

Shooting the Moon
by Geoffrey A. Landis

Yeah, kid, I've heard of you, or, anyway, I've heard of your organization. So you're going to do a moon-flight, are you. No, I'm not laughing at you—I believe that just maybe you can do it. The technology is there. It's been there for thirty years, we both know that.

How'd you hear about me, anyway?

Really? That old son of a bitch.

Okay. Maybe you can. It's not the technology that's going to trip you up, though. The technology is a piece of cake. I mean, it will be hard, it will be harder than anything you can think of, but it will be easy in one sense: with technology you know where you stand, you can figure out what's the best way to do things.

With people, it's not so simple, kid, take it from an old man: the hard part, the goddamn hard part, is the people.

You think you know it all, don't you? You think it's going to be easy. You don't know a goddamn thing.

I'll tell you a story. That's what you came here for, isn't it? To hear a story from the old man. You heard, somehow, about what we did, about what we tried—or maybe you heard some, and you guessed some. And you heard that we fucked up, and you want to know why. I can see that you really don't think anything I can say will apply to you. You think you're golden and you can't fail, and deep down you're sure that there's nothing that you can learn from screw-ups like us—no, you didn't say that, but I was young once, I know how you feel. We were young once, too, and we thought we knew what we were doing. We did the calculations, yeah, the same ones you did.

This was back in the '70's. The Apollo program had come to a dead end, and we were a bunch of hot-shit aerospace engineers scraping out a living, but we had a dream. We were going to the moon. Not sending somebody, we were going to go ourselves. Forget the government projects; we were a little disillusioned with government—nothing against NASA, but we were the generation that saw Richard Nixon cancel the Apollo moonflights, and scrap three working Saturn rockets, and we didn't exactly trust big spaceflight projects. We were going to the moon, and we were going to get Hollywood to pay for it.

Yeah, sure you've heard this story before. It's true now, and it was true back then—there's enough money in the entertainment business to pay for a space program out of petty cash. To Americans, spaceflight is entertainment—science is just a sidelight, an excuse for the spectacle.

Okay. Shut up. Here's the story.

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Project Moon was going to be the greatest spectacle ever filmed, a spectacle to out-spectacle Star Wars; a real moon landing, filmed live on the moon. It was Mr. Rich and the Gecko that thought of it, mostly. They dragged me into it, and we refined the ideas over more than a few beers at the Thirsty Ear. "I figure the Apollo spacecraft had a factor of two margin on the lunar surface," the Gecko said. "That's huge. We can cut corners, leave behind the redundancy, get rid of the margin—we can do it for a quarter of the launch mass." There's an obscure law, you probably haven't heard of it, said that scrap government property can be claimed for cost by any company which has a legitimate business use for it. Far as I know, it's still on the books. At the end of the Apollo program, NASA scrapped three complete Saturn rockets. You can see them, rusting away on display, one in Huntsville, one in Houston, one at the Cape. Lousy thing to do with a rocket, my opinion. We couldn't get them—the damn museums at the Space Centers refused to declare them excess. But we found out that the engines and avionics for Apollo 21—the long-lead-time

parts, all the important stuff—had been manufactured before the mission was canned. They were still there, in perfect shape, stashed in climate-controlled warehouses in Alabama and California. We got dibs on them.

The Gecko was a tall gangly guy with an unpronounceable Polish name. You've never heard of him, but he was an orbital mechanics wizard, which was really something back in those days when a computer was a big hunk of temperamental iron that took up a whole air-conditioned room. I had never seen him wear anything other than a white button-down shirt, not even to the beach. Somebody called him the Gecko because he moved like one, stock still for minutes, and then suddenly—blur—he was somewhere else. The name stuck, even if the guy who tagged him couldn't hack it and left the program.

Mr. Rich, that's Ricardo Capolongo. He was short, dapper, and always wore a suit with a vest, even when vests were out of style. It was Mr. Rich tracked down the spare Apollo parts, and Gecko who said, with no trace of drunkenness in his voice, that if we could find backing, he could land us safely on the moon, no problem.

We'd all read Heinlein. "The Man Who Sold the Moon," great story. It was our inspiration. We could do it. There was money could be made in space, and the entertainment industry was the place to make it.

So we made a pact. We were solemnly sober about it. We pledged to the project everything we had: our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.

We bought tickets west, and hit the streets of Hollywood. I had our financial statements all worked out, knew how to talk knowledgeable about gross, net, up-front money, shooting ratio. We were ready to show how the venture could make money: just give us a billion dollars to put together a mission to the moon, I could guarantee a profit: if not on television and first-run film rights, then on the plastic models and Vue-Master and product endorsements. We had all our T's dotted and our I's crossed, and we started right at the top of the list.

