

"Going Home"

It was the child with the big glasses that asked first. True, most of them were tired from their all day field trip to the museum and observatory, but it was the statue in front of them that had finally brought a hush to their endless chattering. Even children ... especially they ... can recognize true reverence, and they could see such on the face of their teacher. The bronze figures were life size, set at plaza level into the tile surface of the Great Dome's atrium. The woman was taller than the slightly rotund man, all her attention focused upon the bundle in her arms. He stood next to her, arm around her waist and hand upon her cheek. His vision was of her ... and her alone, as if nothing else existed in his world.

"Who are they? Is she ..."

"... sit down in a circle children, please, and I'll tell you a story it's your time to hear." And, looking up at the figures, with tears in her eyes the teacher began the tale.

Perhaps if he'd been paying closer attention to walking rather than wondering about the sudden appearance of an anomaly in the data stream from the surface array the accident wouldn't have occurred. Or maybe it was just sheer exhaustion from having been awake for over sixty Earth hours trying to determine if there was anything that could be deciphered in the data's altered pattern. Then again, even after almost two years at one-sixth gravity, he had never quit managed to master the skill of gliding down the central ramp that led from the surface structure of Lunar Base Armstrong to the living spaces burrowed hundreds of meters beneath the Moon's surface. And, the simple truth was that his job required very little physical movement. Unlike construction workers and visiting selenologists, he had never really made much effort to acclimatize himself to the reduced gravity of the Moon.

All he knew was that one moment he was passing the Wal-Mart cubage, musing about the changes that had taken place in the high band tracking numbers three days earlier, and the next thing he was aware of was everyone staring at him ... and how much taller they suddenly appeared. As he came to full consciousness he realized that he was laying on his back at the end of the fourth-level ramp. A sharp pain in his ribs, upon investigation, turned out to be the cover to his portable data station, broken from the unit and jabbing sharply into his side.

He heard a low groan and felt a slow movement behind him. Slowly rising to a sitting position, he turned to determine the source of the sound. Behind him, crumpled against the bulkhead, clad in a pair of blue engineering coveralls, was a young woman. As he watched she very deliberately sat up and began to check herself for injuries. Apparently finding no broken bones, she collected the disks and note cases scattered around her and rose to her feet. From the smooth fluidity of her movement it was obvious to him that she was a lunar resident, and, sighing slightly to himself, he mentally prepared himself for the verbal onslaught that he knew was bound to come when she turned her attention to him ..."

"... so, Groundhog, you still don't have your moon-legs after all this time?" she questioned him, but the broad smile on her face and the twinkle in her eyes made it a pleasant interrogation.

"I ... how did you know that I've been here awhile?" He was amazed at her powers of observation ... or deduction ... her gaze hadn't yet left his eyes, and clearly she hadn't take the time to look him over.

"Well, first of all, you didn't automatically apologize ... such nonsense would be a dead giveaway that you were new here. I must tell you that you're being very polite by keeping your

mouth shut ... you've obviously learned that good manners dictate that I get to speak first. Second, you haven't made an effort to dust yourself off ... that one takes some time, you know."

"Oh ... it's nice to meet you, Mr. Holmes!"

"Same to you, my dear Watson ... or, should I say, Doctor Williams?"

"How do you ..."

As she laughed the crowd around them began to disperse. Extending a hand she helped him to his feet. He noticed that she was much stronger than her slight frame would seem to indicate ... and, upon cursory examination, he had a very difficult time keeping from staring at her well-proportioned form.

"... read the paper, Professor!" He quickly brought his attention back to the conversation. "And, besides, the name tag on your tunic is clue enough for just about anyone's deductive skills!"

She was beautiful, he was sure he'd never spoken with a woman so absolutely gorgeous. Her dark hair, cut short in a style favored by those who spend much of their time in spacesuits, seemed soft, like some exotic fur worn by an ultra-rich video star ... one of those few who could afford the huge contribution demanded by the Wildlife Conservation Society as tribute, so to speak, in order to be able to be seen in public so attired.

She was half a head taller than he yet, oddly, when she spoke to him there was no impression that she was staring down at him ... or that he was looking up. Usually, for him, to even be in the presence of a woman such as this caused him great anxiety and nervousness. But, to his pleasant surprise, he felt nothing of the sort. All that usually made him awkward and unsure of himself seemed washed away in the warmth of her smile and the the liquid mirth of her deep blue eyes.

"... you all right?"

"Ah, I ... er, yes. I'm okay. At least, I'm in much better shape than my data station!" He laughed, and, not fully in pretense, mimed pulling the remains of the lid from his side.

"Oh ... ouch! Let me see." She accepted the plastic shell from his hand. "I can fix this in my shop. In fact, I'll form a new piece out of a laminate composite. It'll be twenty times as strong at half the weight!"

"I don't want you to go to any trouble, I'll be back on Earth in a few weeks and I can easily have it repaired at home."

"You're not going to take this back to Earth with you! Why, you can sell it here at the station for three or four times what a new one will cost down there. All you have to do is call ahead to CompWorld and they'll accept a download of all your data over an encrypted relay link. In fact, I'll tell you what. I'll buy this from you, with the broken lid and all, for three times the Earth price. How's that sound?"

Even as she spoke her fingers were flying across the unit's keyboard. Before he could even think of the proper ... or polite ... response, she was talking again.

"There, I've reserved for you a unit at the CompWorld in Hilo ... I figured you were going back there because you live on Midway Island and ..."

"... and how did you know where I live?"

"Silly man, you've purchased software from them before so your personal information is in their computer. You've never checked off the little box requesting that it be kept private, have you? Anyway, the new unit will be eleven hundred standard dollars. So I'll give you thirty-three

hundred for this one. After I fix the lid I should be able to sell it for at least four thousand ... not a bad profit for a minor accident and a few hours labor in my workshop!"

"But what about my ...

"We can't send it from here, there's too much shielding at this level and they haven't extended the data transfer transceivers into this cubage yet ... I think that's scheduled for sometime next year ... so we'll have to go back to my place and link into the station mainframe. Is that okay with you?"

He mentally checked his schedule, "I was on my way ..."

