

Man on the moon

By Stephen Gauer

In the fall of 2002 I flew to New York City to research a novel I was writing. I arrived late in the afternoon and surrendered at once to the heat. On the way to my hotel in the Village, the cab driver tried to tell me about the book he was writing, a definitive history of jazz starting in the 1840s, but I was too hot and too tired to listen. I checked into the hotel, went to my room and took a long cool shower. The phone rang as I was drying my hair. I knew who was calling. I picked up the phone. “Hello, Michael,” my cousin said. “Would you like to dine tonight with an astronaut?”

The sound of Adrian’s voice—polished and precise, the Oxford vowels neatly obliterating any traces of his Winnipeg childhood—always raised my spirits. We were good friends, even though we rarely saw each other more than once or twice a year. Whenever I flew to New York he would call within an hour of my arrival—tipped off by the front desk clerk, an efficient young woman who was easily bribed with tickets to Off-Broadway shows. Adrian had money, knew people, was connected. He lived on the Upper East Side, on Madison Avenue, in a small flat above the art and antiques store he owned.

We made arrangements to meet at eight at a new restaurant that Adrian thought highly of. I should explain that Adrian is actually my second cousin; his grandmother and my grandfather on the Richter side of the family were sister and brother. Adrian is the kind of person who knows something about everything, not just art and music and rare books and literature, which you would expect—given his education and background—but also obscure and exotic areas like 17th century alchemy, Phoenician letterform analysis, mesmerism, medieval farming techniques, and the feasibility of time travel. I find him endlessly fascinating and mysterious, like a painting by Colville or Hopper that challenges you to come up with a story explaining what you see.

Adrian's taste is exquisite. He loves beautiful things. He dresses well. That night in the restaurant he wore a navy blue silk shirt open at the collar, pale gray slacks, and a matching gray jacket with narrow lapels. We shook hands and sat down. Adrian looked at his watch. The astronaut, he said, was always very punctual. "He'll come through the door in exactly fifteen minutes," Adrian said.

That gave us just enough time to catch up. I talked a bit about the book and my research into Orson Welles's theatre career. Adrian started to talk about an article on Gauguin he was writing for the Times, then stopped himself. "Enough about me," he said. "You'll want to know about the astronaut, I'm sure. He was Apollo. The seventh flight, I believe. Landed on the moon in 1973. My second year at Oxford."

I asked Adrian the name of the astronaut. When he told me, I didn't recognize it. I asked my cousin how he knew the astronaut.

"He's looking for a very rare book. I'm helping him. Ah! There he is now."

Adrian smiled and waved. I turned around and saw a man walking towards us. The astronaut was slim and rather slightly built, not at all what I expected. He smiled with such intensity that the smile filled his entire face. He had white hair, short as a skullcap, and a dark tan. He seemed strangely underdressed for the restaurant: running shoes, black jeans, black t-shirt and a cheap windbreaker. He moved towards us quickly and gracefully.

I stood up. Adrian introduced me. The astronaut spoke slowly, with a southern drawl that emphasized each word, as though he were speaking in italics. We shook hands. His touch was light and dry. I could feel tendons and bones under the skin. I inspected his face, looking for wrinkles and crow's-feet, but saw none. His skin, unnaturally smooth, was stretched tightly over his face. He must have been at least seventy but could have easily passed for fifty. His smile, still undiminished, lit up our corner of the restaurant. We sat down.

"I understand from Adrian that you're a novelist," the astronaut said.

“Yes,” I said, expecting the usual questions, such as where do I get my ideas, how much of my work is autobiographical, can I recommend a good agent, would I read an unpublished manuscript.

“Can I ask you why?” he said.

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Why do you write novels?”

I looked at my cousin. Adrian had a mischievous smile on his face. He looked down at the menu for a moment.

“I write novels to tell stories, to work out ideas, to explore emotions, to make sense of the world. I write to make money, to be free. There are a lot of reasons. Besides, I’m good at it. Aren’t I, Adrian?”

