

Once in a Blue Moon

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Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall, but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Isaiah 40:30-31

Chapter One

*Here lies Obit writer Bryn
She should have stayed home
Instead of jumping in.*

It's the story of my life. I often jump before looking, much less thinking. But there it is. My life is an obituary-in-the-making. Scary, huh? It keeps things in perspective. But it's not just me. I see others as potential obits, too. Professional hazard, I suppose. Friends text or email pictures of funny or unusual tombstones. One sent me this yesterday:

*The children of Israel wanted bread,
And the Lord sent them manna,
Old clerk Wallace wanted a wife,
And the devil sent him Anna.*

On Halloween, to give everyone in the office a laugh, I dress up as the Grim Reaper. Every artist's rendering I've ever encountered of the bleak goon in dark, heavy cloak resembles a tall, skinny scarecrow. That's pretty much me in a nutshell. Minus the scythe.

Today, on assignment, dressed in fairly normal clothes (for Austin's relaxed attitude, but not necessarily Houston's uptightness) of jeans, cowboy boots, and T-shirt (which reads: *Dead Men Tell No Lies, but their family will!*), I stand in a long, snaking line of which I can just now see the front, waiting my turn (not necessarily patiently). Of

course, my brain wanders as it is prone to do when it doesn't have anything occupying it, my thoughts leaning toward the morose.

Most folks I've talked to this weekend celebrating the 40th anniversary at NASA have happy memories of the Apollo 11 landing on the moon. Astronauts, celebrities, and the common folk alike who observe the stars above and dream of galaxies light years away have gathered at the NASA facilities. Their spirits are as buoyed as the gazillion red-white-and-blue balloons floating around the building, some bound together to form puffy rockets and planetary orbs.

Visitors who were alive on July 20, 1969 when Neil Armstrong stepped on the gray surface of the moon want to share their memories of *the* event of the twentieth century. It's a universal hobby this looking up at the moon, gazing into the depths of space and wondering if life on earth is all there is. Or if there is more, heavenward or in the opposite direction, if there are men from Mars, women from Venus or from some other galaxy. The stars spark our imaginations. The longer we gaze, the smaller and more insignificant we feel, and a craving to know there is something beyond us grows. "One small step for man ..."

... a giant leap into the black hole of my past. I was just a nine-year-old kid busy with throwing a softball into my glove rather than listening to Walter Cronkite narrate the historic occasion, the night my mother stepped into the hereafter ... a murkiness of darkness or light, whatever your beliefs might be. Mine bend toward a gray mist clouding over my heart, leaving me most often in the dark. The gravity of my mother's death pulls me down into a mire of sticky emotions I usually avoid. Without even the spin of the simulator I'm waiting to ride, I suddenly feel my world reel and my stomach tilt.

To distract my wayward thoughts, I make up another appropriate obit:

Brynda Seymour

Took a turn in Zero gravity

She ain't no more.

“Hey!” The stranger next to me who has been texting with his cell phone for the past thirty minutes leans toward me “What’s that?” He nods toward an orange pail outside the door we’ve anticipated entering for over an hour.

“In case we barf.”

“What?” His lips thin, and he loosens his narrow, gray tie. He seems the type to choose cremation rather than burial, maybe his ashes sprinkled over some cosmopolitan area on a cloudy day. “Have you seen anyone get sick?”

“Hard to tell. After the ride, victims”--I smile and edit myself-- “*passengers* exit a different door.”

At that moment, the metal door slides sideways. I crane my neck to see around the few guts-or-glory fools waiting ahead of me. Through the doorway, ten slightly dazed, pale tourists walk (or wobble) out of the simulator, their eyes glazed, their mouths pulled back in a grimace as if they’re still experiencing the full impact of the g-forces. I hold back a laugh. One young woman stutters, grabs a wall and is shown a wheelchair in which she flutters like a collapsed parachute into the sling seat.

“Not too late to change our mind,” the man shuffling along ahead of me says. He’s slightly older than I am, maybe full into his fifties from the looks of his gray head. He’s dressed in shorts and loafers. I imagine him picking out a plain, no-frills casket for his future use.