"... to supper, I know." By now he knew better than to even think of asking. "I'll fix you dinner ... no extra charge!" She started to glide down the ramp then, checking her smooth movement, turned back to him. "So ... is it a deal?"

Normally he would have never accepted such an offer. Then again, he couldn't recall ever having had anyone ... any woman ... any woman such as her ... extend to him an invitation like this. His hesitation must have given him away, for before he could begin to reply she had effortlessly levitated herself back to where he was standing. She gently grasped his arm, and, being so close, he was suddenly aware that to his sense of smell she was like a soft tropical breeze.

"Don't worry, Professor, I don't bite," her laughter echoed up and down the corridor, "You won't have to marry me and, yes, I'll respect you in the morning!" With that, and, to his great surprise, no resistance whatsoever on his part, he found himself descending the ramp that led to the Lunar Station's living spaces.

With a start he awoke. He looked around the darkened room, for a brief moment totally disoriented in the strange surroundings. He was stretched out on a couch, a blanket spread over him. He marveled at how comfortable the furniture was, knowing that it was probably made locally of mostly plastic and spun silica. Feeling the comforter against his neck, he was surprised to notice that it was real wool, something extremely rare on the Moon.

A pool of light filled the far side of the room. Back to him, he could see her sitting at a workbench, the pieces of his ... hers, he remembered now ... data station laid out in front of her. Her attention to her task was total, and he was pleased that her concentration allowed him a moment of reflection.

He must have fallen asleep after dinner. She'd cooked a great meal, especially appreciated by him after almost two year's diet of station food. While the ham was synthetic, something he knew only by training since it tasted as good as any he'd ever had back on Earth, the vegetables were, as she put it, "home grown." He had enjoyed the peas and carrots, but was also delighted with the several hybrids that she'd either steamed or stir-fried. He could still taste the final course, a pie made with a fruit that was a combination of an apple and a raspberry. When he had jokingly referred to it as a "rapple" she had burst into delighted laughter, "Why, yes, that's exactly what we're calling it!"

He looked around the room. Behind him, somewhat sloppily left half ajar, was a hatch leading from the living space to a short corridor beyond. In front of him, across the room from the front entrance, the walls narrowed until they were only about two meters apart, ending in a curious feature such as he'd never seen in a living space on the Moon. At a juncture delineated by a lack of furniture or any other items of human habitation the floor ascended slightly for several meters until it terminated in a curtained wall. All in all, it appeared as if the builders, or, he corrected to himself, the diggers, had begun a new tunnel, only to stop work suddenly, as if called

away to a new project. The space was dark and, other than the pleated curtains shielding its far end, was totally devoid of any decoration or embellishment.

"So ... I see you're up!"

"I ... I'm sorry ... I meant ... I didn't mean to ..."

"It's okay," from across the room her smile relaxed him, "It's enough that you know what good manners are to us here on the Moon. In and of itself, that's what counts most ... hardly any of our visitors ever understand that."

She seemed to float across the room to arrive next to him, and her graceful movement reminded him of the events that had brought him to her living quarters. "Are you all right? I never bothered to ask you if ..."

"... if you had managed to get a word in edgewise and my friends'd found out I'm sure some money would have changed hands! I didn't give you much of a chance to speak. It's kind of a trademark personality trait, or flaw, depending on your interpretation. Anyhow, I'm just fine, Pete, and your ... my ... data station is ..."

"What's your name?" He couldn't believe that he didn't know, and was shocked at how easily he'd interrupted her.

"Oh ... I wondered when you'd get to that! I'm Helen."

"Helen ..."

"Simply Helen. Well, if you want to get technical, I'm Helen 56."

He searched his memory and was pleased that he so quickly found what he was looking for, "So you're the only baby adopted in 2156 and brought to the Moon that was allowed to be named Helen ... right?"

Her smile was ample reward for all the research he had done before he left the Earth for his tour of duty on the Moon, "Why, yes! There was a Helen 50, she was killed in an accident a few years ago. She was the first Helen, by the way. And over at Mitsubitsu Station there's a Helena 55, I believe. I'm the last, however, because ..."

"... in 2157 the World Council banned the adoption and importation ... immigration, you must pardon me for that slip ... of anyone under the age of thirty-five. Am I correct?"

A sadness crossed her eyes, out of place against the cheerfulness of her face, "Yes ... until we can determine how to prevent the irreversible physiological acclimatization that prevents anyone from spending more than a few years in this reduced gravity field it will remain Universal Law that only those who are mature enough to make such a decision for themselves can choose to take up residence ... exile themselves ... on the Moon."

He reached out and held her hand, the softness of her skin in stark contrast to the strength he could feel within her, "And ..."

"... and that's why you're getting ready to leave. If, for a change, you will pardon my apology, I looked up your station dossier while you were napping."

"How did you ..."

"... get past the firewall and security features? You'd be surprised at what I can do. Then again, perhaps you wouldn't if you found out that I designed the entire system. I'm sure that you've written some very involved code yourself, Pete, so you should know that a good programmer always ..."

"... leaves herself a 'backdoor,' so to speak, right?"

"Absolutely! Makes things easier when things go wrong ... plus it allows an enlightened citizenry, that's me, to keep track of the mistakes and foibles of the politicians who are running

this show. Anyhow, you've been here almost two full years now ... kind of stretching it a bit, aren't you?"

"Not really ... well, okay. Just a bit. The medics put me on an 'A' level workout routine about six months back, when I added the second extension to my contract, but ..."

She glanced down at his ample waist, yet her smile remained nothing but kind, "... but you haven't had the time to keep up with the scheduled workouts, and, more to the point, you can't stand bringing yourself to a sweat on the treadmill in the station gym ... can you?"

He grinned back at her, "No, truth is I've never been much for exercising. Would you like to know a little secret?"

"Sure!"

"You were right about my programming ability. My first real binary accomplishment was a hack into my high school's guidance department computer, during which I successfully gave myself the necessary physical education credits required to earn a diploma."

"What about the gym teachers, didn't they notice?"

"Teacher ... Mr. Carlson. And, yes, he noticed."

"So, what did it cost you?"

"Not much, since both of us were essentially rather honest individuals. I don't think anyone ever paid any attention to the fact that he was never scheduled for lunch duty the week before a major vacation, the times when most of the students were just a bit off the wall." He smiled to himself at the reminiscence, reminding himself that it was a good thing, after all, that he was, indeed, basically quite honest. After all, there was the time he'd hacked his way into the school's accounting computer ...