“Yes,” Adrian said. “I would have to say you’re very good at it.”

“I don’t mean to be disrespectful,” the astronaut said. “I’m sure your novels are very well written. But I think we have enough literature already. As a species, we have a much more important mission. To push knowledge forward, to learn more, to understand more.”

“You mean science? I’d say we’re in huge mess because of science.”

“I’m not talking about science.”

“What are you talking about, then?”

“I’m talking about God. You do believe in God, don’t you Michael?”

“Not exactly,” I said.

“What does that mean?” he said.

“I think we should order,” my cousin said.

The menu was five pages long. The astronaut glanced at the first page and ordered a large salad and several bottles of white wine. I let Adrian order for me, as I always do in New York. While we waited for the food to arrive, the astronaut began to talk. He asked me if I understood the significance of the moon landings. Before I could answer, he explained why he thought those landings represented a shift in human consciousness,

a shift that very few people, not even McLuhan, fully understood. Going to the moon wasn't about beating the Soviets, inventing Tang, testing early microcomputers, building bigger and better rockets, looking for valuable minerals, or flexing our explorer muscles. No, he said, the trips to the moon were religious journeys, a form of pilgrimage, completely unexpected and unplanned. If we had understood more clearly what we were doing, we would have sent artists and holy men, not engineers and test pilots.

When I stood on the moon, he said, with my boots buried in two inches of lunar soil, and I stared up and out at the earth hanging in black space, no bigger than a thumbnail at arm's length, my model of reality exploded into a million pieces. The dynamite was a very simple idea – that everything in the universe is inter-connected and therefore part of a single meaningful whole. This idea took possession of me, poured through my veins, surrounded my heart, re-arranged my mind. I was terrified, powerless. I was helpless as a baby. I couldn't move. My heart stopped beating, I'm sure. Houston control was talking to me but I couldn't understand what they were saying. I thought, *I'm dying and they're speaking another language now and it doesn't matter.*

I don't know how long this lasted. Seconds. Ten or fifteen, I don't know. Then I exhaled and my heart started again and an enormous sense of physical release swept over me. My knees almost buckled. The thought came into my head, *a human being is a star's way of knowing a star* and I repeated these words over and over again so I wouldn't forget them. *A human being is a star's way of knowing a star.* And then came the thought that we are not the discrete, independent particles that we think we are, because everything is integrated, everything is part of the greater whole. That gave me a feeling of great satisfaction, great peace.

I've been using the word *idea* in trying to explain this to you. The word is completely inadequate, as inadequate as a snapshot of the Grand Canyon. The idea is only a part of it, the part we have words for. The dynamite. The part that fits our model. There's so much more. When I stood on the moon, I felt the meaning of God and the

meaning of God's design and purpose rush not only into my brain and consciousness but right into my body. The only way I can describe this is to say that I felt possessed.

After those seconds, I talked again. Houston listened and talked back. I was making some kind of sense, I suppose, talking numbers, describing rocks, reeling off acronyms and all of that. You might say I was back in human reality, but the way I see it now I was shifting down from a higher model of reality to a lower model of reality. Like moving from colour to black and white. From four dimensions down to one. Leaving a place where I could see the forest to be back in a place where I could only inspect the trees. Well, Michael, I may have been counting rocks but I was thinking about God.

I told you about a feeling of satisfaction and peace. I can still feel this. All I need is open space, a dark night and a view of the sky. I live on a thousand acres in Texas. I have a special place in the exact geographic center of this property. There's a small hut where I keep an old spacesuit and a sleeping bag. When the nights are dark enough, when the sky is moon-black, and that's the blackest black I've ever seen, then I put on the spacesuit, and I stand and stare at the sky. I feel the same satisfaction and the same peace that I felt on the moon.

