

THE MOON AT NOON

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The Freud simulation program told Mike that he had a subconscious desire to be caught. That was ludicrous, though --- being caught would mean the end of his career, which was a job he enjoyed. It would also be the end of his marriage, as his socially-conscious wife would be embarrassed out of her mind. His kids would be harassed at school, taunted with jeers about their crazy father, and for this reason alone Mike took precautions. He had to be cautious, even though being cautious was the very opposite of what he was doing. What did the Freud simulation know, anyway? It was only a program.

His rubber-walled car would do no more than 35 miles per hour down the crowded expressway --- to go faster would not be safe. Mike often wondered why 35 miles per hour was considered safe, and 36 miles per hour was not. His car pattered like a motorboat, burning natural gas, and inched its way from one lane to another as he progressed toward the next off ramp. Zeiter Park Exit, the sign read. Center City. His car made putt-putt sounds as it crept down the long, safe exit ramp.

As he came to a stop, he did so gently so as not to trigger the air-bag in his steering wheel --- which had gone off several times before. For some reason it had a hair trigger, and when he'd first bought the car Mike thought it was a factory defect. No, said the factory representative, it was made that way on purpose. Just to be safe. That, and the webbing that made up the seat belt system, was now standard in all cars by law. As was the crash helmet on his head.

Mike found a parking place on the street beside some bushes in Zeiter Park, right between two other rubber-walled cars. Rubber walls with a titanium-steel passenger compartment imbedded within, the mandatory norm and ultimate in safety and protection. Four way anti-skid disc brakes and pneumatic collapsible bumpers on front, back and sides. Titanium roll bar. Non-breakable Plexiglas windshield. It was --- all of it --- state of the art, and required by law.

As was the helmet on his head.

Mike got out of the car, pulled a bundled pack out of the back seat, and stepped up onto the soft, rubberized surface of the park sidewalk. He felt like a spaceman stepping out onto a hostile planet. The helmet he wore was not only a crash helmet for driving a car, it also doubled as the mandatory helmet to be worn by pedestrians, along with the mandatory knee and elbow pads, and of course the bullet proof vest to protect him from muggers. Mike, like most people in the last few years, had saved money by buying the whole outfit as a single suit, called a safety suit, which contained all the safe elements required by law for those who would go out in public. As a bonus, this suit also contained an emergency transponder that would radio for help if he should fall down and break his leg or hip, as if that were possible. This was not currently required by law, but Congress was in the process of considering it.

A few joggers ran past, each wearing a safety suit, and a few young couples lay under trees on blankets, groping each other's suits in frustration. Mike carried his bundle far up the hill, staying on the sidewalk, and at one point crossed the street (safely, at a crosswalk), and headed away from the park.

Up a long, steep hill he hiked, up to the top where one of the bigger skyscrapers in town stood, a black and polished bank building called Haben Tower. Inside he went, face blank, eyes straight ahead as he passed the security monitors. He walked straight to the elevators and pushed a button and waited. He was alone, he'd timed it right. Most people at this time were busy in their offices, all their visitors and visitations having been taken care of earlier that morning. The elevator arrived and he alone stepped inside. He pushed the button for the top floor, and stood stoically as the doors slid shut and the elevator began to rise.

This is my civil disobedience, he told himself. I have a right to do this. I have an obligation to do this. I've gone too far to back down now.

Mike took deep breaths, conscious that his hands were shaking.

The ride lasted a long time. It was a slow elevator. Fast elevators were dangerous. Mike had plenty of time to open the pack and pull out the rubber Ralph Nader mask. He pulled off his helmet, put on the mask, and put the helmet back on. With the helmet on, he was sure, no one would look twice at the mask.

There was a pastel tone from the elevator's speaker grill and the doors slid open. Several executives in black and white safety suits stepped in as he was stepping out. One gave him a startled glance but said nothing, and Mike dared not look back as he walked away from the elevator. Hopefully the man had doubted his own eyes. Mike continued down the hall and around a corner to the stair well. A security monitor was right there, electric eye focused on him as he tried the door. It was unlocked, of course --- it was a fire exit --- and he pushed it open and stepped through. He walked up the one remaining flight of stairs and faced the one remaining door at the top of the building. This one was locked, as it was not safe beyond. Mike, fortunately, had a pass key which he'd swiped from a janitor two weeks before. Within seconds he was out in the sunshine on the roof, with all of Center City in view.