She leaned in very close to him and, looking around the room as if to determine if anyone was listening, whispered softly, "I'll bet that's not all you could've done ... if you hadn't been such an honest person!"

"Anyhow, now it seems that my time is up. In theory, I could extend for one more contract period. But the Flight Surgeon has informed me that I'd be pushing the odds big time ... something about a ninety percent chance of a stroke upon returning to Earth gravity after thirty months on the Moon."

"What about now ... after almost two years?" The look of concern on her face was genuine, and pleased him greatly.

"Oh, I'll be okay. Apparently there's a 'breakpoint' at about twenty-seven months, sort of like 'the Wall' in the Marathon. Right now I've probably got, at worst, only a slightly greater chance of having medical problems than there would be for any man of my age who had never left Earth ... or physical condition," he added somewhat sheepishly.

"So ... when is your return flight?"

"In eight weeks ... the last regular passenger flight before the beginning of the next cycle of solar activity. I made a point of scheduling myself on the Lunar Shuttle Challenger. She's a real antique. They're going to retire her sometime next year, by the way. People've told me that the thrill is well worth the bumpy ride!"

"Oh." She was quiet for more than a few moments, her expression almost blank. Then, in a flash, her face was transfixed by a smile that somehow managed to bring laughter to his soul even as his eyes filled with tears, "Then we haven't much time ... have we?"

Later, much later, after their breathing had returned to normal and they'd put the lights back on, he snuggled with her on the couch. He knew that something very special had taken place, yet he still had a difficult time believing that she was in his arms ... no, that he could accept. But how perfectly she fit, that was a wonder to him.

"Mmmmm, you must be tired."

Like those times so long ago, when he'd served double-watches under a moonlight Pacific sky, his fatigue and exhaustion were but a memory. He felt refreshed and renewed, as if he'd just arisen from a long nap. "No, actually I'm fine. Can I ask you something?"

He thought he detected her heart skip a beat. "Ah ... sure. What is it?"

"Well, not to change to subject ..."

"... which means that's exactly what you're about to do, right?"

"Yes ... but I don't want you to think that ..."

"You don't have to worry about that, Pete, you never have to worry about that, okay?"

Gazing into her eyes he was suddenly aware that for most of his life he'd used the word 'forever' in reference to physics or astronomy ... but that he had never once felt that it could be applied to a person's feelings. At least, not until this moment.

"All right. It isn't that big a deal, anyway. My curiosity has just gotten the best of me ... "

"And?"

"Well, why the tunnel with the curtain at the end?" He waited for the sharp comeback, or derisive laughter, or even worse, silence.

She chuckled gently, "Silly you! Within a few minutes of being in this living space most visitors walk over and peek under the curtain ... I'm surprised you just asked."

"Hmmm ... if you'll recall, we ..."

"Okay, okay! I remember!"

They both laughed together, and in the process she somehow seemed to settle even closer to him.

"Do you know where you are?" she asked.

"In heaven?"

"Good answer ... almost as romantic as it is wrong! Try again."

"Okay. Let's see ... I know we're somewhere in the two o'clock section of Level Six. If I recall correctly my temporary visa indoctrination, this is the lowest ..." his voice trailed off as other facts came to him, "... this is a storage and machinery space. There aren't any ..." he caught his error and corrected himself with only a slight pause, "... aren't supposed to be any living quarters on this level."

"And in relation to the surface, where would that put us?"

He'd always had excellent three-dimensional recall, so it was easy for him to project a picture in his mind of the layout of the station superimposed beneath a mental sketch of Sagan Crater. "Why ... we must be near the west rim, near the sheer wall over which all the selenologists have been pulling their hair out for the past fifty years."

As he was speaking she reached down between the cushions of the couch and, after fumbling around for a minute, withdrew a small remote control device. Unlocking and activating the unit, she pushed a tiny green button marked, 'Other.'

He watched as the curtains slowly parted, "Oh, that's all. A view screen." From his position on the couch he could see an external view of the the Lunar Base. In the lower center of the the screen he saw the spaceport runway, in the distance was the far rim of the crater. It was daytime,

the sun was about halfway up the sky and, almost invisible in the glare, he could see the dim outline of the Earth in its 'dark phase.'

"I didn't realize that they'd imported any quite so large up from Earth. As a matter of fact, I think that even back there this would be considered a big one. I don't think I've ever ..." his voice trailed off and he could feel the tiny hairs on the back of his neck begin to stand on end, "... oh my God. That can't be ... it's not ..."

He very carefully let go of her, gently tucking her into the couch as he rose to his feet. Walking to the door, he pushed it completely open, "Has this been open the entire time we ..."

His laughter was very slowly beginning to fill the room, "I hardly ever close it ... an old habit from back before the emergency decompression alarm system was dependable. We used to rely on the sudden popping in our ears to warn us if there was an air loss somewhere in the station. Anyhow, don't worry, nobody ever comes down here unannounced."

He stepped into the corridor outside the room, immediately noticing that the hall stretched downhill for only a short distance before it terminated in an opening to a rather narrow lift tube. Recalling suddenly the events of earlier in the day, he didn't need to look down into the tube to know that it dropped forty meters or so into the Lunar depths. He remembered that afternoon's kilometer long walk along the hallway leading to the tube, and how he had been slightly nervous when she prompted him to step onto one of its ascending platforms. Looking back into the room, without moving from the doorway, he turned and gazed across the length of the living space and up the incline to the open curtain. It only took him a second to make the estimate and do the necessary math in his head, "So ... it is a window! Who ... I mean, why ... no, how did ..."

"Wow ... you're quick! I've a couple of friends who still don't believe it. As to your questions ... I don't know. I found out about this space while doing an analysis of the Station's air movement system. It doesn't show up on any of the databases, nor is it included in any of the electrical or fluid schematics."

"So how did you ..."

"As I said, sweetheart, I was measuring the station's air movement system. In this quadrant there was several thousand cubic feet of air unaccounted for. It didn't show up under the normal use data, but when I did a total decompression projection the refill volume was nowhere near being close to the blueprint figures. So I did a manual screening of the original site plans ... they're on paper, by the way, can you believe that?"