“Oh, don’t worry. This will be fun,” I say. “Can’t be worse than HALO diving.”

The older man turns, raises his eyebrows, which resemble tufts of gray clouds, above his blue eyes. “What’s that?”

“High altitude, low opening,” the suited guy behind me answers. Definitely top-of-the-line casket required here—piped-in music preferred. He looks me up and down, not checking me out for a pickup, but sizing me up and assessing whether or not he believes me capable of the edgy sky-diving. “You’ve HALO skydived?” Doubt permeates his whiny voice. “You military or something?”

“You mean, crazy? Nah, just a reporter.” As if that explains my penchant for the extreme. I’d tell him I’m an obit writer but that might make those in line even more nervous, like I’m scoping out new material.

“Me, too. *Houston Chronicle*.” The lofty tone of his voice sets my teeth on edge. Even though Austin is the state’s capital, the larger metropolitan city reporters tend to look down their snooping noses at our smaller paper.

“*Austin Statesman*.” I give a tight smile and skim the warning signs posted outside the simulator room. If you’re pregnant ... If you have back trouble ... If you have heart problems ... If you have second thoughts ... Stay out. “You ever experience g-forces?”

“Once.” He’s young and fit, close to my daughter’s age, with a tanned face and easygoing smile. “Puked my guts up.”

“Don’t sit next to me then.” As I move toward the opening door, my step garners a bounce. The green light above flashes. All clear. It’s a go-for-launch.

First, a brief introduction to astronaut training by a grim teenager who looks Vulcan minus the pointy ears, then he tells how Buzz Aldrin puked during training. Next, we're given one last chance to abort this mission. A thin, waif of a woman gives an *adios* and is escorted out of the lockdown area.

"Are you ready then?" Star Trek Wannabe eyes our small group of wary space travelers.

"Let 'er rip!" someone behind me hollers. He, I speculate, will be the first to hurl.

"Okay," Spock's cousin says, "let's blast off."

I roll my eyes and follow the master of ceremonies to my personal docking station. I check the plastic cushioned seat for any unidentified stains or particles. All clear. I climb in, pull down the chest guard, and strap the lap belt in place. "What happens," I ask one of the young workers checking for secured seatbelts, "if we get sick during the simulation?"

"Bags are provided in the pouch in front." She sounds as if she's repeated the same phrase a thousand times today.

"No extra charge?"

She gives me a sideways glance, confusion darkening her brown eyes and puckering her forehead.

The older man behind me chuckles.

"Have many been used today?" I ask.

The young woman points to an overflowing trash can. A picture is definitely worth a thousand words.

Sitting quietly for one minute ... two, I check my watch, tap my fingers against the metal handles latched to a fake electronic board providing lights and buttons for my enjoyment. The hatch descends over my head and clicks securely in place. The simulator jerks forward. A bumpy vibration begins in my backside and rattles up my spine. I draw in slow, regulated breaths, releasing the carbon dioxide in equal puffs. I lean my head back against the headrest and close my eyes. My cheeks begin to tremble and shake of their own accord as they pull back toward my ears in a smile that lacks humor or joy. Pressure against my chest builds like a hand bearing down on my heart.

My mind drifts to those first astronauts. What fears did they face during training, during actual liftoff? Did they want to weep? Shout? Say, 'Look, Mom, I'm flying to the moon!'

And right then, my pulse starts racing as if passing the speed of light. It has nothing to do with the simulator or the vortex it's creating around me. My eyes open. I look around. The enclosed space seems smaller. Frantic, I hold the metal handrails. My breath comes out harsh, fast--then stops. It's as if I've stepped off the Eagle right along with Neil Armstrong onto the lifeless moon, but I'm without my astronaut space suit and air pack so can't draw even a single breath.

I wasn't watching the television at the moment he set that spongy shoe on the rocky, dull surface, but at my mother. I watched her chest rise and fall with each ragged breath. Soon my world began to spin out of control, out of orbit...and it's never stopped since.

Before the contents of my stomach start to rise, the simulator jerks to a stop. I sit there a moment, gather my thoughts back into myself, contain them in a tiny capsule, do

a mental check of my body parts—arms, legs, stomach, all still with me even though I feel loose and out of touch. Nothing lags behind, not even the contrails of memories.