We got laughed at. Kubrick we couldn't even talk to. Altman was too busy to talk, this week and for the rest of the next decade. We moved down the list. Once word started getting around Hollywood about the three nerds with their wacko pitch, we had problems even getting in the door. Roddenberry told us to shove off. We kept on pounding the pavement, moving down the list. Roger Corman loved it, couldn't get the money together. Then further down yet. Finally we scraped the bottom of the barrel, and when that didn't work, we went lower yet.

We ended up with Danton Swiggs.

No, I don't doubt that you never heard of him, although he produced two, maybe three hundred feature movies. He's known well enough in Hollywood, though.

Let's just put it this way—Swiggs Productions never had to worry about the budget for wardrobe, since for the most part his actors didn't wear any.

To understand Swiggs, the king of sleaze, you gotta first understand Chicago.

In the late '60s, it seems, there was this masseuse who massaged her clients in some places which Chicago's finest thought she shouldn't ought to be touching. The masseuse in question appealed, and Illinois Supreme Court had ruled that the question of which parts get massaged was a private matter between the masseuse and her client, and the police had nothing to say about it.

Swiggs had seen the business potential released by that decision. Within two months, he had opened up a series of massage parlors to employ busty women in skimpy clothes to rub their lonely male clients a little bit below the buckle, for a hundred bucks a pop. Heck, for all I know, some of 'em might have even known how to give a massage.

Danny Swiggs made a moderate fortune at the massage business, and got out of the business right before the bottom line went south from cut-rate competition. He moved into magazines, the type you don't see at family newsstands, and made money at that. From there he invested in Nevada brothels, and when he made a pile at that, he went on to movies. He already had the connections in the sleaze business. The laws about what you could show on

screen were loosening up. Films like Last Tango In Paris were stretching the limits, making sex into art. Swiggs, he stretched the limits too, just in the other direction.

When we got to Swiggs, he'd made his bundle and was trying to go legit. He wore a magnificent wave of hair (none of it his own), a cream-colored polyester shirt open down to his navel to show off his thick gold chains, and lizard-skin platform shoes. Hanging from his gold chains was a crystal the size of a baseball. "Pure quartz," he explained to me proudly. "One hundred percent natural crystal"—expecting, no doubt, that I would be impressed. Guaranteed to balance his Chi, he said. Double his virility. He had a girl on each arm. Not the type of woman I'd be interested in, even if I hadn't been married; the type that were designed with the word "ornament" in mind, the kind with too much mascara and clothes that were too few or too tight.

Swiggs Productions was going mainstream. He was looking for a project to establish him in Hollywood as a legitimate name, a by-god don't-call-me-I'll-call-you producer—in a town where producers were treated with about the same regard as lawyers or agents, only not quite so high class. But his first attempt at a legit film was a dog, twenty million spent in production and maybe twelve people actually paid money to see it. That just whet his appetite. He had the cash, and he was looking to find the score.

The room was full of girls, girls just lounging around in mini-skirts and extremely tight sweaters. Even back then mini-skirts were years out of fashion, but he just liked the look. "Hey," he said, and winked. "You take a fancy to any of 'em, you give me the word."

Now, I know a lot of aerospace engineers, and all of them (back then) were men, and all of them were married. The astronauts get the publicity and the chicks; the engineers make the rockets work, and go home to their wives and children. "I'm married," I said. "Got two kids in high school."

He looked at me without any real comprehension. "Say, you think I can't be discreet?" He nudged me with an elbow. "No problemo, stud, it's under cover. Go ahead, your little muffy will hear nothing from me, word."

The Gecko would have walked out right then, but we couldn't. We just couldn't. We'd sunk every dollar we'd had or could borrow into Project Moon. Swiggs was the last human being left in Hollywood who would even let us in the door. We had absolutely no choices left.

"So tell me something I want to hear," said Swiggs, leaning back in his leather chair behind a mahogany desk about the size of Idaho. "Give me the pitch that will make me come in my pants."

We held our noses and pitched the concept. Mr. Rich explained how we could scrounge old Apollo hardware. Gecko explained how we could land on the moon, really, no kidding, this is not a scam. I explained how during the Apollo program the sales of television commercials during the TV specials would have easily paid for the whole project. Project Moon could be the story of the century, the story of the underdogs, Horatio Alger times ten.

We ran out of words, and fell silent.

