

POSTCARDS FROM THE MOON

Papa Hank vanished from Whispering Pines on the second Wednesday in March. He was last seen before bed check, wearing a velour bathrobe, with a tattered cigar box cradled under one arm.

The initial call from the facility director was a mixture of surprise, contrition, and confidence. Surprise because no one could figure out how an elderly semi-invalid had slipped past two locked doors, five security cameras, and half the night staff. Contrition because extended care facilities are not supposed to lose their residents. Confidence because Papa Hank has arthritic knees, emphysema, and failing eyesight. How far could he go?

The director assured me that my grandfather would be back in the bosom of Whispering Pines before I knew it.

The director's second call was less optimistic. No sign of Papa Hank, but they were intensifying the search.

The third call came on Friday. It was the Whispering Pines attorney, reminding me that—age and health problems aside—my grandfather was a competent adult, empowered to make his own decisions. The locked doors at the facility were to keep cognitively-challenged residents from wandering off. As Papa Hank didn't fall into that category, he was entitled to depart whenever he chose.

(There was no mention of *how* he had managed his exit.)

The attorney didn't think I had grounds for litigation. I didn't argue. I live in Los Angeles. A neighbor broke an ankle falling down his own stairs, then took his homeowner's insurance carrier to the cleaners. If I lawyered-up, I could win a fat settlement.

But I didn't know Papa Hank that well. Our paths had diverged early in my life and fate had never brought us back together.

I've got Mom's photo album around somewhere, with three fading snaps of me with Papa Hank. Sitting on his lap as he read the comics section of the Sunday paper. Him baiting the hook of my fishing line. The pair of us working on a paper kite, which—according to Mom—got eaten by a tree on its maiden flight.

I have only vague recollections of fishing with Papa Hank and I can't remember the kite at all. Dad's job moved to California before I turned five, and we moved with it. Over the years, my memories of Papa Hank faded along with the rest of my early childhood. I can't even remember why I started calling him Papa Hank, instead of Grandpa or Granddad.

I'd heard stories about the man all my life. Unfortunately, I'd never gotten around to knowing him.

Every few years, one of us felt compelled to write the other a birthday card or something similarly brief and formulary. Those rare exchanges were the extent of our contact.

As his last surviving family member, I received the Whispering Pines newsletter, but I'd never been out there to visit Papa Hank. At best, we were cordial strangers.

So the idea of trumping up a lawsuit felt hypocritical, even for a jaded LA transplant like me. I could hardly claim deep familial attachment.

Besides, there was the letter...

It arrived in my mailbox the Saturday after Papa Hank's disappearance: a fat little envelope of silvery paper, slick and nearly-translucent. As thin as onion skin from the days of old-school airmail.

It was addressed to Dougie Rollins. Nobody but Papa Hank has called me Dougie since kindergarten. The wandering cursive looked like his writing.

I tore the flap and pulled out folded pages of the same silvery paper.

My Dear Dougie,

Unless I'm much mistaken, this will be the strangest letter you ever receive. In all likelihood, you'll decide I'm suffering from dementia. I accept that and I ask you to keep reading.

Stick with me for these brief pages. If I'm sane, you'll learn some odd things about the nature of reality. If I've got bats in my belfry, you'll at least catch a glimpse into my personal brand of madness. Either way, you should find it interesting.

By now, you've heard about my departure. Please rest easy. I'm quite safe. The folks at Whispering Pines aren't going to find me, and they're not ever going to figure out how I left. Unless I'm delusional, in which case someone will stumble across me living in a cardboard box with tinfoil around my head. You'll have to judge for yourself how likely that is.

To make sense of this, we have to go back to my boyhood. East Lansing, in the late 1940s. I know that sounds like a million years ago, and it really was another age. An era of hope and imagination.

I don't mean the mythical flag-waving "good old days" when life was simpler, no one had to lock their doors, and America was somehow more real than it is today.

I'm talking about a vision for a different future than the one we ended up with. A different dream for mankind. A future where humanity turned away from war and made the leap to space. Spreading through the solar system like titanium Conestoga wagons crossing the prairies of infinite night.

*I still remember the first time I read Willy Ley's book, '**The Conquest of Space.**' I was eleven years old. Nearly twelve. My best friend, Terry Keaton, brought it home from the library. It was the most magnificent thing either of us had ever seen! We pored over it all afternoon.*

Terry kept the book that night. I had to make do with memories. As I lay in bed, the illustrations played across the insides of my eyelids. Marvelous! Full color paintings by Chesley Bonestell, so fantastically real that you just knew you were looking at a future that would actually happen. Swept-wing rockets streaking across an ocean of stars. Wheel-shaped space habitats above the blue-green curvature of Earth. The rings of Saturn. The sands of Mars. The planet-wide storms of Jupiter.

On the second night, Terry lent me the book. Woven around the illustrations were the speculations of the brilliant Mr. Ley, explaining how these images were not just possible. They were inevitable. Within a few years, mankind would leave the cradle of its birth and reach for the heavens.

