First man on the moon

They said the brown acid was cool, so long as you didn't do it every day. Mike didn't do it every day, exactly, but was getting close. Before Susan came along.

He couldn't recall how they met, the details of the party, what she was wearing or what he said to her. He wouldn't though, would he – he'd been plunging around his inner space on brown acid at the time. But then, somehow, before he knew it, he was coming down, coming around, splitting the scene and landing, soft as a marshmallow on a hot summer afternoon on her salt-slicked, mud-ruffled, fold-down bed, somewhere near Peckham. Susan; cafe goddess with huge, hollow eyes, working girl, weekend flower child. He took her out to lunch. He bought her fizzy drinks. He knew he had to be where she was. And after all, he'd already decided to blow out university.

She wasn't an easy lay though. Oh no, it took some planning, and a real, special occasion. They borrowed an old TV set, lugged it like a dead horse all the way up the stairs, roped in the buck-toothed girl from the basement flat to help. The girl had wanted to join them, stood sweating and twirling her hair in the doorway.

'Two's company, three's a crowd,' he'd said with a wink as he shut the door in her face.

The cathode ray had hummed, streaming tiny explosions, finger-fronds of black-grey-white in luminous flecks across Susan's plastic glasses, her big white teeth and the pearly sheen of her city skin. They had sprawled on the bed, woollen blankets sticking to their tacky bodies, and waited. At a distance of 239,000 miles, it was all going off. Apollo 11, middle of the night. Stepping off into space.

Mind. Blown. No need for medication.

He'd taken his chance as she bathed in the projected light of the conquered moon. He was in her, on her, moving and roving, bouncing over her sharp little hip bones, investigating her craters. Lust charged through him like a solar wind. It must be scorching her fanny, surely? But when he looked in her face, her eyes were still suckling off that cold, flat screen, even when her back arched and her nails slid into his buttocks. He watched the lunar landing reflected in her pupils, and it occurred to him that Neil Armstrong had, indeed, got there first. Ploughing on anyway, eyes closed, his grunting was accompanied by occasional interjections from James Burke, back in the BBC studio.

Later, lying on his back and trying to get her attention, he resorted to his usual trick; rolling a spliff and talking in his best, loudest, most commanding public-school voice. She couldn't ignore him then, could she?

'How d'you suppose they knew?'

'Knew what?'

'That is wasn't cheese?'

Her mouth smiled at him, but her eyes didn't move.

'Before they landed? I mean… what if it really had been, you know… uh, cream cheese, or, you know, Wensleydale, or Dairy Lea or something else horrid?' He laughed *huh-huh* and her brows drew together. Maybe she liked Dairy Lea. Maybe he should have said cheddar. The lunar puff balls bobbed on the screen some more, and then it was back to the studio in London.

'Maths,' she said, eventually.

'What do you mean – maths?'

'How they worked it all out.' She shrugged. 'You know… the moon, the planets, the universe.'

'Now don't try to be clever—'

'All that stuff; it's all maths.'

'Right. I hate maths. Flunked my O level.'

She shook her head. 'I never took it to fail. Left school when I was 15.'

'But we're groovy, Susan, you and me. We don't need NASA, do we, honey? We don't need maths.' He winked and offered her the joint. She looked away.

'It's amazing, don't you think? A man up there… And it's not just…' She looked at him closely then, as if for the first time. 'Not just numbers. There's so much meaning, so much emotion—'

'Free love, yeah? Harmony? Come on, let's—' He made a grab for her leg, but she kicked at him, her heel hard as it came up to meet his face.

'Sorry,' she said softly as he doubled up. She didn't sound sorry. He took his time to sit back up, milking it, because he knew it was the only thing he could do now to get her attention, since he wasn't an astronaut or a hero, and he had a growing feeling that he never would be.

She leant towards him and the TV disappeared behind her long, chestnut hair. Her scent was hot on his face, sweet like fresh tobacco and tea. It made him horny.

'You OK, Mike?'

In answer, he lurched her onto her back and had another go.

Her old dad wasn't pleased, and neither were his parents, disowning him when September came around and he refused to budge. It didn't bother him, initially, but October in her bedsit was weighed with damp and shadows. It wasn't good for her asthma, Susan complained, and neither was his smoking. But now he'd given up the acid, he had to have something, and dope was just dope. He told her to chill out, and that the baby would be fine, whatever happened, because it was made of majestic lunar love. It was the creation of maths and science and technology, after all – talk

about calculations, talk about 28 days at gas mark 6, talk about moon cycles and neap tides, and Neil Armstrong and his shoe size – oh yes, would that be about a nine, no?