The book I am searching for contains the original Aramaic text of a missing book of the New Testament. This book is a series of first-person narratives and sermons by Christ. The original scrolls are lost, but three printed versions, one in Aramaic text, two in Latin, were catalogued and then suppressed by the Vatican during the reign of Innocent IV in the 13th century. They were never destroyed. Isaac Newton mentions them in the sixth draft of his *Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms Amended*, a history of the world that he was working on when he died. Do you know anything about Newton? He was a difficult, quarrelsome man. He didn't believe in the Trinity. He thought that Christ, while a very wise man, was an intermediary between man and God, not a God himself.

I think Newton was right. Christ was a man who knew how to talk to God. That's why I was so excited by Adrian's phone call last week telling me he may have located the

Aramaic text. It may be in England in the library of a rock musician's manor in the Cotswolds.

The astronaut stopped talking. There was a long silence. I realized that the table was littered with empty wine bottles, but my head felt clear and buoyant. One of the waiters, a pale young man with angry hair, stood in the corner, glaring at us.

"Do you understand the significance of this book?" the astronaut said.

"Yes," I said. "A missing book of the Bible. That's very exciting."

He shook his head at me. "Adrian, would you please explain to your cousin the significance of this book?"

Adrian began to smile his mischievous smile, then stopped. He took a final swirl of wine into his mouth and swallowed. He looked me straight in the eye with a seriousness I had never seen before. "According to Newton," he said, "the final section of this text will tell us how to do something very special. Something very, very special."

"For God's sake, Adrian," I said. "Would you please just spit it out?"

"The last section of this book," he said, "contains instructions on how to talk to God."

There was a long silence again. I didn't know what to think. I didn't believe in the kind of God who would welcome a chat with the six billion human beings on the planet. And yet everything the astronaut had said seemed real and true. But if his stories were true, why I had never heard of the missing book before? How could you keep something like that secret for two thousand years? The more I thought about it, the more unlikely it seemed.

Outside the restaurant, we said goodbye to the astronaut and started to walk in the direction of my hotel. At the end of the block, I turned around, expecting to see him still standing there waiting for a cab but the sidewalk was empty. He must have slipped away in the opposite direction, I decided.

Adrian said goodnight outside my hotel. I invited him in for a nightcap, but he said no, he had an early morning appointment with a European customer looking for a 1780s Shaker table. And then he was off to London to look into the Jesus book.

“What did you think of my astronaut?” he said.

I said I wasn’t sure.

“I think he’s marvelous. Wise and kind. Generous to a fault, if that’s possible.

Very well spoken, of course. And he pays extremely well.”

Adrian smiled his smile again. We said goodnight. As I watched him walk away I had a strange feeling, not déjà vu, but rather the opposite, the feeling that I was seeing something I’d never seen before and would never see again. The glow cast by his pale gray jacket and pants was slowly extinguished by the Manhattan night.

As it turned out, I didn’t see Adrian again for many months. His trip to England took longer than he planned, and I had to get back to Vancouver. The day after I got home, I went to the library and looked up the Apollo astronauts who had been to the moon. Sure enough, Adrian’s astronaut was there, thirty years younger, with exactly the same eyes, the same face, the same close-cropped hair. Instead of the huge smile on his face that I’d seen in the restaurant, he wore the posed, more complicated expression that all the astronauts had, equal parts arrogance and optimism.

I worked hard on my novel all through fall and winter and well into spring. One day in May, I received an email from Adrian, saying that he would be stopping off in Vancouver the next week, en route to Japan for business. Could we get together for dinner? Of course, I replied.

Adrian arrived at the door fifteen minutes early, cradling a bottle of expensive French vodka in his arms. I took the bottle and he surprised me with a hug. When he let go, I asked him if he was alright. “I don’t know,” he said. “I suppose I am. It’s been extraordinary. The entire experience.”

“You’re talking about the astronaut?”

“Of course.”

I poured some vodka into juice glasses and we sat in the living room.