Now he had to work fast, for there would be security guards after him within the next few minutes. He opened the pack, pulled out the aluminum and nylon contents, and then began removing his safety suit. After that was off, he removed all the rest of his clothes --- everything, including the helmet. The only thing that remained was the Ralph Nader mask. He stood naked on the roof, shoving his clothing into the pack, and with that done he began pulling out the telescoping aluminum struts and unfolding the nylon wings of his hang glider. He had eight wing nuts to fasten and twelve buttons to snap. He worked quickly but with precision, as he'd practiced this over fifty times in his garage. He had done it in secret, as hang gliders were strictly forbidden, and mere possession of one was a felony --- now he was doing it bare-ass naked on the top of a public building, in full view of the world.

The wings spread out and caught the faint breeze, glittering with all the colors of a butterfly. Mike finished the last few snaps and stashed his pack with his safety suit and helmet in a net at the top of the harness. He looped the padded harness around him and stood near the building's edge, nerving himself. He thought of the words written by his hero, the great 1960's pop philosopher Ashleigh Brilliant, "Should I abide by the rules until they're changed, or help speed the change by breaking them?" The door behind him burst open and a half-dozen security guards rushed out onto the roof, and Mike, startled, ran for the edge of the building. "Speed the change!" he shouted out loud, his voice

cracking with excitement. He took one last long step and the building was behind him.

The first few seconds were the biggest thrill, as he felt himself plummeting through the air. Then the wings caught and yanked him up, and he curved up and around to taunt the guards on the building top. They stared at him like a group of knights in black, leathery armor, some of them even smiling. Mike waved, made a steep bank and turned away.

It was a dizzy feeling, reeling through the air with it rushing across his bare skin, pulling at the little hairs on his chest, arms and legs. He was eye-level with the sea gulls and pigeons, sharing their element, scaring them off the ledges of the tower and sending them squawking away. The excitement and the caress of the air was of sexual intensity, and his sexual organ responded in kind. He flew several times around the tower, seeing shocked faces pressed up against tinted windows, before he turned on a wing and soared off across town.

The top of another tall building lay below him, down the hill from Haben Tower, and he could have landed on it had he wished. Instead he touched the microwave relay antenna on its roof with the tips of his toes as he flew over, making it wobble, causing a momentary interruption in someone's data-link. Somewhere in the building, someone missed a word in a conversation, or lost some bytes in a data transfer. The thought made him giggle, and he circled around and waved at the windows, each one filled with faces and open, gaping mouths. As he did so, the wind caught an edge of his mask and pulled it off.

His face had been sweating under the mask, and the sudden blast of cool air was a shock. He turned quickly away from the windows, dipped the glider and banked, soaring away from the building. Holy Jesus, he thought. Holy Jesus. Holy holy Jesus. For the first time since he jumped off the Haben Tower he felt naked. What am I going to do?

It was like a bad dream.

Heading away from the buildings, Mike continued down the hill, passing over the City Hall. He circled above it, feeling his panic fade. Far below, gnat sized people stood around in a parking lot looking up at him. He was so far up that there was no way they could see his face, not even with binoculars. Not clearly, at least. He continued to circle, smiling at the city buildings and the tiny figures in the parking lot beneath him. City officials, no doubt, men and women in the public trust, making laws to protect people from themselves. Seeing something strange in the sky today? An eclipse perhaps? The moon at noon?

He meandered above the city searching for updrafts. The loss of his mask still worried him. It made him feel unsure, urged him to race the glider toward the park for a quick escape. But he had plenty of elevation, and there were warm updrafts here and there --- he could stay up for another 30 minutes at least. At the moment he was deliberately avoiding the park, not wanting to help any of the authorities who may be tracking him to guess where he intended to land. As long as Mike maintained his altitude, all it would take was one long dip, a quick swoop across town, and he would be at the park --- far faster than anyone in a car or on a bicycle could follow. I have time, he told himself. Lots of time.

Daring himself, Mike turned into the wind and headed for the far side of the hill, where the updraft would be the strongest. The breeze coming in from the West hit the hill and deflected up at a steep angle. Mike felt for it as he rounded past the concentric circles of the Country Club, hoping to ease into it as

he thought it might be quite turbulent. He was over the upper half of the golf range, the really tough holes which sat on the lower shoulder of the hill, when the updraft hit him. Even though he was expecting it, it caught him off guard as to how strong it actually was --- he felt the Earth drop away and the blood rush to his feet, and there was creaking sounds from his aluminum frame and two harsh pops, followed by a rapid fluttering of nylon. The thrill of fear went through him like a spike. Two snap buttons on the leading edge of his left wing, out toward the tip, had come undone. The drag of the loose material pulled on that wing tip and made the glider turn, taking him against his will out of the updraft.

