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propeller heads

LCTN: SOL-3a, MOUNT MARILYN, MOON
CORD: SAO-0.0101 (1.001au from SOL)
DATE: 2099ce-NOVEMBER-6-WEDNESDAY
TIME: 09:10zulu

After three weeks of discord this hastily set up lunar base has more the ambiance of a trailer park rather than a scientific endeavor. Because of the infighting it has been remarked that all it needs now is a barbecue, horseshoe pits, and the occasional tornado to make some of them feel right at home.

Of the nineteen people at the site, fourteen of them are pissing and moaning that two college boys are emceeing this show.

Their handlers, three über-fellows from academia who are representing Oxford, Texas A&M, and the ICTP out of Trieste, refuse to give into the agents from the DOD, DOE, JPL, NASA and the ESA. All their concerns, arguments, cajoling, and threats did not sway the managing 'fellows' position one inch or iota. ASU is at the helm and they picked Jay and Silent Bob for the task.

Born into privilege, the short-brawny graduate geek from the ASU Department of Physics, who goes by the name of Jason Kay, has had a blast arguing theoretical physics over the last twenty-one days. Thumbing his nose at these titans in the field, and not subtly so, he has basically dismissed everything they believe and hold dear. His contention that *a proof does not make for truth*, is argumentatively sound, and the fact that almost every known theory in physics has found its way onto the metaphorical scrapheap is clearly supported by the historical record.

Jay's stoner like exterior cannot hide his intelligence, disdain for the conventional, or the biting sarcasm he wields like a chainsaw, "Can you fossils say Higgs boson, branes, and multiverses? I knew you could."

Being labeled a *closeted forth-dimensional time-space holdout*

would not endear an accuser to anyone, but when it's *in your face*, and from such a nobody, it makes for very bad feelings indeed.

More so because he's not far off the mark.

Worse yet has been the annoying "Whoa...Steve" these two collage boys say, with the obligatory *mano cornuto* sign and a solemn bow of the head, whenever someone mentions anything dealing with the Standard Model, Technicolor, or KISS.

In science theory becomes postulate—becomes indomitable truth and, at the turn of the millennium when string theorists were as mad as bloody March hares coming up with all kinds of fanciful ideas that made the revelations of L. Ron Hubbard look reasonable and grounded by comparison, Steve Weinberg stepped back and watched. Steve reached a *Cultus Confirmus* status to this latest generation because, like Gödel to Einstein, his level-headed observations brought reasonable back to popular reason.

Unfortunately, it was decades after his passing.

Credit is where credit's due, and his work late in life lead another to the unification of gravity as a non-force effect to the other three actual forces. This impossibility was accomplished by an Italian gravestone cutter doing his graduate work at night and on weekends. His paper entitled, *Kasko Irregolare String Struttura*, translated and published in early 2071, pulled this poverty-stricken family man from everyday obscurity to rock star status overnight.

Very-very few people embrace change, and when the physics community does manage to shake things up they are notorious for casting off one set of dogmatic blinders for another. It is said that they hobble themselves with empirical proof instead of seeking truth itself—which are not one and the same—and Jason takes incredible delight in applying *stupor-gravity* as salt in the open wounds of the old guard trapped with him at the base.

Colonel Washington, an astronaut representing both NASA and the Department Of Defense, is not happy about how this mission is being managed. With just a few minutes to go before it launches he is obviously agitated that his efforts to wrestle control of the experiment out of the hands of the consortium have proved fruitless. So are the four NASA astronauts and two from the ESA on hand. They too are afraid that these undisciplined college dweebs are going to blow the experiment. The idea that these seven highly trained professionals are going to be upstaged by two techno twerps erks all of them to no end—especially by that quiet geek-tron who the Colonel describes as, "A walking ficus tree with that God-damned propeller beanie!"