"And ..."

"... the plans matched the blueprints in the computer. But, when I looked closely, I found something that didn't make much sense."

"What was that?"

"There was a full sectional airlock bulkhead hatch separating this cubic space from the rest of the level. The safety specifications don't call for anything like that, so I ..."

Without thinking, he continued for her, "... so you came down here with a tape measure and laser level and walked the floor, right?"

"Yup! And here it was. The corridor below is over fifty times longer than the plans indicate, and the lift tube doesn't show up at all. The door was locked and secured with an old fashioned lead seal. And, yes, I checked the initials ... there was no match with anybody even remotely involved with the construction of the station. It took me almost a week to crack the code on the lock, seems like nobody knows much about mechanical combination locks anymore."

"Fascinating!" It was as good as any mystery story that he'd ever read, "What did you find when you opened it?"

"Sorry to disappoint you ... a Lunar King Tut I didn't get to find. Mostly, the place seemed to be a storehouse for spare parts and tools used during the station's construction. Totally unaccounted for, by the way, something that has been to my advantage several times. Nothing really interesting, to be honest, other than the window itself, except for one thing, that is ..." she paused, knowing how dramatic she sounded.

"Okay ... I'm begging! What was it?"

"Geeze, you're easy! Well, in the at the far end of the tunnel there's a tiny alcove. I didn't notice it when I first explored the space. It was only after I'd replaced all the burned out glow units that there was enough light to see it. When I did discover it I found the dried remains of a dozen roses in a vase tucked into the cutout. What do you think of that?"

He walked back to the couch and reached down to softly stroke her cheek. Without saying a word, he slowly walked up into the tunnel. With the curtains open, and the light low, the effect was quite disconcerting. His knowledge of physics didn't help matters much, as he'd already computed to himself the tremendous amount of force that the station's air pressure was placing on the huge tempered quartz portal. Without being conscious of the thought, he made a point of stopping more than an arm's length from the window, as if to draw any closer would tempt him to reach out and touch its surface, thus somehow teasing the Fates more than he'd any inclination of doing.

Looking to his left, he spied the alcove in the shadow. Nestled neatly within the hollow was a small vase containing a dozen fresh bright red roses, on the Moon a commodity worth literally almost their weight in gold. Turning, he glided slowly down the incline back to the couch. He settled in next to her, embracing her completely within his arms. As she tucked her head against her chest she began to speak, but he put his finger up against her lips and she stopped.

He gazed down upon her, and then back up the tunnel to the vase full of flowers and the view through the window.

"I ... Helen ... I love you, Helen, and ..."

"... and I love you, Pete, I love you." She pushed another button and the lights in the room went out. It was quite some time before she reached for the remote to close the curtains.

So, are you sure you're up for this?"

"Look, we've been over this. The fact that I'm scared to death doesn't change my mind. Yes ... yes, I want to do it."

She looked across the outfitting room, a huge grin on her face, "Okay, strip!"

He knew she was teasing him, waiting to see if the presence of others in the room would bother him. With a swift motion he removed his coverall. Before it had completed its slow fall to the floor he'd glided over to her side and, with an innocent look on his face, asked, "Should I have worn underwear? Or is this affair casual?"

"You ... you ..."

He burst out laughing, distracting for a moment the few engineers and technicians who were suiting up in the room. "I grew up on an island, remember? There was a time that the only embarrassment clothing caused me was when someone else made the mistake of wearing it to the beach. Are you surprised?"

"Why ... no, I guess not ..."

He suddenly reddened, and very softly she quickly continued, "Pete, when are you going to get it through that thick skull of yours that it doesn't matter?"

He looked down at his less than streamlined form, then back to her, "Old habit ... sorr ... I mean, you're right. But I have to ask you a question. All the times I wanted to do this, they could never find a suit that fit me. Oh, there are the emergency decomp units ... but never a true surface suit. So where did you ..."

"I'm not sure you should know," she interjected with a sly grin.

"Com'on. I can take it! Please, Helen, I'm really curious."

"Well ... hmmm ... okay. Take a peek at the data screen on the left arm panel. Yup, that's it. Now, push the unlocking slide and activate the display."

He did so, and was instantly presented with a standard bio-readout in glowing blue ... that color by itself an indication that the suit was not yet being worn. Knowing better by now than to ask her for any further information, he carefully inspected the display. Everything seemed perfectly normal, no different than those used in all sorts of monitoring situations, but then he noticed something very odd. Looking closely, "Why there're two trace lines. That doesn't make any sense. And the second line ..." He punched a couple of the buttons placed along the bottom of the screen. "... the base for the second line doesn't include respiration, it's only got blood pressure, heartbeat, and ..."

"And?" She innocently asked.

"... and this suit is for a pregnant woman! Funny, I'm more mystified than embarrassed. I didn't think there had ever been a pregnancy on the Moon that made it past the first trimester."

"There hasn't been," she responded sadly, "But this is a pre-production model that was built a great many years ago in the anticipation ... hope ... that some day it would be needed. You're sure you don't mind?"

"No ... really! I think my skull is getting thinner!"

When they both laughed he noticed that the sound was as the music that two people might dance to ... and he also accepted the envious looks several of those in the room directed towards him.

They finished dressing and completed a rigorous routine of safety check procedures. Then, a custom that had evolved out of necessity during the short but violent history of Lunar exploration, they were inspected fully by a certified suit master, one of whom was always on duty in the air-lock section of the base.

Moving into the elevator, he accepted the guidance of her hands as she positioned him along the back wall of the lift. Closing the door, she activated the operation panel and pushed a large button marked 'Surface.' Almost immediately, as a feeling of increased weight informed him that the unit was moving upward, she unlatched the panel front plate, opened the entire face of the unit, buttons and all, and flicked a tiny metal rocker switch attached to the interior side of the box.

The elevator continued to rise for a few more seconds, then, quite abruptly, came to a halt. He noticed that none of the level indicators were lit, and was quite unprepared when the door opened suddenly and she jumped into the narrow corridor in front of them. "Hurry up ... quickly ... there you go, that's it! You can hold still now."

Behind him the elevator door shut and he could hear it as it resumed its ascent to the surface structures above.