“Start at the beginning,” I said. “And please don’t leave anything out.”

I left for London, Adrian said, the day after our dinner with the astronaut. From London I took a train to Paxton, a small village in the Cotswolds about 40 miles north of Oxford, where the rock musician had a country house. The house was one of those squat gray monstrosities from the late 1700s, homely as a brick, set far back from the road at the end of an enormous stone driveway. I parked my rental car near the house and knocked on the door. An elderly man dressed in jeans and a corduroy shirt answered the door and showed me to an enormous room in the basement of the house. The rare book agent, a man named Dagleitch, stood in the centre of this room surrounded by packing crates filled with books. The rock musician, it seems, had only unpacked two of the twenty crates before meeting an unfortunate death at the hands of an elderly neighbour who ran him over one foggy morning in a 1954 Morris Minor not far from the house.

The rock star was a frequent customer of Dagleitch’s, fond of ordering entire lots of old books from estate sales. The books would be delivered to the man’s house, uncrated in the basement, and then lovingly appraised, one at time, over brandy in the man’s library on the main floor of the house. The Jesus text, as Dagleitch called it, had shown up in the latest batch, from an estate sale of one James Fetherington Quinton, a retired Army colonel and amateur astronomer who owned a city house in Covent Gardens and a modest cottage/observatory just five miles from the rock star’s house. Dagleitch knew very little about Quinton but clearly the man had had an obsessive interest in rare books; two of the four floors of his London house were filled floor to ceiling with books dating as far back as the 1520s. At his death, they were crated, divided into three lots and sold at auction.

I listened patiently to Dagleitch’s story but after fifteen minutes ran out of patience and interrupted him to ask where the Jesus book was. He led me upstairs to the library. It was a charming room, done up in standard Victorian style. I must have seen

dozens of libraries like this one while I was working for Sotheby's. Pretty much same old, same old, but charming nonetheless: hardwood floors, rich Oriental carpets, mammoth mahogany bookcases, an early period Chippendale desk and matching chair, two red leather chesterfields, three plush early Victorian armchairs in one corner of the room, and above the fireplace, a splendid antique Roman mosaic showing a lion attacking a leopard. A single tall window was framed by full-length royal blue curtains with white sash trim.

Papers, books and magazines littered the desk. Dagleitch walked straight over to it, moved a couple of magazines, and picked up a book. He gave me the book, and I held it carefully in my hands. Not because it was fragile, not even because it was worth well into six figures, but because it meant so much to my astronaut friend. I must tell you I was very excited. It was a lovely book, quarter folio size, that's about five inches by seven, bound in calfskin and tooled in gold. I gently turned some of the pages and stared at the strange characters, Aramaic presumably, which I couldn't read. Of course at that moment I wanted to! The characters looked like tiny, lopsided buildings marching across the page, blunt and heavy as the weight of history itself. There was a page of Latin at the front of the book. When I examined the binding carefully, I could see that this page had been inserted sometime after the book had been originally bound. I looked at the paper carefully. It was whiter and smoother than the other pages; the bottom edge was cut straighter. Dagleitch was watching me very carefully. He asked me if I read Latin. I said a little, which wasn't a complete lie. He asked me if I could read the page and I shook my head. Are you sure you want this book, he asked me. There's a warning here, you know. I said, yes, I want the book, subject to authentication.

The negotiations lasted two days. I wrote a cheque for twenty-five percent of the agreed price and handed it to him. I covered the book in a moisture-proof wrapper and placed it in my briefcase. I drove to Oxford, where I met an old friend, Niall, who was at Balliol College with me back in the 1970s. Niall is a fine classics scholar with a passion for the cello. He greeted me warmly and put a Bach CD into the sound system. He turned the pages of the book with glee, bobbing his head in time to the music and uttering many

small noises of astonishment. Remarkable, he kept saying, absolutely remarkable. What does it say, I asked. For God's sake, what does it say?