Robert Graves, the Silent Bob ficus tree, is a mystery wrapped

in an enigma. Believed by those at Mount Marilyn to have only a two word vocabulary, that being *no* and *Pepsi*, it is well documented that at JPL during the first Moon experiment, he actually put two words together by way of *holy* and *shit*. In spite of his quiet demeanor the report on Robert is that from his humble double-wide beginnings he excelled in high school enough to win scholarships in Philosophy and Logic at ASU. On top of that he has a reputation of being a computer wiz, a consummate gamer, an expert in crane style Kung-Fu, which is in sharp contrast to his street fighting juvi-record, and that he has an ongoing stable of centerfold quality girlfriends without money, means of transportation, or GQ savoir-faire.

When put to the question by Colonel Washington all Jason had to say is that, "He's a good listener and chicks dig that. Also, I hear he plays a mean game of hide the Genoa. That counts for something."

With three minutes to go the Colonel steps up, leans over the console to block the main monitor from Jason and Bob, and demands, "Don't you propeller heads fuck this up!"

As Robert gives him a snappy salute, Jason comes back with attitude, "Look, Colonel Washington, dude, for the umpteenth time, we'll run your half as best we can and, after your time is up, we're gonna do our thing."

"Mr. Kay, I'm not quite up on this addendum you're working with this morning. It looks more like a crazy quilt table of organization instead of the carefully thought out flight plan we gave you clowns!"

Jason parries, "For gravity repulse, dude! Come to think of it, I have yet to hear of a burn patient or a family sedan being shot out into space simply by turning that shit on! Do any of you people know what's happening here? I wish someone can tell me, because we don't know jack." Jason shakes his head as the Colonel just stares back, "This is not just unexplored territory, Bwana. We're stepping into the grotto of the Vestal Virgins! The holiest of holies in Physics. You guys left it up to us clowns to figure out how to spelunk this honey pot an' we do not intend to do it on the fly."

The Colonel's eyes pierce Jason with death rays.

Colonel Washington has come to admire the tenacity of these two 'punk-ass shits' as everybody, even their own handlers, have come to know them by. Jason's valley-rocker façade is wearing thin and it is clearly evident that he knows something nobody else does. Not that he hasn't been trying to share this knowledge with everyone else, he has, ad nauseum, but it is the rest of them who have chosen not to listen. On that note, it is apparent to the Colonel that his own arrogance and prejudice may have prevented him from making the correct judgments about these two but any admission now would be a

weakness he cannot afford to show at this time.

Colonel Washington makes a hollow threat for good measure, "For my cousin, Leon, make me proud or I'll unceremoniously toss both of you shits out the airlock."

Of all the people at the site it is the Colonel that Jason and Robert have actually come to respect and enjoy bickering with. He has not avoided them no matter how obstinate or insulting they may have been and, to his credit, he has constantly challenged them at every turn and on every issue. Most would crack under his double-barreled microscope but the boys have loved every minute of it.

Jason chuckles, "Then you better start cycling it up, bird-man. If it comes to that we'll toss ourselves in and all you gotta do is flush our asses out!"

The Colonel wanted to laugh but was able to hide it with a snort, and with ninety seconds left to go he gets out of the way so Jason can finish the pre-flight check list with the JPL engineers and techs. Jason is totally excited in his role but the Colonel is amazed by how calm Robert is. The lanky kid just sits there with his chin in his hand and the propeller on top of his beanie, an antique premium from the old Alienware computer company, slowly turning from the air blowing down on them from the AC duct above.

Jason, on the final count down, stops at seven and calls out with anticipation, "Boost the juice!"

In orbit around the moon the experiment, the tower configured into a remotely piloted vehicle is pushed into full power up. Right on queue the *juice* is diverted to the gravity field generators and, just as expected, the readings spike completely off the chart

The experiment suddenly rips away at one-thousand and twenty-three kilometers a second.

The first maneuver is to push the field to the port side, whereby it was believed by most at the base that the ship would go towards starboard but, as predicted by Jason, the ship zigged to the left instead of zagging to the right.

Jason says in their face, "We got ourselves a tractor drive! Chalk up one for the dynamic duo!"

They then pull back the direction of the field and the ship stops the sideways maneuver while continuing on its way downrange.

Jason turns to Robert, "That says lock down all over it! You were right." He then crumples up the original NASA flight plan and tosses it back over his head as he then says, "Let's try this."