"So, are you going to tell me ..."

"Not yet, okay?"

If he'd learned one thing during the preceding few weeks, the twinkle in her eyes brought to him nothing but a feeling of total acceptance and trust ... even when the resulting pranks could sometimes be a bit outrageous. "Lead on!"

They walked side by side for several kilometers, not saying much as they seemed to instinctively know that conversation would prevent them from sharing the unusual solitude offered by the tunnel. Finally, their stroll came to an abrupt ending at an air lock bulkhead. Closing her faceplate, she indicated to him to do the same. As he finished, she checked her own helmet's faceplate shield, then inspected his. Tapping the side of his helmet, she made a 'yapping' sign with her thumb and fingers, the universal signal for radio communication.

He switched on his suit's transceiver and immediately heard her voice, "... okay ... good ... how are you hearing me?"

Despite the newness of the experience, emergency suit training had been ingrained into him and the procedures seemed quite familiar. "Five by five, ... Skipper!" He completed a careful scan of the suit's readout panel, "All indicators are in the green ... 'cept for one unused bioreadout line, of course ... and ... just a second ..." he reached down and turned off the master power switch, waited for a moment, then activated the secondary electrical supply. Watching the panel carefully, he informed her, "Redundancy is one-hundred percent!" Remember his training, he was rewarded with an appreciative look from her when he finished, "Master power is re-enabled ... suit function is a 'Go'!"

She smiled at him, then checked all the indicators on her own suit. Finishing her task, she approached the airlock interior hatch and glanced at the safety display set into its surface. Seeing that all the lights were green, with a practiced twist of her wrist she opened the inspection valve set in the door's center. As was the proper procedure, she peered through the tube, then placed the thick wear surface of her left glove over the opening. Waiting for a second, she pulled her hand away from the door. "Pressure is at interior level, it's okay to open. Would you like to do the honors?"

"Sure!" He stepped forward and, after unlocking the safety link, pulled up the large lever protruding from the center of the hatch. With very little effort, and somewhat anticlimactic he thought to himself, the door swung open. They both entered the tiny space, and she pulled the door shut behind them. Checking the interior displays, she reminded him to check his suit readouts again.

Without really thinking he asked, "Is that really necessary?"

"Have you ever seen a picture of an ..."

"... explosive decompression accident? Yes, you're absolutely correct. As you've said, I guess I really am a 'Groundhog.'"

She mirrored his smile, but her voice was quite soft, "Well ... I've seen more than pictures. Believe me, Pete, it wouldn't become you!" With that, she opened the door in front of them.

For just a second, even though she went first and motioned for him to follow, he hesitated to step from the airlock. Stretching in front of him was a large chamber, perhaps twenty meters across. It wasn't its size that caused him concern as he'd been in larger enclosures during his stay on the moon. It was the ... he thought briefly to himself ... the 'unfinished' nature of what he saw. A room hewn roughly from lunar lava shield, his first impression was one of a construction site, such as those he had seen on the Big Island whenever the foundation for a new building was being excavated. Tools were scattered about, and the only lighting was that cast by temporary work

lamps tacked along the walls of the chamber. Finally, he stepped from the airlock and carefully walked across the room to where she had strolled.

"What is this place?"

"It was going to be ... is going to be, someday ... the Lunar Sheraton. At least, this is the first level. Eventually, when the economic situation on the Earth improves, it will be excavated down at least twenty or thirty levels. But that's not where we're headed. Look over this way."

She pointed to the side of the room. For the first time he noticed that a ramp was cut into the rock wall of the chamber. "We're going up?"

She was already on her way, "Last one up's a rotten egg! 'course, I've never actually seen one of those ... but it always sounded rather disgusting to me."

He followed her up the ramp, aware that there was no guard rail and that, even in the reduced gravity field, a fall to the cluttered floor of the cavern would most likely result in serious injury or, if his suit integrity were compromised, a swift but very painful death. As he reached the top of the ramp he found her holding onto a metal ladder. Even here, in this deserted and seemingly neglected location, he noticed that there was an inspection placard wired to the ladder's frame, and that she carefully checked the dates and initials marked upon it.

"Okay, much as I'd like to let you go first, doing so would violate safety procedures. I'm not sure why it happens, but you might lose radio contact for a moment or two while I'm climbing. Just watch me and you'll see me flash my helmet lamp when it's your turn. Make sure you clip your friction glide to the safety rail when you start up and ... well, try not to forget to unhook it when you get to the top, okay?"

She blew him a kiss, and watching her lips he suddenly was aware of one of the serious limitations of being in a zero pressure environment. With that, she headed up ladder.

He'd a good eye for distances, and he figured that she'd climbed at least sixty meters before he saw her disappear from sight. Immediately, even as he remembered to attach his safety brake, he saw the blinking of her helmet light at the top of the shaft.

The climb was relatively easy, especially to someone whose muscles had grown up accustomed to a gravity field six times the one that he was resisting. He tried calling her on his radio, but was, as she had anticipated, rewarded with only static in response. The movement up the ladder became relatively monotonous, but he was careful to make each step a carefully calculated affair, knowing that to do otherwise would be to invite a slip. He was sure that the safety brake and cable would do their jobs, but he had no intention of finding out with a first-person experience.

Soon, just as his legs were becoming aware of the amount of work they had been asked to do, he was at the top. Stepping from the ladder, he unhooked his safety cable and backed away from the shaft's opening. As he watched, she bent down and closed a roughly finished cover over the dangerous opening, then secured it with a large metal safety pin.

He was already somewhat disappointedly inspecting the vista around them when he heard her voice on the suit radio, "... this isn't it, silly! This is just the inside of a rather minor impact crater. It filled in with lava several hundred million years ago ... that was mostly what we walked through to get here. Follow me."

He watched as she headed up a line of suit prints towards the edge of the crater. In the pools of illumination cast by their suit's headlamps, which had activated automatically when they stepped into the blackness of the crater, he could see that the trail was quite worn and that it stretched towards a tiny notch cut out of the crater's rim. The hike across the floor of the feature

was only a few hundred meters, and they soon reached the rise that marked the rim. There he found a set of stairs lasered rather crudely from the rock. Climbing behind her, he kept his attention focused on making sure that he didn't step off the finished surface onto the loose material on either side of the stairs, and was very careful to avoid being distracted by the view behind him.