This was our future—mine and Terry's! We knew it instantly. We would live, work, and build among the stars. In our bubble-helmeted spacesuits, we would carve the footholds that our species would ascend to claim the universe.

Custody of the book alternated. One night with me, one night with Terry. Reading by flashlight far past our bedtimes.

*When Terry returned **'The Conquest of Space'** to the library, I promptly checked it out. Our sharing and dreaming continued.*

*After my lending period expired, we moved on to **'Across the Space Frontier.'** Then **'Rockets – the Future of Travel Beyond the Stratosphere.'** Space-themed issues of *Colliers*, and anything else we could find, if the text or illustrations were about the cosmos.*

We expanded into fiction. Asimov. Bradbury. Heinlein. Clarke. The pulps. The slicks. Anything that depicted man's destiny beyond the sky.

We planned. We sketched rocket designs on our brown paper lunch sacks, and buckled down in math, geometry, and science. We'd need those subjects when we became rocket pilots, astrologators, or orbital construction engineers.

Most boyhood fancies pass quickly. Not ours. Nineteen-fifty rolled around and we were more obsessed than ever. The fire was still blazing in fifty-one and showed no signs of cooling in fifty-two.

*We watched every space travel movie that showed in East Lansing. **'Destination Moon.'** **'Rocketship X-M.'** **'Flight to Mars.'** The good ones. The bad ones. We didn't discriminate.*

Jet-pack flying suits. Giant robots with laser beam eyes. Levers and blinking lights on rocketship control panels. We didn't care how chintzy the films were. We ate, drank, and breathed anything that hinted at life "out there."

And we kept planning.

The space age exploded around us. Actual rocket scientists were developing the technologies of space flight. Formulating rocket fuels. Calculating fuselage geometries. Testing steel-throated rocket engines that spat fire and roared like mechanical dragons.

The dream was happening! And we were growing up at the perfect time to be a part of it.

Terry's birthday was a couple of months ahead of mine. The day he turned sixteen, he told me that he was running away to join the United States Space Corps.

I pointed out that there was no such thing as the Space Corps.

"But there will be!" Terry insisted. "They'll start it any day now, and I'm going to be there. I'll lie about my age and be one of the first to join up."

Growing up when you did, Dougie, that probably sounds silly. But in those days, proof of identity consisted of fairly simple paperwork and we'd both sprouted up like weeds. Either one of us could have passed for eighteen. And World War II wasn't long in the rearview mirror. Some uncounted number of American teenagers had lied about their ages after Pearl Harbor and fought in all branches of the military. A strapping lad might expect a bit of quiet collusion from the Space Corps recruiting agents, assuming that such an organization came into being.

Terry offered to wait until my birthday. If I wasn't ready by then, he'd leave without me.

That got my fur up. My enthusiasm was as strong as Terry's, but I couldn't see the sense in running away to join an outfit that didn't exist.

I agreed that there would be a Space Corps, or some equivalent organization. I even agreed about the timeline. Formation of the Space Corps (or agency, or whatever) would likely be announced within a few months. I just wasn't willing to jump until I knew we'd have somewhere to land.

I told myself I was being mature. We were embarking on our chosen vocation. Constructing the very future of our species. This was not something to leap into without preparation.

Terry regarded my hesitation as more cowardice than caution. I've had more than six decades to think about it, and he wasn't entirely wrong. I guess I was too faint-hearted to leave the comforts of home and strike out into the unknown.

For eight weeks, we wheedled and argued, each trying to change the other's mind.

On the morning of my sixteenth birthday, as the butter-sweet aroma of my mother's scratch cake wafted through the house, I glanced out the kitchen window and saw Terry standing near our back fence. The anticipatory glee of my birthday cake was dimmed as I read the question on his face.

I gave my head the barest possible shake, trying to say with my eyes that we'd talk later.

Terry nodded, acknowledging my headshake but probably not my unspoken message. He turned and walked down the lane. Away from my house. Away from our town. Away from me.

No one in East Lansing ever saw Terry again.

I started by saying that you'll likely decide I'm senile. Keep that in mind, because we're coming to the part where you have to decide whether my trolley has jumped the track.

Because I got a postcard from Terry three weeks later. "Having a great time. Wish you were here!"

Nothing crazy about that, but he signed the card, "Spaceman (Fourth Class) Terrence A. Keaton." The postmark read: "U.S. Space Corps Recruiting Command, Omaha, NE."

The postcard could have been Terry's idea of a joke, only it would have been a damned expensive prank to play. The front showed a full-color image of a streamlined rocket trailing fiery exhaust against a field of gleaming stars. In the upper left corner of the card was an official-looking emblem: a flaming sword, encircled by eagle wings.

I don't know how else to explain it, except to say that the card looked like the real thing. It had the aura of authenticity. This was what a postcard from the Space Corps would be like, if such an organization existed.