Jason repeats the last maneuver, but with a twist. They pull the field back to stop all forward momentum and then press it towards the left again. The experiment is now drifting towards port.

Jason then warns, "Let's confirm. Dropping the field."

The Colonel shouts, "Wait!"

Too late because Jason has already killed the field and the experiment continues to drift towards the left.

Robert and Jason tap fists as the Colonel steps in, "What the fuck are you two doing?"

"Confirming a hypothesis." Jason then turns the field back on and the tower rips away again at high speed.

Jason then calls out, "Engaging transitional shift."

The Colonel shouts, "God damn it! Trans what?"

When the experiment stops on a dime, yet again Jason turns to Robert and they tap knuckles, "Exquisite bit of coding, my man. You're battin' a thousand!"

The Colonel is pissed, "I want to know now! Lock down?"

Jason shrugs, "The field locks the experiment in static space."

"Shouldn't it be going the other way?" The Colonel asks suggesting towards the universal center.

"So you would think, but it appears that space is traveling through us faster than we are traveling through it." Jason then asks the tech behind them, "Is its clock dragging or racing, tech dude?"

The tech calls out, "Measurably faster."

The Colonel then asks, "Where the fuck are you taking this thing is what I want to know."

"We're taking it where it needs to go, bird-man." Jason then calls out to the techs, "What's our status?"

Such a dismissal would normally infuriate the Colonel, but when he hears the tech respond he pulls his fangs back, "Looks good. A little bump when you dropped off, though. Also, we can't make out the power glut in the surrounding event field. It's in the tera-joules, and that doesn't make sense unless it's stripping virtual particles at the field's event horizon."

"Crazy kEwL! What's it doing now?"

"Bump."

"It was off, and now?"

"Nothing. You gonna turn it back on?"

"Just did." Jason turns to Robert, "You're right on again."

The Colonel asks, "It's just sitting there. Transitional shift, that thing you mentioned earlier, right?"

"Yeppers, Colonel dude! Now, are you ready for something completely different?"

The Colonel looks back towards the three physicists and does a double take when he sees their faces. They are in wide-eyed shock and astonishment, trying to absorb what these two students have done with the experiment.

The tech announces, "You got twelve minutes of power left."

The Colonel turns back to Jason, "Ya, surprise me."

Jason elbows Robert next to him in the ribs, "Okay, Drama Flakes, she's yours to fly."

As Robert puts his hands on the gamer flight controls they Jerry-rigged to the console, he quietly calls out his battle cry with his best rocker accent, "Spoooooon!"

And, boy howdy, is the Colonel surprised!

Colonel Washington's secret pleasure has been on-line video games and his favorite to date has been the VFR mod to DCS9. In this mod everyone flies the high-end fighters and nobody takes on the A10 in the air-to-air mode because it's just not done. One guy, who goes by the handle *Drama Flakes*, has made running and gunning in the old A10 a skillset unsurpassed by all. So much so that few have been able to boom on Drama and prevail because his piloting skills are reputed to borderline on clairvoyance, and when his signature battle cry is heard over TeamSpeak everyone knows that someone on the other side is going down hard. From his many encounters with, and deaths by the hand of Drama Flakes, the Colonel urged the Marine Air School to study his tactics and when they did they could not make sense out of them. Drama never did the same thing in exactly the same way and he had this uncanny ability to lure people into stall traps.

The kid was a natural, and totally improvised.

At first what Robert does is simple turns and straight lines of acceleration to get a feel for the controls. With that out of the way, he starts to pull loops, barrel rolls and the occasional corkscrew or two for good measure.

Blinking with amazement at the coordinated turns in the vacuum of space, the Colonel looks to the techs behind them and asks about the telemetry, "You are gettin' all this, right?"

"Every bit of it, Colonel." The tech then calls out to Robert and Jason, "Guys, we need to wrap this up inside three minutes."

Robert nods and flies the tower back towards the moon. He carefully slips the experiment into an orbital track where he drops the field and leaves it floating in space as if it never left.

The tech laughs, "Sloppy elliptical, but it'll do."

After a moment of stoned silence the three physicists step up and their leader, an old pterodactyl from the ICTP, announces for all to hear, "Spatial displacement—this validates KISS. Mr. Kay, I have to say we stand humbled. We should have listened."