He told her the baby would be a scientist, and they should call it Neil.

'What if it's a girl?' she said.

'Come on, be serious! It won't be a girl, will it? I can feel it, down here.' He'd squeezed his balls and grinned. 'That's no moonie-June in your womb, eh, dimples?'

Weeks, days, months, she had it all weighed out and calendarized before the end of the first trimester. All was in order, and that should have made him happy. But it felt heavy, like extra gravity. She felt it too, said the city was swallowing her, her and her swelling baby. She was drowning in the air. She couldn't work in the café anymore, and he was damned if he was going to go hod carrying. They needed a plan.

'Let's get closer to nature,' she said, stroking the mottled skin of her bump. 'Perhaps we can we ask your parents? You said they have a place—'

'Forget it.' He shook his head. 'We don't need them. I'll rob a bank or invent something. Or star a band. You know?'

She looked away when he laughed, out over the grey-brown sludge of the street and said for the twentieth time that day that she needed to get away.

'Make a plan, Mike. Be a man. You're going to be a father. It's not funny anymore.'

Bu it was Susan who made the plan: in the first weeks of the bright new decade, she decided they would stay with her friend in the country. Not really a friend; some girl she'd met in '68 at a Hyde Park happening. They'd got bored stiff by Blind Faith and exchanged home addresses. This girl had magic mushrooms and magic crystals and a place miles from anywhere, and sent occasional scrawled postcards of oast houses. On Tuesday, Susan sent her one back announcing they were coming, and on Thursday they bumped down the stairs with a cardboard suitcase each. Hitching lifts out through south-London streets patterned with puddles, headlights and the ghosts of bombsites, all the while she stroked the fat little paunch and told it they were going home.

'Maybe it's twins,' he said, frowning, as they jolted through Penge. There was something about the lumps under her skin, the way they moved when she was still, that gave him the shudders. Something unnatural.

'Not twins,' she said, not even smiling.

She never smiled anymore. Didn't smoke, drink, dance, laugh. Shag. Pretend to listen. Cook. Clean. Nothing. Susan had got serious. It was January 1970 and he felt 30 years old instead of 19. When she'd told him he should get a job on a neighbouring farm, his fist tingled surprisingly to punch her. He'd thought work and the system was what they were getting away from. That, and the damp.

The house that Peonie lived in was more like a barn, with no electric in some parts and water only in the yard. Susan said she loved it, went to sleep in the big feather bed in the middle of the afternoon, didn't even close the curtain over the crooked little window. He stood and looked out at the crowded, black trees. Everything was dead, even the sky. He cast a shadow over the bedroom floor, watched it lengthen, then shrugged and headed downstairs for a smoke.

The sitting room was stuffed with bursting orange cushions and throws made from rags, lit by oil lamps and stinking candles. It smelled of cats. In the yard there were cobbles, a dirty old bath under a dripping, furry tap, the rotted, rusting leaves and spikes of ancient farm machinery and forgotten cars. His hands shook as he rolled his spliff and he wondered how long it would take to hitch back to town. Peonie made lentil soup and told him how much she loved air.

He spent February watching winter crawl across the windows, and by March his eyes burned so hard it felt like he's never shut them, not even once. They sat around a smoking fire and played recorders and tambourines and sang songs with no words and he wondered if his parents would have him back now if he went. He didn't recognise the bearded face in the mirror. He had no money, not even any shoes. They ate rice and turnips and talked about the end of the world, but only when visitors came. Most of the time they didn't eat or talk at all. Or, only Susan ate. Sometimes the visitors brought pills, and Mike would munch on them as if his life depended on it. There was no TV with black-grey-white fronds, no record player. No radio. No other life. No outside. No future. He'd fallen into the middle ages. Sometimes Mike got stuck into Peonie across the kitchen table, simply for something to do. That was how he found out her real name was Nora.

And all the while Susan lay in the feather bed, looking out of the crooked little window. She did not want to see a doctor and did not want to go to hospital. She didn't want to be poked about or prodded, said her mum died in labour, some doctor's arm shoved halfway up her.

'Have faith,' she said softly, like some stained-glass saint awaiting martyrdom.

