. I knew that he'd stayed there for three euphoric days, then come home and imploded: that he'd lost his moorings and been unable to settle; had terrorized his children and tormented his wife, before eventually finding peace and resolution with her through faith in God. Now the pair ran a ministry out of New Braunfels, Texas. They were in town to talk about it.

The longer I looked, the more fascinated I became with the strange and intense three and a half years in which the landings took place, during which the world seemed to shudder and change shape forever. By the end, a black Rolling Stones fan had

been beaten to death at Altamont and the Beatles had split in acrimony, with JFK, Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King seeming like distant memories. Vietnam was effectively over and the counterculture which defined itself in opposition to the war was drifting off to nowhere like dust in a desert wind, while Watergate reared and racial conflict escalated and the pop music that swirled around my ten-year-old head seemed cooler and more cynical than it ever had before. As NASA flight director Chris Kraft would remark, "The best of times for America was also the worst of times." Now recession was bearing down and a darker, harsher world was emerging.

And although the space programme was begat by the Cold War, the lunar landings still looked like such a crazy Sixties thing, a last waltz with optimism in a decade which arguably ended on December 19, 1972, when the *Apollo 17* astronauts sailed home knowing that the adventure was over and its promise had been a mirage. No Merry Prankster or acid-popping mystic ever did anything freakier than this, and yet the ambiguities of the enterprise seemed endless. What had humanity gained from President Kennedy's capricious decision to launch his nation at the Moon, and the outrageous cash it required? The lunar programme cost twenty-four billion 1960s dollars: at its peak, NASA was swallowing 5 per cent of the U.S. federal budget. Was all that time, energy, money, *life*, wasted?

Charlie Duke wasn't the only one for whom the return to Earth was difficult. I traced the others and found that they'd reacted to their experience in wildly different ways. The First Man on the Moon, Neil Armstrong, became a teacher and retreated from public view, "getting back to the fundamentals of the planet," while his partner Buzz Aldrin spent years mired in alcoholism and depression, then threw himself into developing space ideas which all looked impossibly fanciful to me. The naturally rebellious Alan Bean of *Apollo 12* quit space to become an artist, endlessly rendering scenes from the lunar quest in oils, and Edgar Mitchell experienced a "flash of understanding" in which he switched on to the Universe, sensing an intelligence which he would spend the rest of his life trying to understand. Even more dramatically, Jim Irwin purported to have heard God

whispering to him at the feet of the majestic, gold-coloured Apennine Mountains, leaving NASA for the Church upon his return. Meanwhile, the fearsome Alan Shepard, the only one to admit crying on the surface, did the one thing no one thought he would do – *could* do: he mellowed.

Among the rest, John Young became a fierce critic of NASA after the *Challenger* shuttle disaster and left the Astronaut Office in a fog of anger and grief, and Last Man on the Moon Gene Cernan admits to a nagging disappointment with everything that has followed his experience with *Apollo 17* ("it's tough to find an encore"). His flight companion, Jack Schmitt, became a U.S. senator, but found politicians myopic and frustrating after the creativity he'd grown used to. He wasn't re-elected and I'd heard that he latterly worked as a "space consultant" in Albuquerque. All described an almost mystical sense of the unity of humankind as seen from afar. A lot happened up there. The post-flight divorce rate was, in more than one sense, astronomical.

With hindsight, the astronauts' reactions should have been predictable. Suddenly, the twelve had to find answers to a question that had never been asked in quite the same way before – namely, "Where do you go after you've been to the Moon?" In addition to their own hopes and expectations, they had the fantasies of faceless millions at their backs and millennia's worth of lore. The Nepalese, for instance, believe that their dead reside on the Moon; when the *Apollo 14* veteran Stu Roosa visited there, he grew increasingly flustered at being asked, "So did you see my grandmother?" The walkers will forever be caught between the gravitational pull of the Moon and Earth's collective dreaming. Charlie Duke grew angry as he admitted getting letters from conspiracy theorists who hold that the Moon landings were staged and call him a liar.

