

Pawtucket, Rhode Island

July 1969

"So, they're really on a spaceship? Like Buck Rogers? And they're about to land their spaceship on the moon?" asks young Colin McLean.

His father, Andrew, wrinkles his forehead and chuckles lightly as he replies, "Yes, son, this image is coming back to Earth from the moon."

1973 has been especially memorable for the twelve-year-old. His father had been promoted, and they'd moved from Texas to Louisiana. The summer had been full of swimming classes, church camp, and playing baseball. His little league team even won their playoff game, and he'd hit a home run. Now he, his mother and father were on vacation, visiting his mother's parents in Rhode Island. On this day, July 16th, he sits, fidgeting on the bare linoleum floor in front of a 21-inch RCA color console television, focusing all his energy on understanding the scratchy, static-filled picture. To him, it seems to be occasionally filled with unidentified ghostly images.

"Seriously? That is really from the Apollo mission, dad? What if the moon is too soft? What if they sink like they're in quicksand? What if they find aliens!!!" he exclaims in almost spastically enthusiastic rapid-fire succession.

"Slow down, son," responds his dad with a laugh. He hopes the yelling doesn't upset his wife's mother, who always says that kids make too much noise for her liking. Then, pointing towards the screen, he says, "This picture is live from the lunar lander right now." Then, hoping to bring the event closer to home, he continues, "You know, son, the man who will step onto the moon's surface first, went to the same school as your friend Jason's father did. Both of them attended Purdue University in the state of Indiana. And, to answer your other question,

NASA has already landed unmanned machines on the moon safely, so it is a fact that the moon isn't made of quicksand."

"Okay," Colin says, standing, the excitement too much for him to remain seated. He thinks that perhaps he's just hit on the perfect combination to become the cool kid in class when school resumes in September. Show and tell what you did over summer break might be awesome if he can establish a link between him and the final moon landing. But, he also realizes a bit of important information has been left out of his father's response. "Hey! You didn't say anything about the aliens that might be living on the moon! Why did you avoid answering my question? Are there aliens on the moon, and you don't want to tell me? Is that why we got transferred to Louisiana? Are you working in some secret lab at the air force base? That'd be so cool!"

Andrew decides to play along with his son for a moment.

"Well, Colin, first, you know I can't talk about my work, it's very secret. . ."

Colin interrupts, "Come on, dad! You don't work at a lab. You're a US Marshal! Unless you are running their security! Is that what you're doing?"

"Son, if I were, I'd probably never be able to tell you, or your mother, or our friends."

Colin considers this for a moment, then nods and says, "Your secret is safe with me, dad. They'd have to torture me first."

With a smirk, Andrew responds, "Hopefully, it never comes to that, Colin."

Everyone gathered around the television has grown silent, entranced by the coverage. The potential horrors of the moon mission sweeping through the imaginations of each person, are muted by the comforting reporting by veteran news anchors Aric Sevareid and Walter Cronkite.

"I am trying, oh boy, to accept that the lofty ambition of putting a man, a human man, on the moon is about to come true. I cannot believe it has come true," mutters an amazed Cronkite to the world.

Colin turns his attention back to the television, enthralled. Then, since he'd just graduated from cub scout to boy scout, he thinks of something and blurts out his question, "Dad! Do you think all the astronauts were all Eagle scouts?"

His father laughs, "I bet they were, son."

"Do you think that, in the future, everyone will live in space? I would love to live in space one day. Wouldn't you?" Without pausing, he asks with even greater urgency, "Do you want to live in space someday, dad?"

"Well, son, I'm not sure if we'll live in space in my lifetime."

Colin frowns, unsure what to make of his dad's use of the phrase, 'in my lifetime.' Then, quietly considering what his dad meant, he turns his attention to the television, fantastic images running through his imagination of powerful human heroes fighting evil aliens, probably riding giant robot ants, on the moon.

They all grow silent once more, their attention focused on the television. All see that the lunar lander has started kicking up dust as its descent brings it nearer and nearer touchdown. Obscured by the dust, they miss the camera shot of one leg settling onto the lunar surface. As the lander's engine cuts off, they all hear the Mission Commander tell the universe, "Houston, Lunar Base One here, the Eagle has landed."

Everyone erupts into cheers, even grandma, who appears to be actually shedding a tear of joy. Colin and his dad are jumping up and down, yelling like idiots about the moon landing. Exhausted, they all settle down soon and begin listening to that description of what the astronauts will be doing over the next few days.

Colin is reminded that this isn't a vacation for these men. It is their job.

"Wow, how far away are they, dad?" he inquires.

"More than 230,000 miles, son." He sees his son trying to find a way to equate that to a number he can understand, so he continues with, "That's like trying to fly around the earth without stopping ten times."

"That seems like a lot!" Colin says with wonder.

"Yes, it is, son. And consider this, while the lunar lander doesn't have a car engine like cars do, it does have an engine with lots of moving parts. So if I have engine trouble on the road, what do I do?"

Colin considers his father's question for a few moments.

"You get out and try to fix it. If you can't, you get on the CB radio and ask a trucker to pick you up so you can go get the part fixed or buy a new one.

"You are right. I get out and try to fix it. If I can't fix it, we might have the car towed to a dealership or a garage, where it can be fixed and get back on the road. The moon lander has two engines, one they used to land on the moon, and another one they'll use to leave the moon when they are finished with their work there. Suppose a mechanical failure happens to the engine they'll use to escape the moon and rendezvous with their colleague orbiting the moon above them. In that case, they will not be able to get back home."

"They'd be stuck on the moon?" Colin mutters, understanding the finality of what that might mean if it were to occur. "They'd die there."

Andrew nods, "Yes, they would." Then, seeing the look of displeasure on his wife's face at the mention of the astronauts dying on the moon, he smiles and redirects Colin's interest. "But your friend's father says they're going to be fine. I am sure the government has spared no expense, used the best materials possible, and tested every possibility for failure. What really matters is that we beat the Russians to the moon, right?"

"Right!" Colin says with enthusiasm. "Gotta beat the Ruskies!" Then, Colin, goes silent for a moment. He usually spends some of his free time in the summer participating in a 'how many books can you read in a summer' challenge at a local library. Since science fiction is the only topic he really enjoys reading, a thought pops into his mind about the Russians getting to the moon first.

"But dad, what if someone or something already beat all of us to the moon?"