Swiggs had his eyes closed, his face all scrunched up. Suddenly he stood up and pointed a finger at me. "Baby!" he said. "Yes, fucking yes, and I mean, yes. I've got a hard-on, I'm coming in my pants, this is the E-ticket ride of the century. The Moon Mission. No, wait, more class—The Moon Odyssey. No, I got it, I got it: Adventure: Moon. I can see it. This is big, guys, I mean big."

Gecko looked at me, raised an eyebrow, ventured a tiny smile. I winked and gave him a covert thumbs up. At long last, could we finally have hooked a producer? Now if we could only reel him in.

"Just one thing," Swiggs said, and we wilted silently. He looked at me.

"Convince me you can do it. I'm a simple kind of dude. That Apollo thingie cost 25 billion bucks. Explain to me in words I can understand just why you think you can do it cheaper."

I relaxed fractionally. This was a question we were ready for. "We're private," I said. "That means we're just plain more efficient than the government. We don't have to deal with politics, don't have to answer to Congress—when we need a decision, we make it. No committees, no reports, no justifications. When we need to buy something, we'll buy it—no government specifications, no fifty pounds of paperwork. We use off the shelf technology instead of custom made. Use electronics designed for televisions, at ten cents each, not aerospace parts at a thousand dollars a pop. And we know it can be done. Most of the technology is already developed, we can get it surplus." "And, face it," Mr. Rich added, "we tolerate a little more risk. Danger sells."

"People pay money to see Evel Knievel jump his motorcycle over cars," I clarified. "You know that they wouldn't be paying if they knew for sure he was going to make it. A little risk helps us."

Swiggs nodded. "That's straight. Where's your script?"

Mr. Rich cleared his throat. "No, ah, we were going to just film it as it happens. Give it a feel of veracity."

"A documentary? Babes in the woods. Docs don't fill theaters, dude. No, we need a plot—a little danger, a little romance. Fuck, no problem, I got writers, I buy fucking writers by the dozen, we can have a script next week." He leaned back in his fake-leather chair, and stared up at his reflection in the mirrored ceiling. "Do you assholes know what you have here? Baby, Adventure: Moon has got everything in one sweet deal, spectacle, adventure, exotic locations, sex—you're selling the goddamn American dream here, we are. It's going to be so hot it will make the hula-hoop fad look like old socks. You came to the right place, baby, you came to somebody who knows how to put together a deal."

We looked at each other and smiled. He was hooked.

"If you can pull off the tech shit," he said, "I can find the funding. Are you assholes lucky, or what?"

And that was how we sold our souls for a chance to go to the moon—not even to the Devil, but to Danton Swiggs.

"He's a lizard," Mr. Rich said, when we finally left, outside in that warm Hollywood night.

"But he's a producer," I said, and we both grinned.

"Hey," said the Gecko. "Watch it. You're insulting reptiles."

You understand, we didn't have any other choice. We had cut the budget and scraped and lied and cut every corner. When we started, we'd had plans for follow-up missions, for a whole settlement—we killed those plans, they cost too much. One trip to the moon, paid for by private funds—that was all we thought about, all we talked about, all that appeared in our dreams at night. And Danton Swiggs knew where to get the money to do it.

It wasn't his own money—Swiggs had money, but not nearly enough to put together the Project Moon expedition all by himself. But he knew people. Kids with inherited millions who liked a little risk along with their blue chips and trust funds. Oil-industry executives that needed tax-shelters to hide windfall profits from the IRS. Drug dealers who needed to put money into a legitimate business. Casino owners looking for new places to invest. And Swiggs took his cut.

His cut, as it happened, meant a controlling interest in the project. That was something we fought like wolverines, but it was one thing he wouldn't budge on. Swiggs might consult a personal astrologer to tell him the best hour of day to sign a contract, he might decide to trust somebody because he had a dream about the color of their shoes, but his cocaine-rotted nose was infallible about sniffing out just exactly what was good for Danton Swiggs, and the one rule he didn't break was, take care of number one: always keep control.

When Swiggs told us that this was a non-negotiable, we excused ourselves and held a hasty strategy conference.

"Deal-breaker," said the Gecko. "I say we walk."

"Walk?" Mr. Rich said. "Where the hell do you think we can go?" He laid it out for us. "We've already done everything but rob banks," he said. "And you know we'd do that too, but we need more cash than a bank robbery. It comes to this: sign the project over to Swiggs, and go to the moon, or keep control, and forget we had ever dreamed. Do you see any other choices? I don't. What do you want to do, guys? Just what do you want to do?"

