

Hetty's Moon

Bryar sits with a napkin tucked into his shirt, eating meatballs.

Kubrick wants to fly to the moon, he says.

Is there any chance it'll happen? I ask.

Bryar motions at me to pass a plate of American bread biscuits.

NASA's having none of it, says Cubert. They say he'd need months of training and exercise—

He's too old and too fat, says Bryar, his mouth filled with gravy-soaked biscuit.

What about Nixon? I ask.

Nixon's as crazy as Kubrick, says Cubert. He wants to know if we even need a launch.

It's a legitimate question, says Bryar.

Cubert's face widens with vexation. We're in a space race, he says, not filming the Thunderbirds.

You can innovate, says Bryar, his fifth digit evacuating wax from his ear. NASA has the resources.

Planetary systems are not explored by sitting in a studio, it's insane.

No more insane than flying two-hundred and fifty thousand miles to stick a flag in the ground.

Are you being serious? We'll face international embarrassment.

Bryar stares at a meatball, impaled on the end of his fork.

Tens of billions of dollars for a couple of guys to bring back a bag of moon dust, he says. The Soviets are laughing at us already.

This is our country's moment.

But *you* want to risk second place, says Bryar, pressing a finger into Cubert's left pectoral.

You want to—

Forget Yuri Gagarin, says Cubert. This time we can win.

The Russian success can't be forgotten; Nixon wants rock-solid certainty.

There is certainty, Kraft is on the brink of finishing launch preparations.

The president doesn't care, says Bryar, wiping crumbs from his napkin.

Cubert turns and looks at me, facing his back towards Bryar.

Nixon has been forced to play Kennedy's tune on his own broken fiddle, he says, and he hates it. But someone needs to tell him it would be madness to make-believe the mission.

Everyone has been telling him, says Bryar. He's not bloody listening, move on.

He'll have to listen, says Cubert, there's no choice. NASA is already pissed that their moon footage won't be shown. Now you want special effects to replicate rocket fuel.

I know who's really pissed, says Bryar, it's Tommy Paine. He's all heart and no head.

Nixon is all self and no other, says Cubert.

Let's not simplify, we need to be realistic.

Flying to the moon has nothing to do with being realistic. It's about something bigger than that, the greater good.

Listen to what you're saying. NASA's idealism is dangerous.

Nixon's solipsism is dangerous.

The president simply wants to mitigate the risks.

He's a coward.

He's a politician, says Bryar, throwing down his cutlery. It clatters off his plate and drops to the floor.

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Cubert, a NASA go-between to the US government, arrived last week.

He's symptomatic of how things are going.

All of a sudden, we're somebodies. And we're stuck at the centre of a struggle between the president and the space agency.

Kubrick is losing the fucking plot, says Bryar, and it's causing panic.

All kinds of shit are hitting all types of fan, says Cubert.

Something like that.

But most of all, the president is nervous.

Only about the ability of this tin-pot operation to deliver, says Bryar.

It wouldn't be so tin-pot, I hear myself saying, if we'd been properly funded.

Things are going to change, says Cubert, but he's not talking about money. His role is to ensure that NASA is not compromised or left red-faced.

You're in a mess, he says, always shuffling the set around, risking detection.

It's like a dire piece of slapstick, he continues. Any moment someone is going to have their foot stuck in a bucket or be knocked over by a ladder.

He's right, the contract to film a secondary landing is proving difficult to conceal at the studios. Hiding our work from the BBC is impossible.

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After all your support for the peace movement, says Little Hetty, those years filming protests against the war, living with the flower-power children.

Little Hetty is the size of a pea. She is uncomfortably positioned next to my brain stem. She's right about the peace movement, it's how I met Big Hetty, the real Hetty, the woman I married.

Her flowing dresses, the daisies in her hair. She was a force of energy and freedom. I fell in love with her immediately. My films became about her, not the wider movement.

I found work at Ealing Studios when we married; it was a necessary part of growing up. There would be compromises to my artistic freedom, but to have an income was essential.