She wanted no technology involved in the birth of her baby – and he had to face it, no matter what he'd said, or promised, it was now very clearly *her* baby, not his. He sat in the corner of the yard in the place where the black gutter dripped green down the wall and watched the catkins puff on the hazels. Somewhere, he could hear men building a road. The machines growled in the undergrowth.

Susan went into labour a couple of weeks early, on Good Friday, according to Peonie's calendar. So Peonie spun a crystal over a bucket of herbs mashed into water and proclaimed the Earth Goddess ready. Everything would be cool.

He had to be there in the room, he supposed, but kept well back towards the door, couldn't be near the bed because there was something about Susan in that state,

so white and big and sweaty and strong that it scared him. It scared him, although he'd never find the words to admit it. So he peered around Peonie's little shoulders to witness Susan's heaving thighs.

Could this be right? That man had come so far, he could get to the moon and back, plant a flag, go into orbit, but birth was still so sweat-ripe sordid? The candles turned themselves to stumps as she writhed and moaned, so he stomped out to the yard to smoke and cough and prop up the low, frowning sky. There'd be nothing good about this Friday, but he had to see it through.

Back in the room, it was chill now the sun had set but she couldn't feel it, she was struggling, saying she never thought it would be so hard. On all-fours, she was wet and dripping everywhere but it wasn't red, it was clear like rain or tears and Peonie said her waters had broken. He didn't know what they were. What waters, where from? He should have got a book out of the library, should have armed himself with some knowledge, some Doctor Spock. Should not have let himself be presented here, as a man, as a father, with no idea of what was going on. He was not in control. Legs suddenly weak, he sat on the floor and hugged his knees to his chest as she started roaring again, asking for tea, throwing it up, calling him over and grasping for his shirt, then pulling his hair out by the roots. This couldn't be right, could it? She was roaring like a lion, like a dinosaur, like the machines out building the road. This was not his little Susan. As her noise reached a crescendo, Peonie joined in. He stuffed his fingers into his ears and screamed.

Then silence. He opened his eyes, surprised to hear only himself. Susan was still, flattened, quiet, Peonie beside her crumpled like a stack of dirty clothes. His own panting dripped into the quiet, then the creep of fingers in wet flesh, a rustle of soiled cotton. The thought sidled up to him that the baby should be crying. That's what happened in films: the doctors hold the new-born by its feet and slap its wobbly white arse, and it cries, and everyone laughs and congratulates each other, except the mother, who lies and looks like a statue of the virgin Mary.

'Susan?'

'Ssshhh.'

'Slap its arse. You've got to slap it. Get it to cry. I mean…'

With fistfuls of eiderdown he pulled himself up from the floor, lifting his face level with the muck of the bed. Susan's body was bleeding, but her face was beautiful. Peonie looked up between shining, slimy fingers.

And then he looked for the baby, following the women's gaze. He squinted, rubbed a hand over his face, then looked again and felt the room rock. He was gripping tightly to the bed with strange hand-claws. It couldn't be.

He gulped down a breath and looked again. Yes, he saw it, he knew it. His progeny. He was going to faint.

In the place where his squalling pink scientist should have been, he saw a wet, slippery, limp lump.

‘But…’

He made out two long feet. A long back. A nose, with whiskers.

‘That’s not… it can’t be.’

Topped by two long, thin, pointed ears.

It was not a baby. It was not a future scientist. It was no Neil. It was no human.

Susan stared down at it, smiling beatifically. Peonie stared up at it, cooing and dribbling. Both women turned their eyes to him, and a sneaking little laugh slipped through Susan’s soft white throat.

‘What’s wrong, Mike?’

He could only stare. This was not right. This was against nature. This was… a hare.

‘Aren’t you proud of our baby?’ She reached out a finger and it turned its furry, wet head. ‘Don’t you think it’s—’

‘No!’

Thought, feeling and logic curdled in his brain. Lunging forward, he grabbed the wet little leveret by its long, slick ears. It shrieked, the hare lip drawing back to show long, white teeth as its eyes rolled. Susan made a grab for its back leg, but Mike was too quick, flicking it out of her grasp, leaping to his feet. He was across the little bedroom before she could escape the bed. And he knew what he must do.

Yanking open the crooked little window, he flung out the monstrosity as far as he could, as hard as he could, up towards the mercury moon and out over the needled backs of the trees. Let the hazels have it. Let the hawthorns spear it. Let the foxes rip it up.

A hare, in place of his little man-scientist. The dirty, dirty moon.

And then there really was no sound.

Just the roaring, shuddering moon bent over Mike’s mad-man silence.

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