Well, for one thing, Niall said, the front page, which as you correctly surmised was added sometime after the book was initially bound, is a clear warning from a Vatican bishop that whoever reads the full text of this book faces the "full displeasure of God". Did you read this page, Adrian? I looked at my friend and laughed and reminded him that Latin had always been my weakest subject. Aside from the opening lines of a couple of love poems by Catullus, I could barely remember a word. Niall went through the first half of the inserted page, translating for me. The warning was very clear. Whoever read and then acted on the contents of this book would not only offend God, but suffer the full consequences of that offense.

Niall asked me to describe the contents of the book. It contains instructions on how to talk to God, I said.

Really, he said. Wouldn't we all love to do that?

I asked him to translate the first few lines of Aramaic. Dear God, I can't do that, he said. I can speak Aramaic, enough to say hello, how are you, may I please have a cup of coffee, but I couldn't for the life of me translate the classical written text. That would be like asking you to play the minuet from Bach's first cello suite based on your ability to hum the first four bars. Quite hopeless. Completely hopeless!

So I've wasted my time, I said.

No, not at all. This text is clearly written in classical Aramaic, I can vouch for that. I know what it looks like, I just can't read it. One can master only so many dead languages. The brain, sad to say, does falter in middle age. Or should I say, "mid life"? I believe that's the new expression. Where was I? Oh yes. Judging from the condition of the binding, the paper, that inserted page in Latin, and the smell of the thing. He placed the book directly under his nose and took a long and meticulous sniff of its dull red leather jacket. I would say mid-16th century, he said, give or take a quarter century either way.

So it is authentic, I said.

Of course it's authentic, dear Adrian. Would I be sitting here jabbering on like this if it were a fake?

Michael, believe me, at that moment my heart soared. I knew the book was real. I got up rather suddenly and told Niall that it was time for me to leave.

But you must stay, he said. We will find a translator for you. I'm sure Smithson over at Christ Church could round up an Aramaic expert in no time at all. Stay for dinner. We'll make a night of it, shall we?

I shook my head. I wrapped the book up again and placed it carefully in my briefcase. I said goodbye rather quickly, offending Niall, perhaps, but I was impatient to get back to Paxton and pay the remaining balance to Dagleitch, complete the deal and go home. Niall had never been wrong in his book judgments, not once in twenty seven years, and as I headed north, out of Oxford, back into the tidy English countryside I felt again that surge of excitement and joy that accompanies the discovery of something, something very old or valuable or beautiful, or all three at once. People pay me to find things and I'm very good at it. It doesn't matter that there are no new places on the earth to explore, I don't give a damn about that, because there are always things to find, to pry out of hiding places, to pull from a crate in a rich man's basement, or uncover in a back room of an auction hall. And how interesting the past is! How wonderfully physical and real! Isn't it marvelous that by holding these old objects in our hands, touching them and smelling them, we can travel back ourselves? It's a kind of time travel, don't you think?

I returned to Paxton and paid the balance to Dagleitch. It was a lot of money, the most I'd ever negotiated on behalf of a client. But the astronaut was completely trustworthy, always paid me in advance, never bounced a cheque, never missed an appointment. It was almost a little spooky how predictable and conscientious the man was, because most of my customers ebb and flow like a tide. But no, the astronaut was a first-class customer all the way.

We met again in New York, a day after I returned from London with the book. When he's in town, he stays at the Standling, a rather shabby hotel in midtown. I went to his room. It was a Tuesday, mid-morning, around ten. When he opened the door, I could smell incense. I loathe that sickly sweet smell, don't you, Michael? His pupils were wider than the Atlantic. He was quite bad about that, quite reckless with the risks. The room was very dark. The bed was unmade. Stacks of books were lined up on both sides of the bed. We sat at a small table in the corner. He offered me tea and we sat silently for a few minutes drinking it. Finally he said, please, may I have my book. I took it out of the briefcase and placed it carefully on the table in front of him. He was not smiling. He picked the book up, stroked the leather jacket slowly and thoughtfully, and then opened the book and began to examine the pages.