I liked Duke. At the age of sixty-four he was still tall and handsome and spoke with a balmy drawl that seemed familiar, though it took a while for me to place it. I felt like a child lost in a favourite bedtime story as he described his flight and the striking luminescence of our world as it moves through the lonely black void of space. From the Moon, he said, the planet was like a jewel, so colourful and bright that you felt you could reach up

and grab it, hold it in your hands and marvel at it like the precious thing it is. Then he described his horror at realizing that his life could only be one long, slow anticlimax from there. All that effort and creativity . . . what had it been for? The development of Teflon? A few photographs? By 1972, Americans didn't give a damn about space. Then Duke spoke of his touching hope that one day "we'll go back there" and I didn't have the heart to tell him that from where I was sitting, that didn't look likely – at least not in his lifetime. Perhaps not even in mine.

When our time was up, I thanked him for a conversation I'd greatly enjoyed and made to leave, but Charlie told me that he had a gap in his schedule, so we could talk a while longer if I wanted to. He then explained that he and Dotty had received some troubling news the night before, when word arrived that Pete Conrad, the wisecracking, larger-than-life commander of the *Apollo 12* mission, the second one to land, had been injured in a motorbike accident near his home in California.

Conrad was the one whose colourful swearing worried NASA suits, but who had kept cool when his Saturn rocket was hit by lightning – twice – on takeoff, sending cockpit alarms into a cacophonous frenzy and the ground into panic. When a journalist doubted his assertion that Armstrong's "One small step . . ." speech was not scripted, Conrad secretly bet her $500 that he could say whatever he wanted when his turn came and nominated his words on the spot. "Whoopie! Man, that may have been a small step for Neil, but it's a long one for me!" she duly heard the diminutive astronaut trill as he became the third person on the Moon on November 19, 1969. He was also the one who took a cassette player on the trip so that he and his crew could bounce around to "The Girl from Ipanema" and The Archies' "Sugar Sugar," and allowed copilot Al Bean to take the pirouetting gold Lunar Module, so spidery and fragile-looking, for a joyride round the back side of the Moon, where NASA couldn't see what they were up to. When they went for their lunar stroll, Mission Control had to tell the two friends to stop yammering and exclaiming their delight to each other, as they couldn't hear a word Dick Gordon was saying from the orbiting command craft.

Then Dotty was called to the phone and came back with the shocking news that Conrad had died of his injuries, and I wasn't surprised to see Charlie Duke's eyes cloud over as he talked about his comrade. I later learned that the place where he fell was called Ojai, a Native American word for Moon, but it was the words Duke left me with that set my mind reeling that day. He said them quietly and evenly, as though uttering a psalm.

"Now there's only nine of us."

Only nine.

On the way home my mind buzzed with the stories Duke had told, yet I also found myself overtaken by a sadness I hadn't seen coming – not because only nine people remain who've seen us from the surface of the Moon, but because one day, possibly one day soon, there won't be anyone who has. Nevertheless, I went home and carried on as before, expecting to think no more about the Apollo project, banishing it to the corner of my mind that it had occupied so obediently for three decades.

But something unexpected happened: the spacemen wouldn't go away. Three years later, I still found myself slipping outside to stare at the Moon in a way that I hadn't since childhood, trying to imagine the tense drift toward it, the ecstatic return. I wondered whether the Moonwalkers had reconciled themselves to being Earthbound; whether they'd made peace with our world or continued to mourn their strangled hopes. I wanted to know what kind of people they'd become and what they'd learned; how they felt about the weird trip now and whether they thought it had changed them. Even more than this, I wondered why I suddenly cared when I hadn't before. I began to ask myself what the whole thing had been about – what it had *meant*, if indeed it meant anything – and to develop an inchoate sense that the answers to these questions were important, even if I wasn't yet sure why.

And in the end I realized that there was only one way to try and answer them. I was going to have to find the nine Moonwalkers and see for myself where the odyssey had led, while I still could.