"That's some serious crow eatage, fossil dude, but don't tell it to me. I don't have an original thought in my head. Talk to him..." Pointing to Robert, "He's the brains of our little enterprise."

They all look over at Robert who, after a pregnant pause, feigns a shiver, "Cold mutherfucker in here, isn't it?"

They all just stare at him, waiting for more.

"Wha'?" Robert looks around and shrugs big, "What do you want me to say? You people keep trying to prove shit and what we did here proves nothing! How about discovering something without your heads up your asses, hu?"

The pterodactyl purses his shriveled lips, "Okay, you insolent little fuck, obviously you're ten or more steps ahead of all of us. How about you give us your thoughts before we shove our heads back up our own asses...hu?"

Robert smiles, "I'm beginning to like you."

"Make it mutual. How about a brain dump?"

"Okay...how about we take this puppy out for a spin?"

With open minds they listen, and to the surprise of all they do exactly what Robert suggests.

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NASA recovers the experiment and turns it around inside eight weeks. In that time they strap on extra generators, a Lunar Lander and the command trailer from Mount Marilyn.

With Robert in the left pilot's seat, the Colonel graciously takes the co-pilots seat and says, "You got the stick, Drama Flakes."

This time there is a carefully thought out flight plan that they stick too. Mostly because they're thrilled with its layout and simplicity

which consists of straight-line speed runs just to see what they can squeeze out of this drive system.

When the gravity fields are kicked on they shoot off like a bolt towards the glowing spot of Saturn in the far distance. Robert pushes the field out little by little, all-the-while telemetry is called back to him. They have ninety minutes worth of power available but it only takes them five minutes to exceed the speed of light (c) and a couple of more before they hit $3c$.

It takes only thirty-five minutes to reach Saturn, and as Robert slows it down to go around the planet he lets go of the controls and nods to the Colonel, "She's yours to fly, Sir."

The trip back is just as uneventful as the trip out except inside this twelve minute run the Colonel pushes the ship to $12c$.

The Colonel drops the ship in a perfectly circular orbit and they all silently crawl into the Lunar Lander. They are in absolute shock trying to mentally digest what they just pulled off.

On the way down the Colonel breaks the silence, "Drama, Robert, you are officially the man who broke the light barrier."

Jason speaks up for him by pointing out, "Colonel, dude, you were there too. We all were."

"He was the pilot, and that's what counts."

Jason quips, "Ya, but you beat him by a factor of three on the way back, dude. That makes you the fastest fly-boy around town."

Robert interjects, "Guys, let's chill on all this because it was Leon that figured this shit out—not us. Now, in my book, it's Colonel Washington's cousin that gets the credit."

The Colonel nods with a flash of understanding.

He now sees Jason and Robert in a new light. Those two did this thing here for the kicks—not for the bragging rights. He knows that people will look to them as heroes, just like when he came back from Mars, but they will shun the spotlight and flippantly brush off the kudos to come. This is something the Colonel would never have been able to comprehend until just now, and this understanding also comes with a concession of respect for these two young men.

Colonel Washington looks down at the Navy Astronauts Badge pinned to his chest. He remembers all that he did to earn this little piece of brass and he has been so proud of his accomplishments because of it, but lately he has wondered if his time spent on the Moon and going to Mars were worth losing his family? What they did here today was a great thing and no matter how giant a leap this was for

the species as a whole it comes with the stark realization that he has no one back home to share this moment with. Being a Zoomie in the Marines was bad enough but the astronaut corps has taken a whole decade of his life away from his wife and children.

Here and now, at the conclusion of man's greatest scientific achievement in space since his landing on Mars, Colonel Washington realizes that all he has ever done—was all about him.

Epiphanies come when you least expect them.

His divorce is not yet final, and with a resolve greater than that which drove him to get this little piece of brass, the Colonel is suddenly determined to get his family and life back.

With the hint of a tear in his eye, the Colonel pulls the badge from his jump suit and, with an approving nod, he reaches out to pin it on Robert, "Here, son, you deserve this."

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