You haven't read it, have you?

Of course not, I said. My expert in Oxford performed the authentication. This is the 1548 printing that you wanted.

Did your expert read it?

Only enough to authenticate, I said. He's fluent in oral Aramaic, not the classical script.

Excellent, he said.

He put the book back into the wrapper, put this bundle into a large plastic envelope, closed the flap, and then put the envelope into his backpack.

Can *you* read it, I asked.

He smiled at me. Then he stood up as though to dismiss me. I have to pack, he said.

But we should have lunch, I said. You must stay for lunch. There are still a few details to work out. Our account. There will still be some money left in the account, even after I deduct expenses.

Take it, he said. Take all of it.

Stay for lunch. Please.

No.

And that was the last time I saw him. He checked out that afternoon. October 24. I heard nothing from him. Then six weeks ago there was a small story in the Times about his disappearance. He was in Israel, doing language classes at the university. He just disappeared, right out of the blue. I was worried, of course. I had the number for his ex-wife in Washington. I called her and explained who I was and how I knew her ex-husband. She had a chilly, precise voice; she sounded like an academic who'd spent too many years lecturing bored undergraduates. She had not talked to him before he left for Israel. She had no idea why he was there. I knew but I didn't tell her. As far as she knew, their son David was the only family member who knew he was going. David was a lawyer for the EPA in Washington. He'd flown to Tel Aviv, against her wishes, to look for his father. What was the point? The astronaut was a lost man, she said, as remote and distant as the moon. Why look for someone who didn't want to be found? She asked me again to identify myself and describe the work I'd done for the astronaut. I did this, and she finally gave me the number of a hotel in Tel Aviv.

It took me three days to reach the son, but I persevered. Yes, he knew who I was; his father had mentioned my name several times in the last year. I told him I was very good at finding things. He said his father had still not surfaced and the Israeli police were not very helpful and he was about to give up and come home. I said I felt some responsibility for his father's disappearance. David argued with me but I was very determined. He agreed to wait for me. We met two days later in the lobby of the hotel. He was a slim, rather nervous man with deep circles under his eyes and fluttery hands that wouldn't stay still. Clearly, he hadn't slept properly in weeks. I asked him if he was alright.

No, he said, almost shouting. I am not alright. You shouldn't have come.

Why not, I said.

I found my father.

David said that when he arrived in Tel Aviv, he paid his father's hotel bill and then moved into his room. He searched it thoroughly, from top to bottom and back again, looking for some kind of clue, some hint, some receipt or scrap of paper, something, anything that might lead him to his father. My father, he said, left a suitcase containing a couple of shirts, a pair of city shoes, underwear and socks. There were two guide books on the bedside table. I talked to everyone in the hotel but no one knew anything about him. He had kept a regular routine, leaving his room every morning around eight and returning around six, then went out again in the evening, usually until midnight. No one saw him the day he disappeared.

I checked the car rental agencies, the tourist bureau, the tour operators. Why would my father play tourist? Dad had been to Israel at least once before, so I assumed he knew his way around, and I knew he wasn't foolhardy or careless, that he wouldn't stray into areas where he might attract attention or trouble. The police were useless. They knew nothing. He was not listed in any hospital admittance reports. As far as the police knew he had not been injured, kidnapped or assassinated. If something comes up, we will let you know, they told me. They looked at me with disbelieving eyes, as though I'd made it all up.