Bryar was sent over from the US when the moon assignment began. He reassured me, when filming ended for *Space Odyssey*, Kubrick would keep open sound stages and locations.

He told me being secondary film-makers was a meal ticket.

But Kubrick being at loggerheads with the CIA is a problem.

Time is running out for him at MGM, says Cubert.

His ego is messing everything up, says Bryar.

In short, uncertainty surrounds Kubrick's ongoing slipstream and pressure is building.

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The whole thing was set in motion before Nixon entered office, says Cubert. The former administration was persuaded into forming a task force –

They made contingency plans, says Bryar. It was a sensible thing to do.

Operation Waterfall, says Cubert, a shitty mistake.

And now it's Nixon's baby.

Nixon's shitty mistake.

Let's not blame our current leaders, says Bryar, for the opportunities they've been handed.

His hand is resting on Cubert's shoulder.

It'll be enough to give LBJ a heart attack if the whole thing's a sham, says Cubert. He's been pushing the space programme ever since he was JFK's vice.

He wriggles out from under Bryar's grip.

For god's sake, says Bryar, America deserves the full glory. The massive hard-on of being first on the moon; none of *this* crap. I'm the first to admit that, but–

Republicans do things differently, says Cubert.

We live in an imperfect world, says Bryar. A world where—

Nixon wants success but couldn't care less about achievement.

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It can't be that important, says Hetty, you know I can keep a secret.

They've made us promise not to utter a word, otherwise it's our jobs, we've signed on it. I so want to tell you, but it's no go.

The official secrets act has saved me from confessing that I'm working for Nixon. If Hetty knew I was working for US relations...

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NASA has received its primary recommendations. And based on Cubert's observations, they've agreed that the Ealing Studios site isn't secure.

No surprise there, says Bryar, it's not exactly the Nevada desert.

We'll need to move film equipment and props to another location, says Cubert, somewhere less public.

Do we have the cooperation of The Ministry? asks Bryar.

I tell him that we do. (This is according to Jeremy, a low-grade civil servant, my main contact in government.)

In that case, listen, he says. There's a garrison built a hundred years ago. They use it for weapons testing, it's way out, east of the city.

What type of munitions are being denotated there? asks Cubert.

There's some low-level atomic work, says Bryar, alongside the regular noise makers, but it's all contained.

Is this Shrewsbury, or Sho'bury, something like that?

Shoeburyness.

That's it, says Bryar.

I don't know how Bryar is privilege to this information, or where Cubert heard about the small outpost, all I know is the name. But I promise to make enquiries about the base and to explore how we'll move equipment out there. Most likely under the cover of darkness.

I place a call to Jeremy. He reassures me there'll be no problem using the army ground for our filming. There's a possibility he'll join us down there.

He suggests using one of the disused tube stations for loading trains with equipment and then pushing them out through Fenchurch Street. The MOD is already using Brompton Road, it would be fairly easy to move equipment through there. But things might be better at York Road, if we can organise a train. It's closer to Fenchurch, he says. It's less risky if you aren't on the underground tracks too long. You don't want whispers at the control rooms spreading news of something happening.

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Listen Hetty, I need to spend a few days away. We're going on location.

I suspect you can't tell me where, so I won't ask, she says.

I'm sorry. I'll call you every night.

(It's up to Little Hetty now to keep me on the right side of wrong. Her role is inflated, as is she: Little Hetty has grown to the size of a squash ball.)

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Nobody knows about the branch line to the MOD site or they think it's abandoned. They have trains in the sidings there, looks like they've been there forever, but slowly they're taken out overnight to the base. They use them for target practice before scrapping them, I say. It has all been explained to me.

And you're sure there'll be no leaks? Cubert asks. That's all NASA want to know.

Bryar was right, radioactive materials have been shuffled through there. Film equipment will be no problem, I say.

What about props? he asks.

Wilkens, the stage technician, steps forwards.

Our team can use the old trains to fashion something, he says.

It sounds workable. There are plenty of trains.