With a talented graphic artist and a good offset printer, you could fake something like that. But where would a broke teenager get that kind of money?

I nearly showed the postcard to Terry's family. I thought it might bring them comfort to know that their missing child was safe. But the card would raise more questions than it could answer.

So I shut my mouth and tucked the card into the cigar box where I kept my personal treasures.

The next day, I walked to the post office. A lady postal clerk thumbed through several registries and made two phone calls before announcing that there was no postal address for a Space Corps Recruiting Command in Omaha.

I showed her the postcard. She assured me that it was some kind of gag. My friend had picked it up in a novelty shop—phony postmark already in place—and scribbled a note on the back. Then, it was just a matter of slipping the fake card into my mailbox to complete the prank. She was certain that the postcard hadn't been delivered by any legitimate mail carrier.

I thanked her and slipped the postcard into my pocket.

My brain was abuzz as I walked home. If there was no Space Corps, where had Terry gone?

Spring gave way to summer, with no sign of Terry.

The second postcard came about twelve weeks after the first. Terry had completed recruit indoctrination and was being transferred to Moon Base One for technical training.

The card depicted a cluster of habitat domes in the basin of a lunar crater, with Earth rising above the escarpments. Again, there was the sigil of the Space Corps.

And the postcards kept on coming, Dougie. At least a couple every year.

I got one when Terry soloed in a rocket scooter. And one after he was nearly killed by a moonquake that demolished the ski-crawler he was driving.

Terry was promoted to Spaceman Third Class. Then Second Class. Then First. He qualified as a rocket pilot and flew missions to Mars. Venus. The moons of Jupiter.

Every postcard came with pictures that could have been clipped from a book by Willy Ley. Every one stamped with the Space Corps insignia.

But there was not a mention of any U.S. Space Corps in the newspapers or radio broadcasts in Lansing. And it gradually became clear that America's space program was taking a different direction from the one Terry and I had imagined.

Instead of the Space Corps, we got something called NASA. We didn't blaze a trail to the planets. Space travel meant the occasional orbit around our planet, usually at altitudes of less than three hundred miles. A series of snatch-and-grab visits to the moon and then mankind abandoned the dream.

We didn't get the stars. We got television satellites. Weather satellites. Spy satellites. GPS satellites. So many that Earth orbit is practically a junkyard.

But somehow... and we're back to the craziness... my friend, Terrence Arthur Keaton, crossed over into that other future. That other reality, where the dream actually happened.

Ever heard of the multi-universe concept, Dougie? It's the only hypothesis that fits the evidence. Apparently, the idea of overlapping dimensions of reality is more than esoteric math and crackpot theories.

Or, maybe not. Could be that your Papa Hank is nuttier than a Snickers bar.

All I can say is this... I've got a hundred and thirty-eight postcards in a Dutch Masters cigar box. In more than sixty years, I've never caught anybody sneaking one into my mailbox.

Where did they come from, Dougie? Tell me that.

Oh. You can't. Because I'm missing too. I've disappeared just as thoroughly as good old Terry.

Want to know what happened? Where your senile old Grandpappy got himself off to?

I went where Terry went.

After six decades of postcards from nowhere, I finally wrote back. I poured my heart out. I apologized for not believing all those years ago. For not having the courage to step through the door Terry had opened.

I told him—of all the mistakes I've made—that's the one I still regret.

You know what Terry did? He sent me a ticket. First class, one-way service to Moon Base Five.

I didn't even pack. Just grabbed my cigar box and went.

Please don't be insulted if I don't care whether you believe me, Dougie. Because this lunar gravity has taken the strain off my knees. The astrodocs are growing some new cartilage in the BioScience Lab. New lungs, fresh corneas, and a dozen other parts of me that have worn out.

I'll be as good as new in a few months. Terry's got as many years on his clock as I've got on mine and he doesn't look a day over thirty.

It's okay if you think I'm bonkers, Dougie. But one of these days, your own clock will wind down. You'll wake up and discover you're tired of living in a world that's forgotten how to dream. How to believe.

When that happens, you let me know. I'll send you a ticket. First class.

You'll like it here. This is the future we were meant to have. You and I can finally make up for all that time we should have had together.

Until then, I'll drop you a postcard once in a while.

With Love,

Papa Hank

I haven't shown the letter to anyone. Maybe Papa Hank is out there somewhere, sleeping in a refrigerator box.

Or maybe he's somewhere else. Someplace where doctors can re-grow lungs and corneas. I honestly can't say.

The people at Whispering Pines are getting ulcers, worrying that I'll sue. I should sign a waiver or something.

In the meantime, I keep going back to Papa Hank's letter. Not what he wrote, although that's certainly an eye-opener. I mean the pages. The envelope.

There's no return address, but the postmark reads: "U.S. Space Corps, Moon Base Five."

And the stationary? That slick silvery translucent stuff that's not quite paper?

It's like nothing in this world.