One day I lost my temper and began to shout at them, to shout that they weren't taking me seriously, that my father was an American citizen lost in Israeli jurisdiction and they should be concerned and if they weren't concerned I was prepared to go to the ambassador and raise hell. A desk sergeant smirked and then told me to lower my voice. I said fuck you under my breath and walked out of the police station. I was furious with them, and furious with myself. What if he was half dead and stranded in the desert? What if he'd been beaten and robbed and left to die in a gutter somewhere? I was ready to give up. Then you called. You pissed me off so much I threw the phone on the floor. I picked it up and began phoning again, all the car rental agencies, just in case.

The fifteenth agency that I called said that yes, my father had rented a car and not yet returned it. I asked to speak to the employee who had handled this customer. A

young man came on the line. He said he remembered my father because he'd asked about St Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai Peninsula. The young man told him that advance reservations were required if he planned to stay overnight at the monastery.

I checked the map of Israel and found the monastery. It was right beside Mount Sinai. It took me two days to get there. Mount Sinai looked just like the photos. Jagged. Like teeth. The monks were less than friendly. Why hadn't I called before coming? There was a procedure for tourists to follow and I had not followed it. They were full; they would allow me to sleep in my car, but only for the one night. And they knew nothing about a missing American man.

I wandered around the parking lot below the monastery looking for dad's rental car. I found it, covered in dust. I cleared a circle of window with the sleeve of my arm and looked inside but I couldn't see anything, only beige upholstery and black trim. Where was my father?

It was too late to start searching. I spent a cold night in the car, woke at dawn, walked up the steep staircase to the monastery, and then behind the monastery found another set of steps that led to the top of the mountain. It took me hours to reach the top; I stopped every fifteen minutes to catch my breath, knocked out by the altitude, cursing the feeble condition of my heart and lungs.

It was almost noon by the time I reached the top. I could see ocean off to the south and to the south-east, but I didn't have a clue which ocean it was. I stumbled from rock to rock as the heat grew worse and the sun bore down on me. The summit was filled with crevices and gullies, strange rock formations that made it difficult to find my way. I'd used up all my drinking water and was ready to give up this fruitless, hopeless search, when I saw something on the ground ahead of me, behind a heap of rocks. I wasn't sure what it was. A hand? A human hand?

I moved too quickly, almost tripping and falling over my own feet. As I got close to the heap of rocks, I saw that there was a hand, and then I could see that the hand was attached to a body and the body was my father's. He was on his back, face to the sky,

eyes open. For a moment, I thought he might still be alive but as soon as I touched the hand I knew he was dead. He clasped a book in the other hand. He looked very calm, very peaceful, except for two angry red marks on his forehead. As I moved closer, I could see that there was something wrong with his eyes. I wanted to close the eyelids quickly, to hide the eyes, but some stronger force made me bring my face very close to my father's face, and look straight into the eyes and see that where there had once been pupils there were now only milky disks, blank and useless. I stared at the eyes for what seemed like a long time and then with a single movement of my hand closed them.

Adrian had stopped talking. Our glasses were empty. I asked him if he wanted another drink. He looked out towards the inlet, where the light of a late spring evening had drained the warmth from the water and left it a bruised, blackish blue.

"The funeral is next week," Adrian said.

"Are you going?" I asked gently.

"Of course. How can I not?"

"Do you think he ... do you think he really talked to God?"

"I don't know. I hope so. I hope God had something intelligent to say to him."

We were silent for a moment, each imagining, I suppose, the unimaginable.

"I hope you don't blame yourself," I said at last. "He would have found the book eventually. Or if not that book, then another book. Don't you think?"

"I don't know. I really don't know. I now loathe and despise the book. I wish I had never found it. I wish the rock star had not died. I wish Mr. James Fetherington Quinton had not died. I especially wish my good friend the astronaut had not died."

"Yes," I said, because I wasn't sure what else to say.

"The damned book. The son was going to give it to the Library of Congress, you know."

"That's a good idea," I said. "What do you mean, 'was'?"

"That's the thing," Adrian said.

“What do you mean?”

“He no longer has the book.”

“Why not?”

“It seems it’s been stolen.”

I got up and poured us another drink.

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