When the hatch opens, I hop out quickly, ready to escape my past, and give a forced laugh as my boots clunk on the linoleum floor. A retching sound comes from the simulator next to mine. Discreetly, I glance away from the young man in the suit, but can't help looking around me at the other faces, which seem drawn and shaded like the green men of a 1960s sci-fi film. I give a thumbs-up sign to the older man who stood beside me for so long and who now seems steady on his feet. The young reporter crawls out of the simulator, hangs onto the edge, and searches through his pockets. For his barf bag? But he pulls out his cell phone and texts a message. Probably: *Survived*. It sounds more optimistic than his shaky reality.

“Where've you been, Bryn?” Marty Peters, my cameraman, rushes up to me.

“Taking a spin.” I thumb back toward the simulator.

He grabs my arm and tugs me out of the simulator room and into a crowded hallway. His camera bag bangs against my shoulder. He wears his Nikon around his neck with a long lens attachment. We seem to be swimming upstream. Marty's long blond ponytail swings from side to side across his back.

I have an urge to grab the ponytail and slow him down. *Whoa, boy*. “What's the hurry? Where are we going?”

“I've got somebody for you to meet. Might be your next article.” Article, not obit. I write inspirational true-life stories for the Sunday paper—stories of life—overcoming, overachieving, survival tales. Ironic, huh?

Marty sidesteps a kid in a wheelchair and veers down a corridor, making me hop, skip and swerve to avoid getting my toes crunched under wire wheels. “Can’t we get something to eat first?” My stomach feels wobbly but not from the ride. “Didn’t I hear there’s cake?”

“Shaped like a moon. And nearly as big. But later.”

“So who is this person? Dead or alive?”

“Oh, he’s kicking all right. Could be a Sunday special. I told him about you. Said he’s a fan.”

“Of what?”

Marty pauses outside a doorway. Inside a crowd jumbles together in the oversized room. The din of voices swirls around me, and I feel nauseated. What’s wrong with me? Marty scans the crowd, stretching one way, then the other. “This guy worked in the Mission Control room from Gemini to Apollo 14.”

“Okay. But I need to eat.” I wonder if I should have taken the barf bag and tucked it in my hip pocket for insurance, like carrying an umbrella to scare off rain clouds. I spot the cake across the room and plunge into the crowd, my trajectory straight and determined. “What’s he do now?” I toss the question over my shoulder at Marty. “Is it an astronaut?”

“Retired, I think.” Marty catches up to me. “He’s old.” This, from a twenty-something’s perspective.

We weave through the crowd holding plastic cups of a lime-green punch. I press a hand against my stomach just as I reach the table and grab a plate with a square of cake. The frosting is an unappetizing pale gray. A bit of red piped frosting bisects my piece.

Must be a part of the American flag. Just as I shove a forkful of sugary sweetness into my mouth, Marty comes to an abrupt halt. I bump into his back, barely avoiding slamming my cake into his shoulder blade. He swerves around and stares at my mouth, giving me a look that says, ‘What are you doing?’

“Brynda Seymour!” A voice bursts toward me like a thrust of a jet engine. The man, as tall and slender as a flag pole, steps forward, hand extended toward me. “I’d have recognized you anywhere. Anywhere.”

I gulp down that bite of cake and shake the man’s hand a bit warily. Who would have heard of me? And why?

“Bill Moore,” Marty adds to clue me in.

Should I know that name? An ex head of NASA or astronaut? The older man with scraggly lead-gray hair that reminds me of the professor in *Back to the Future* also sports a handlebar mustache. He leans toward me, his thick glasses making his eyes loom larger. His gaze aims at me like a laser. “That’s not my real name,” he whispers in a rushed huff, then glances over his shoulder. “But I must be careful.”

Surprised by his confession, I wait for him to explain. He doesn’t. “You were a part of all of this”--I swivel my wrist, indicating all the hoopla around us--“forty years ago?”