Several steps ahead of him, she reached the top first and called back, "Stop when you get right below me."

Doing so, he checked his footing then turned to glance back at the crater they had crossed. Nothing spectacular, even to his inexperienced eye, he immediately noticed that the view wasn't much different than several he had experienced from view ports in the station. But, then again he thought, he knew her enough to be sure that ...

"Are you ready?"

"A-okay! Where to?"

"When we step over the ridge you're going to find a tiny platform. Except for a hint of Earthlight you'll be in total shadow, and there's no railing so if you keep walking you'll get quite thrill ... your last one, of course, unless you consider making your own personal impact crater an amusing experience. There'll be a metal bench on your left, just sit there, okay?"

"Stop ... left ... bench ... sit. Check."

She stepped up and then disappeared from his sight. He followed her, making sure to keep his eyes on the surface in front of him. As he stepped through the rock walls he immediately became aware of the lip of the rock platform. Turning to his left, he found her standing right next to him with her hands out, obviously ready to stop him if he proceeded any further.

"I'm okay ... thanks. I can see what you mean, the next step's a doosie!"

She pulled an insulation blanket from beneath the bench and spread it out across the metal surface. "Here, we don't want to freeze our rear ends! Sit down."

They sat together. As she snuggled up next to him, a rather complicated process considering the suits they were wearing, he began to survey the scene in front of him. Once again he was disappointed, for he found himself staring out into a rather drab impact crater.

"It's ..."

"Look closely ... tell me what you see."

Looking at the smile on her face he complied with her instructions, all the while knowing what he would really like to be doing.

"Well ... let's see. It's an impact crater. Young ... ah ... very young. Mmmmm ... only a few million years ... or less?"

"Yup ... about six-hundred thousand to be exact. Very good ... go on."

"This is a 'skip' crater. Whatever hit must have come from ... let me see ..." he stood up for a second and looked back up at the rim of the crater behind him, "... must have come from Lunar east at a very low angle, almost a flat hit. That's rather unusual, I think. Since the notch is small and so clearly defined, the object must have been rather tiny ... perhaps a few meters across. But ..." he glanced back down in front of them, "... but it must have been rather heavy, to do such damage. So ..."

"So ..."

"It was an iron meteor ... not ejected Lunar material. And it hit hard ... extremely hard. From the looks of it there must be a layer of Lunar basalt across from us. I'd guess that it

ricocheted off that and ... ah ... and it probably still had enough velocity that the moon's gravitational field couldn't capture it, so it kept right on going into space. How'd I do?"

"Not bad! Actually, you're quite good considering it's not your field. The meteorite didn't quite escape, however. Believe it or not, part of it was found in Antarctica over a hundred years ago. Of course, they didn't know that at the time. A few years ago, quite by chance, I happened to notice that the isotopic 'fingerprint' of the meteorite seemed familiar and, well, after a bit of database comparison I found it to be a perfect match for the traces left in the walls of this crater! By odd coincidence, it was discovered in the same year the first lunar station was established."

He was suddenly curious, "Where is Lunar Base One ... in relationship to where we are right now, that is?"

She pointed out towards their right, "Over that way, about two hundred kilometers."

"Can we ..."

"No ... nobody can. No one ever has ... no one ever will. At least, not for several thousand years. It should be cooled off by then, but not any sooner."

"Oh ..."

She was quiet for a moment, and he felt honored that she included him in her silent respect. Then, after checking her chronometer, "It'll be soon ... in just a few minutes. Cut your master power switch, that'll shut off your suit's panel lights ..." she seemed to sense his concern, "... don't worry, the minimum safety rating for any suit is thirty minutes unpowered, and we won't be near that long."

He did as she directed, then gazed out across the scarred moonscape in front of them. Trusting her totally, he searched carefully for whatever it was he was supposed to look. Finally, he was sure that he'd found it. A tiny discoloration at the base of a cliff at the far edge of the gouge, the purples and yellows he saw were clearly out of place on the Moon. He'd no explanation ... nor did he consider asking for one. Turning to look at her, he whispered into his suit's inactive microphone, "I love you, Helen." He turned to the view in front of him.

The near total darkness made the scene in front of him almost two-dimensional in nature. At first, there was little impression of depth. A line of mountains in the distance stood out faintly, illuminated by the slight amount of light cast by the Earth in its slim crescent phase. The floor of the crater was completely dark, and he suddenly realized that the color he seen was not from reflected light but was, indeed, self-illuminating, such as the phosphorescent glow given off by many minerals when placed under ultraviolet light.

He felt her hands tighten upon his arm, and, as he had learned to do when scuba diving coral reefs at night, he slowly relaxed his eyes and stared slightly to the side of the discoloration in front of him. He became aware that something was moving in the darkness. He wasn't quite sure of his vision, but he reminded himself to put away his preconceived notions and view the scene objectively, accepting the evidence provided by his senses.

Moving ... wandering in circles ... pulsing ... glowing ... growing outward and upward with remarkable speed until ...

... the earphones in suit helmet crackled to life, pure static noise loud enough to cause him some discomfort. In front of him from the dusty surface of the Moon a fountain of light reached towards the stars above. Green ... red ... yellow ... a million intermediate shades of color ... it fluoresced its way to the heavens. It reached out towards him, and he instinctively pulled Helen closer, not noticing that she had already done the same to him.

Then, even as it still seemed to engulf them, it ended. Slowly the crater returned to darkness. As his eyes readjusted to the lack of light, he could see that the colored stains upon the surface were glistening. But, before he could look closer, even they faded and the scene was as it had been when they arrived.

"Whew ..." he remembered that his suit was without electricity, and activated the master power switch, "... that was something! What was ..."

"I'm not going to let you off that easy! Give it a try, okay?"

"Well, it was some sort of geyser, that's for sure. Ummmm ... obviously you knew when it was going to erupt, so it must happen at regular intervals. Some sort of gas out jetting?"

"Excellent! Actually, it's water!"

"Water? But I've never heard ..."