I tell them this has to be a success and that the PM is getting itchy.

In truth, I'm more worried about Hetty than Wilson. I know the filming will take more than a few days to set up and can see that it could last weeks.

The studio vans are loaded with equipment. It's hard work unloading them at York Road, up and down the steps to the platform. We work by flashlight, rats scurry in all directions.

When we're done, the vehicles return to Ealing.

All the scaffolding we'll need is already on site and the sand is to be transported the next day under the premise that it's restocking the public beach, but won't stop at the beach, it will carry on to the camp.

Kubrick is continuing to make demands that can't be met. The CIA lacks any influence over the FBI to remove his name from their historical investigations. It's becoming ever more certain our footage will be needed.

It's late, says Hetty.

I know, sorry for not ringing earlier. It's been a long day on set.

Wilson is determined for us to succeed, to prove we'll be America's ally against the Soviet Union. He is squeezing every ounce of energy out of us. (Jeremy is here to crack the whip on his behalf.)

I can't tell her any of this.

Living at the encampment without Hetty, I think about how bohemian life was when I started at the studios. There was no need to cut my hair. No need to get out of bed early.

Everything in this place is contained and controlled. We are not permitted to stray into the nearby town, nor are we allowed onto the marshland from where we hear constant cracks and booms. Our only communications are between ourselves; with the film crew and the Americans. The monotonous pattern of sleep and work is grinding us down. We all want to be done with this.

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The Americans are drinking bourbon and reciting Kennedy's '62 speech, reminiscing about the death of Komarov. It is two years ago to the day since Komarov's parachute failed on his return to Earth; a great shadow cast across celebrations of the October Revolution and a portent for the Soviet space programme.

Seeing the two men in the mess area, enjoying a rare moment of camaraderie, it hits me that I'm doing this all for Nixon. For the war in Vietnam. For the use of napalm; for the obliteration of people not like them.

Little Hetty is hardening into a golf ball. I can feel her protruding from the base of my skull. She tells me that I need to do something, to not blindly work for the US. I have a plan to help discredit the work that we're doing. To leave little clues for the world. They might not be seen at first, but eventually the world will see Nixon for the fraud he is. I will not let Little Hetty down and even if Big Hetty never hears of it, I will have done right by her.

The plan is to allow the team little pieces of creative license that the public will love. It doesn't matter if they're true to life or not, I won't check. Hopefully, there'll be things we get wrong.

There is no wind on the night that we film. Mikey, one of the crew, offers up the wind-machine we brought to add some fluttering to the stars and stripes. He reminds us about low gravity levels meaning the flag would likely float. The technicians go to work on it.

Brainstorming then starts on how the astronauts are going to move around the scene. Theatrical wires are connected to scaffolding, we spend a good deal of time getting the leaps and jumps right (or, better still, wrong).

Bryar walks up to me with a golf club. He tells me that there should be golf.

I take onboard every suggestion, increasing the risk of error with every flourish. But Cubert isn't happy with the golf and insists on it being cut.

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We knew from the very beginning that the quality of any transmission coming back from space would be poor quality. Our final task after filming is to degrade what we've filmed to make it convincing but at the same time make it good enough to engage a demanding populace.

I'm in the cutting room finding ways to add authenticity to the footage when Wilkens walks in and tells me that the Americans are sick, taken down with something nasty. It's going to be down to me to fly the film canister over to the US.

I'll need to tell Hetty where I'm going.

Why have her worry? Wilkens asks.

My passport, it's at home.

There's no time, he says, they'll waive the checks.

How do you know?

Bryar told me.

Our film is played as the landing footage is relayed simultaneously to a small room in the John F. Kennedy Space Center. The six men in that room are the only ones to see the real thing. It is unimpressive. It keeps cutting out, it isn't suitable for broadcast. Nixon has done the right thing and a contract for the following landings is signed the next day.

I should feel elated but there are blotches in front of my eyes, and I feel dizzy as I mount the steps to the plane home. I'm not sure how I'll tell Hetty about this, I feel my legs go from under me and I'm falling backwards down the stairs. My head is bumping on every step. I wake up in a hospital. Hetty is there by my side, she tells me that the doctors have been running tests.