Cragged and pockmarked as the surface of the moon, his face breaks into a smile, his mustache curving upward with his lips. “I was. I was. Amazing time. Truly amazing.” He surveys the room and from his high-perched vantage point, he should be able to see just about anything he wants. Suddenly, he hunches his shoulders forward and shoves his hands in his pants’ pockets. His casket, I decide, would have to be extra long. “We should

have gone back before now. So much we didn't do. So much we ...” He waves away his statement like it's a pesky fly circling my cake. “I've been contemplating writing my memoirs. You're on the top of my list of writers. Top of my list.”

I arch an eyebrow at Marty. “That's flattering, Mr....” I pause, not knowing what to call this strange man. “What should I call you?”

He glances sideways, then behind him. “Howard,” he whispers, his breath, a mixture of cigarettes and coffee, puffing across my face and making me take a step back. “I'll explain everything—”

“I'm afraid you might have me mixed up with another reporter. I write inspirational profiles but mostly I'm an obituary writer.”

“Isn't that all a memoir is? A long obituary?” His laughter is strange and awkward, as if he's unaccustomed to the procedure. Casually, he loops an arm around my shoulders, and I give Marty a look telling him through make-believe mental telepathy that he's going to pay for this.

Marty jumps forward as if the point of my boot stuck him in the backside. Unfortunately, I didn't have that particular pleasure. “Can I get anyone something to drink?”

I frown at him. If he leaves me alone with this guy—

“Do you know if they have lemonade?” Howard's face scrunches into serious consideration. “Pink, not yellow.”

“Uh, I'll check. But let's get a couple of shots of you in the lobby. Maybe with a moon rock or next to that rocket.”

“No pictures!” Howard’s voice booms like a rocket on liftoff. He shakes his head vehemently, making his mustache quiver. “Thing is, Brynda,” he still has a hold on me, “my story needs to be told.” His breath puffs against my ear and the hair along my nape rises. I lean as far away from him as I can without tipping myself over, but Howard only moves closer. “It’s a shame it hasn’t been brought to light before now. But so many here...at NASA...don’t want the real story told. Others are afraid.”

I aim my fork at the space between his chin and mine. He backs up slightly, and I fork my cake instead of him. “And why’s that?”

“Because *they* know.”

“Know what?”

“What was really found on the moon.”

I start to laugh, but something in Howard’s clear gaze stops me. He’s serious. Or else an Oscar-worthy actor. Carefully, I slide my gaze toward Marty and assess his reaction. He seems just as baffled. I shove my empty plate at Marty, cross my arms over my chest, and meet Howard’s gaze again. “And what was found? No air? A lack of gravity?” I decide I need the last scoop of icing and cake and swipe it with my finger. “A bunch of rocks? Or cheese?”

“A crystal palace,” he states lucidly. Or so I presume.

I freeze, finger in mouth, and wait for Howard to laugh first. But he doesn’t. Not even a crack of a smile. His features remain solid, serious. The cake thickens at the back of my throat and I choke, cough, sputter.

Howard slaps me on the back and continues as if it's quite normal to believe a crystal palace resides on the moon, like some exotic resort taking reservations for family vacations. Is it an all inclusive resort? "The evidence is quite clear."

"Crystal clear?" I laugh at my own joke, but no one else joins me. I wrangle my humor, strapping it down as best I can. "And who lives in this palace? Cinderella?"

Howard's gaze crackles like broken glass. He pokes his bifocals back into place with his index finger. "Obviously, we don't know. Yet. But don't you think more investigations should have been conducted rather than covering up the evidence?"

I slide my gaze toward Marty. His eyes widen as if to tell me he didn't know Howard was a loon. "Okay, well..." I give Howard a careful smile. Time to go. But as with any crazy, I've learned to go slow. "Interesting. Definitely interesting. As you know, I'm not a scientific journalist, Mr. ... Howard. I'm sure a solid foundation in physics--" Or psychiatry--" would be beneficial." Or even a rope to tether him to reality. "Good luck with your...um...project. Maybe you could get Will Smith to conduct that research for you."

Howard or Bill or Howdy Doody slides a worn, raggedy piece of paper into my hand, pressing it against my palm. "This is my number. Don't share it with anyone." He squeezes my hand, and I get a cold, clammy feeling in the bowl of my belly. "Do you understand?"

"Believe me, I won't."