"Nor have very many people ... oh, dear, I hope this doesn't mean that now I'm supposed to shoot you!" She paused for a second, somewhat overcome by her own laughter, "It was discovered by the hotel people when they were first doing the site survey. Quite by accident, I'm believe. They wanted an untouched crater for the facility, so they dug across from the station and burned a shaft up to the surface. Apparently the fourth or fifth person to make the ascent noticed the glow of light when the geyser erupted. By the time he'd walked across the crater to investigate it was all over. But he was smart ... extremely smart."

"How was that?"

"He immediately informed the site crew that the area at the surface was very unstable, and that no one should go back up until fully detailed mapping could be done. Under normal conditions it might not have made much of a difference, but it was only a few days later that ..."

"Wait! Let me give it a shot, okay?"

"Sure," she grinned, "go ahead."

"A few days later was the Great Solar Storm of 2047 to 2049. Lunar exploration ... much less development and exploitation ... came to a total standstill, and has pretty much stagnated since then. This entire project was closed down and has remained as it was since then. Am I close?"

She bristled a bit, "We prefer to use words such as, 'slow and planned construction,' but, yes, you're right. Actually, your description is pretty much the truth. Since the resulting economic crash that took place when the Earth's entire satellite communication industry was destroyed, the Moon has only seen about two or three percent of actual new growth and development. But that'll end soon ... just a few more years, I would think."

He didn't want to disagree with her optimism concerning the time frame for Lunar development, "So how many people actually know? Besides you, that is?"

"I did a bit of very subtle detective work. Only two men from the original site crew survived to get back to Earth, and from what I could find of the original maintenance files I don't think either of them ever worked in that tunnel. I also hacked into their company headquarter's database ... but all I could find there was that all references to the construction foreman's actual hand written field notes were deleted almost as soon as they'd been filed. I've a feeling that now just two or three people in the company's upper-level management know about it."

"Why?"

"Well, call it a hunch. But I've checked their voting records, and they are strong supporters of Lunar redevelopment, especially the rejuvenation of this project. Also, when I looked into their stock portfolios I ..."

"... found that they've invested quite heavily in the Lunar Sheraton, almost as if they know that when it's built it will be a tourist draw."

"True! But even more important, I think that a detailed exploration will find that there's a huge pool of water locked beneath the surface. Really dirty water ... a mixture of all sorts of long-chain organic molecules! In other words ... when we've the technology to dig that deep ... the raw materials from which we will continue the building of Luna. They're already rich, I checked ... but their grandkids are going to do even better."

"You must have brought your friends here?"

"No, I haven't shown anyone ..."

"But what about the trail across the crater?"

"Other than a few traces of the prints of the worker who discovered the geyser, they're all my prints ... and, now, yours, too, Pete."

He looked out into the darkness, but didn't bother to ask the question that formed in his mind. Instead, "My rear's getting a bit cold. I think we've used up our welcome." He stood up, "Are you ready?"

She accepted his arm, "Yes ... and ... thanks, Pete."

"You're welcome ... for what?"

Through the faceplate of her helmet he could see the tears in her eyes and, not being able to wipe them away, in his entire life he had never felt so distant from anyone.

She smiled weakly at him, "Just for being here with me ... for being you ... for letting me love you."

He'd didn't know how to respond, so they walked back to the shaft entrance in silence. His last thought, as he began to descend the ladder, was, looking in the sky above, of how the Earth suddenly seemed so very, very close.

To the left ... that's it ... just a tiny bit more ... ahhhhh ... perfect!"

"It's so bright ... so blue. I've always pictured a lot of green when I thought of the Earth."

Through the faceplate of her suit her soft skin was illuminated solely by light pouring from the objective lens somewhat haphazardly attached to the Observatory's telescope. The Moon's atmosphere being somewhat 'dusty,' serious scientific study was usually done from far more advanced devices parked in various orbits around the Earth. This particular telescope had been originally used primarily for specialized photography of the Earth's corona, and it was only through some serious bartering of his computer skills that he'd been able to bring Helen up into the dome to offer her a peek at his home. Hopefully, he'd be settled in on Earth long before anyone even stood a chance of discovering that a special rush shipment to the Moon of pizeo crystals was, in fact, several boxes of Cuban cigars and a case of Coke-Cola.

He watched the computer monitor at the base of the instrument, "There ... drift it with the fine tune button just a bit more to the left ... that's it ... now, push the tracking lock switch!"

She did so, and, as the computer took over the task of maintaining the scope's alignment, he could sense a change in the vibration transmitted from the floor plate they were standing upon.

"Okay ... now zoom in slowly."

She pushed the appropriate rocker switch, all the while staring intently into the telescope. "It's not the same as a monitor or view screen, is it?"

"No, it's just like ..."

"... my window! You're right."

He checked the computer screen and, without her seeing, punched a minor correction into the terminal keyboard, "You're doing a great job! There ... you can see the island pretty good now."

"Oh ... it's beautiful!"

"We're unbelievably lucky. The atmosphere is extremely clear today. Normally, at this angle, we'd be lucky to get even a recognizable blur."

By now the view screen was filled with an image of the atoll, only tiny bits of surf appearing at the top and bottom of the picture. He reached over and continued to zoom the telescope.

"Now, if we're really lucky and nobody drives a excursion vehicle within several kilometers, you might be able to see my home." He punched a few more numbers into the keyboard, knowing that even the fine tuning knobs were, at this point, completely useless. The image blurred for a second, then settled. In the center of the view was a modest beach house tucked into a glade of palms near the edge of the island, the barest outline of some sort of boat was visible along the side of the building.

"Oh ... it's ... your home is beautiful! I hadn't ... I mean, I imagined it to be some sort of huge palace, like you see in the videos."

"You mean a 'Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous' home," he chuckled, "don't you?"

"I ... I guess so," she turned her face to his and the warmth in her smile far exceeded that of the tropics back on Earth, "but I like yours much better. It's ... well, it's you. Simple. Honest. And ..." she thought of their nights together, "... and very functional, I might add!"

He flushed a bit, but had become accustomed enough to her that he took the complement gracefully.

"... you miss it?"

He looked down at the screen, even as he watched the swiftly turning planet rotated his island home further away from him, and then back into her eyes, which he knew could read him so perfectly, "Yes. I miss it. I wish I could explain to you the feeling of a warm, fresh tropical breeze ... the rush of the surf bounding against the living reef ... how it is to be submerged in the ocean, to become a minuscule part of a great big world that has a life all its own ... how it feels to ..."