I try to tell Hetty about the film and about how they broadcast a fake. She tells me to be quiet and to rest. She kisses my forehead and squeezes my hand. I can feel the room fading away from me.

From this point onwards, life is a collection of dizzy spells and headaches. It's like I'm cutting through a forest with only a toothpick. The work at Ealing Studios becomes harder. It's years later, I'm told there's an abnormal, raspberry-shaped, cluster of blood vessels sitting inside my brain. It's pretty large and will be difficult to operate on.

The drugs that I was already taking seem to be no better or worse than anything new they might offer me following the diagnosis. Life goes on and I'm not sure whether Hetty understood what I told her in those moments at the hospital. We never speak about the work I do at the studios, or the work I've done in the past. At home she nurses me and tells me about her day. Her ongoing fears for the world haven't passed, but she knows it exhausts me to listen.

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Cubert arrives on the doorstep one day. He tells me about a book that's been published claiming there never was a moon landing. The writer is Bill Kaysing, his name sounds familiar.

I question why no one has released the real footage. It is amateurish and unglamorous but to show it to the people would put the reality beyond question.

It would take the heat off, says Cubert, if we had it.

This confuses me. NASA has the film. Unless they passed it over to the White House.

Nixon wants the moon landing to remain ..., says Cubert, searching for a word, desirable.

It's Ford's choice now, he's in charge. Forget Nixon, retrieve the footage.

Nixon, he says, pausing, destroyed the footage.

The US will need to ride the storm until the fuss goes away then. It's the pragmatic choice, which is what I guess you're after.

Cubert is shaking his head and pulling a grimace.

Ford has suggested a new film, he says, a reconstruction of what you saw being relayed at the Space Center.

I ask him if everyone has lost their minds.

There is a thing known as the truth, I say. Nixon needs to stand up and tell it.

Ford pushed hard to pardon Nixon after the scandal, a confession would only upset things.

If you really want to convince the people, he –

No.

In which case, Nixon escapes again.

It's one way of looking at it, says Cubert, but we need to stop thinking about Nixon.

This is about NASA, the astronauts, the mathematicians, and the people with ordinary lives who've done extraordinary things. The voices that are muffled when politicians speak

and when books are written. Those who transmit a signal never clearly received. The distortion for which we are all guilty.

I tell him that I'll consider our options but that this time I won't be traipsing through abandoned tube stations and being locked up on army camps. There will be conditions and there will be proper compensation for my efforts.

He shakes my hand and I feel like I've agreed to be sucked back into the something at the point where it was looking likely to end.

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The record currently stored in my head from July 20, 1969 will be committed to film in the coming months. Those who witnessed the real thing will look on, convinced it was retrieved from the 'trash can'.

There's a reason for this. Little Hetty stored for me a perfect record of the moon landing and as she lets it be revealed to me, piece by piece, so she will shrink. The doctors will be impressed. She'll still be there and will never disappear completely, but with her role fulfilled she'll be no bother anymore.

Over the years that follow, the new footage will stealthily replace the old, having been bled into it and combined at every new showing. It will be the version that years from now will be known to everyone.

And so, the truth will prevail.

The living, breathing, loving Hetty trusts in this sentiment. Even though she will not live to see the day in which this particular truth comes to light.

It is God's will that she passes before me. I cannot change this, it is a history that cannot be retold, even though it is in the future. For it is certain. Her illness has already progressed too far.

I'll visit her every day in the hospital, and we'll reminisce about our time together on Earth.

America is fatigued by landing men on the moon, I'll tell her. It's become a niche interest of middle-age men and young boys.

I'm sure this won't always be the way, she'll say.

I'll hold tight to her frail body and the gloriousness of life on our planet. She'll be ready to depart, gracefully into the heavens.

The opposite of a rocket ship, all noise and show. Hetty is eternity and she is everything.

Farewell, Hetty.