Mike swore, throwing his weight to the other side, fighting the turn. If it kept up like this, the best he could hope for was a slow spiral down to the ground. What he was really worried about was coming around and hitting that updraft again. With two snaps off, it wouldn't take much to pull the rest loose --- the wing would come off like it were unzipped, parting from the frame that held it out. Mike would tumble to his death, and only prove to the world that hang gliding --- with or without a safety suit --- was too dangerous to be legal.

Mike managed to cancel the turn, even to coax the glider a little to the right. This was still no good, as he was now heading right for the side of the hill. He had hardly any control now at all, though if he could just get it a little more to the right, he could land safely on the fairway to the 7th hole. But a sudden updraft caught him and sent him up another thirty meters, getting him right up to the crest of the shoulder. And there, sitting on the ridge, was the Country Club clubhouse. Mike aimed for the white rock of the long, flat roof, and touched down to find it very hot on the bottom of his bare feet.

"Yow!" he said. "Ow! Oooh! Ouch!" He hopped around, getting out of the harness, then dropped the glider and danced around to the wing tip. He snapped the buttons shut, rushed back to the middle, harnessed himself, and ran off toward the North-East. There was a terrible dip off the edge of the roof, and for a moment it didn't look like he was going to clear the line of trees separating one side of the ridge from the other. He turned on one wing and sailed in between, right through the trees and only several feet over the grassy ground, then the hill dropped away and the city once again spread below his bare toes. "Jesus!" he exclaimed to himself. "This is it. This is enough." He pulled on the bar and went into a dive. The glider swooped down toward the tops of the buildings, the air rushing past him and roaring in his ears, then he pulled up and crossed over to the park, a streak of color slicing through the air. He circled around once, looking for a secluded spot, and shedding some of the speed from the dive. There was a whole meadow adjacent to his car that looked totally deserted, so he took it down and hit the ground running. He reached the edge of the bushes and struggled out of his harness, then quickly began undoing the wing nuts so that he could fold the wings and get out of sight. From somewhere to his right he heard shouting, and he gritted his teeth, trying to hurry. "Over there!" he heard a woman's voice. "I think he landed!"

"Where?!"

"Over there!"

Mike folded the wings and rushed into the bushes, pulling the glider after him. He pulled his pack out and fumbled with his clothes, putting his underwear on backwards and buttoning his shirt crooked. By the time he had his safety suit on he could hear people in the meadow where he'd landed, calling out to each other,

saying they could swear this is where he had dropped from sight. Trying to be as silent as possible, he disassembled the glider --- though no matter what he tried, he couldn't silence the unsnapping of the buttons. Someone was poking around in the bushes to the right of him, about ten meters away, when Mike finished stowing the glider in the pack. He took a breath, turned toward the street and pushed his way through the bushes to the sidewalk.

There were two cops and a squad car right in front of him. One was walking around the bushes toward the meadow, the other stood at the car and then looked over to see Mike on the sidewalk, looking guilty. "Hey," he said, walking over to Mike. "What's that in the bag there?"

"What?"

The officer reached over and unzipped part of the bag, where a tuft of the nylon had been sticking out. He pulled more of the nylon out and felt it with his fingers. "I'll be damned," he muttered, looking up and peering into Mike's eyes. "You're him."

"I'm who?" Mike said, but his voice was shaking, as were his hands.

"Don't play games with me, you're that crazy bastard mooning the city from the air!" The officer whipped out his night stick and smacked Mike in the face. "Pervert!" Whack! "Terrorist!" Whack, whack! Mike gasped in agony and fell backwards, watching in horror as the policeman's partner came into view and begin delivering blows of his own.

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Consciousness came and went. Mike was aware of the ride in the ambulance, and the doctors putting stitches in his face. Then he was in a hospital bed. The gaps in between were like sections of a video tape that had been erased with a magnet. He lie in the white, sterile linen, held snugly by the safety straps required of all hospital beds, and stared at the holes in the ceiling. His face felt as if an angry cougar used it to sharpen its claws.

Mike thought of his kids, his wife. His job. It was over. They would never understand. Why did I have to do this? He tried to feel regret, but it wasn't there. He was glad he was caught --- he was calm about it. The Freud simulation had been right. In one single act he'd broken all of the safety laws he so desperately hated, and he was proud of it. He'd done it, survived, and now he could get on with his life . . . or at least what there was left of it.

Someone was yelling outside the door. The voice had the edge of authority in it, and sounded angry. "Let me get this straight. You beat up and put into the hospital a man who broke the safety laws? Is this what I'm hearing you say? I can't believe anyone can be so stupid! No! Shut up! I don't want to hear any more . . ." The voice faded out as they conversation moved away from the door. Mike felt the impulse to smile, but it hurt too much. Good thing he'd had his safety suit on before the police caught him. It had probably saved his life.

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