He stopped suddenly, aware that he'd been talking to the image that had disappeared from his view. It was silent ... too silent. He looked down at the indicator panel on her suit and saw immediately that she'd turned off her radio. Reaching down, he tilted her head up towards his and, in the reflected glow from the computer screen, he could see the tears pouring from her eyes. Taking her hand, he helped her down from the platform and back towards the observatory's inner airlock. His last thought of the facility, as he closed the portal behind them, was of how cold it was.

Are you sure?"

"I'm afraid so."

"There's no mistake," even though she had broken into the station's computer and double checked the figures herself, "you're absolutely sure?"

He sighed, "Yes, you know as well as I do the predictions are quite reliable. The precursor activity is very definite. This solar cycle is not only going to start up early, it looks to be that the radiation winds are going to be especially bad. They've loaded everything up and the shuttle's going to launch in about twelve hours ... any delay and it might be months before it's clear enough to fly. And you know that ..."

"... you've just about outstayed your welcome. I know. If ... if ..."

"Helen, we knew this was coming. What else can we do?"

"I know," she sniffled for just a second, then smiled at him. "We're grown adults. We met ... and we've shared something wonderful. Now ... now you're going home. In the movies, I'd follow you so that we could live forever on the beach of your island paradise ... but I can't do that, not ever. Or, with a different director, perhaps, you'd stay here, at the last minute some absent minded professor having discovered a miracle formula that would allow you to remain an Earthman while living on the Moon ...

"... but we're not in the movies, are we?" she continued.

"No, we aren't. But this doesn't have to be an ending, Helen, does it?"

"So what is it?"

"It's ... it's ..." his eyes stung from a sudden outpouring of tears, "... it's an ending, I guess. I wish I could come up with better words, Helen, I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize," she snapped, but immediately softened so that he knew her reaction had been merely a reflex, "Pete, you needn't ever apologize to me ... not ever, okay?"

"Okay. So ... what do we do with the few hours I've got left? Maybe we could go up to the concourse and take in a movie? Or we could ..."

She reached over and used the remote to turn down the room's lights, "Silly Groundhog ... silly, silly, silly ..."

I can't go any further than this, that hatch leads into a quarantine zone."

"I know, I remember the boring two weeks I spent in there after I first landed."

"You'll write and ...

"Helen, we've been through this. What we've been to one another these past weeks is over ... there's no sense in holding on to it. But I am your friend, also, and your friend isn't about to let go of you! Okay?"

She sniffled, and immediately a nearby spaceport biohazard inspector made a notation on the memory pad clipped to his arm. "Damned ... after you leave it looks like I'm going to get to spend a week in my room!"

He started to say something, but the green boarding lamps began to flash and the loudspeaker blared out, "Last call ... all aboard who are heading up Earth."

He turned to check which portal was being used for embarkation, and when he looked back she was gone. He searched the room, looking to the overhead access ramps as well as all corners of the space, but his survey was in vain. A green suited attendant, not unawares of the things that took place in the station, came up to him, "Doctor Wilson ... uh ... it's time for you to go home."

He glided down the ramp to the exit portal, stopping when he had half entered the tube leading to the shuttle. Turning back, he took one last look at the station. He called back softly into the room, "Goodbye, Helen ... I love you." The attendant at the hatch didn't seem the least bit surprised, and she waited until he was all the way down the tube and into the shuttle air lock before she sealed the hatch behind him.

She sat in front of her window, the cushions from the couch softening the hardness of the floor. Enveloped tightly in the wool blanket that still carried his smell, she wrapped her arms about herself and held her breath as the Lunar Shuttle began its silent ascent from the Moon's surface. The blue flame from its fusion drive licked across the runway and for a brief moment the craft was obscured from sight by the cloud of dust raised by the powerful exhaust plume. Very

suddenly, it reappeared. Rising swiftly from the crater the spaceship slowly rotated so that it seemed to be heading directly over her. Before she'd had a chance to resume breathing the powerful blue flame of the ship's drive stretched for kilometers across the Lunar sky. Then, like a video screen shut down by some unseen hand, it was gone. As it passed overhead and out of her vision her last impression was that she had never before been aware of just how beautiful it was and, with a shiver, how it would never again seem quite so pretty a sight.

The darkness of the room was beginning to overwhelm her, and she knew that it was time to get up. Rising slowly, she reached out to touch the Earth shining so very brightly in the sky. Fingertips against the glass, she murmured softly, "I love you, Pete, I shall always ..."

"... love you."

She didn't turn, but, instead, reached out to the wall to brace herself. While the spinning of her head seemed to halt after a moment, her vision remained blurred ... she was completely unawares of the tears pouring from her eyes, "Pete ... oh, Pete. How ... I mean ... why ..."

"I love you Helen ... I will always love you. So I'm here."

It was only then that she turned around, remaining where she stood as she gazed across the room to see him standing in the open doorway. "How did you ... what about the ..."

"Well, more than a few people are going to be slightly mad at me! For the first time I can truly appreciate certain Lunar customs ... otherwise I'd be apologizing well into the next century. And, my dear, sweet Helen, I'm much afraid that I'll be without a job for awhile ... at least, until I can figure out what it is I'm to do to earn my keep on the Moon."

"But, Pete, what about your home?" She turned her head to look once more at the brilliant blue orb floating in the sky above the crater. "What about Earth?"

"Earth ..." he glided down the ramp to stand at her side, and, taking her into his arms, "... is just another planet. Helen, I've come home to you."

The children sat spellbound. They had grown up hearing various parts of the story, but it seemed so special to listen to it here ... in this very unique place. Finally, even while the magic of the moment was still in the air, the child with the big glasses whispered, "So ... did they stay in love? Did they live happily ever after?" The teacher glanced up at the statue of Helen 56, Pete Wilson and their tiny daughter, called by all Helen One ... for the year of her birth was both officially and universally considered to be the true beginning of Lunar history ... and then she smiled upon all the children in front of her, her blue eyes aglow with the fondness of memory, "Yes, their love grew even stronger as time went on. And, yes, my mother and father lived happily ever after."