We signed.

We thought we knew what we were getting into. The first thing Swiggs told us—and he told us this even before we signed—was that we could forget the silly idea that we would make the trip to the moon ourselves.

"Actors," he said. "Jeez, I thought you knew that from the start." Swiggs was wearing a purple velvet dinner jacket with a pink velour shirt. As he talked he was pulling Froot Loops out of a box, examining each one before popping it into his mouth. "We need some talent here, and that means actors, not engineers. Some hot numbers who look good on screen. The public plinks down their beer money, and they want to see beautiful people; they want drama and romance, not a couple of pasty-faced whitebread dorks wearing pocket-protectors, no offense."

This had always been the part of our plan that we'd never dared to speak aloud: we were not only going to put together a moon mission, overcoming tremendous odds, but we were going to fly it ourselves. Wouldn't the drama of the mission overshadow everything, and make the nation understand us for what we were—engineers—and like us all the better for not pretending?

"Are you jerking me off?" said Swiggs. "You, in the movie? Get real."

Gecko tried to argue this to Swiggs. He played every card in his deck: that our story was a story of a dream, it was our story, it would only be a shabby lie if they produced Project Moon with actors. Swiggs didn't budge. "So the story's about engineers—fine, the actors play engineers. No problemo, we'll write that into the script. You think that when the public sees a movie about cowboys, they hire real cowboys? Hell, no. They hire Yul Brynner to play a cowboy. Hollywood sells dreams, and that doesn't mean pudgy middle-aged guys in white shirts. Wipe-out, dudes, you sucked the big O. Pick up your boards and get with the program."

He looked at us. "Forget it, it's a done deal. Say, want some Froot Loops?"

"I figure it this way," the Gecko explained to me, later. "We do this right, it's a big hit, there's going to be a sequel." He smiled. "And then—then—who's holding the winning cards? We signed away control—but just for one film. Next time, we're in for sure—and this time we'll have a real budget, not just paperclips and old string."

"You think?" I asked.

"Sure." The Gecko smiled beatifically. "Mr. Swiggs promised me."

Then Swiggs let us know that he would shoot a porn flick.

"It's your idea, guy," he told me. "You said it: we've got to hit every market in America."

I threw up my hands and shook my head: no way. Every market? Sure, but pornography wasn't the business plan I'd had in mind.

Swiggs explained. The film would still be targeted to mainstream America. What Swiggs envisioned was a second film, shot between scenes of his film *Adventure: Moon*, a porn film in space.

After all, porn was what he was good at.

We didn't like it.

"How much did it cost to shoot *Deep Throat*?" he demanded.

I shook my head, shrugged my shoulders. "I don't know."

"Fifty grand," he said. "Fifty grand to shoot—that's pocket change. How much did it gross?"

Again, I shook my head.

He pointed his finger at me and laughed. "Bingo!" He snapped his fingers. "You got it. Nobody knows how much it grossed; they've been keeping that figure close. Half that money was under the table anyway. Now, how much have they reported, eh? Reported income only. Okay, hold on to your balls. Three hundred

and fifty million smackers. A third of a billion gross for a film that cost fifty grand to produce, and that's just the tip of the iceberg.

"And why is that? How come Americans, smart people who like their money, how come they paid three hundred million to see a lousy film that featured crummy lighting, amateur camera work, and actors that couldn't even say a two-line script without flubbing their lines? I tell you why. They paid for the novelty, that's why. They paid to see on-screen fucking like they've never seen on screen before, a new way to do the world's oldest trick.

"Now, you tell me: what kind of property do we have here? Don't answer, I'll tell you. We have got our little hands around a property that will show sex acts that have never even been possible on Earth. A measly third of a billion? Hell, we're going to blow that away on the video alone. We're going to be drowning in money. And we rake the straight stuff, the action-adventure stuff, right off the top. First we sell to the kiddies, make a few billion, then after we've saturated that market, we sell again to their mommy and daddy, let 'em watch some hot action like they've never seen. This is going to be hot, babe, and I mean bitching hot. You guys just don't know, you don't have a clue."

Suddenly he got serious. Swiggs did that sometimes, change moods instantly.

"Let me explain this so you can understand," he said. "We got no choice here. You tell me I've gotta line up a billion dollars cool to buy a seat in this poker game—" he held up a hand—"I know, I know, we'll make it back, we'll be rich. I know that, I've got the story. Now you listen. If I don't line up the bones, we don't get rich, we get the big Melvin. I need a pitch I can sell. Investors aren't going for the adventures. I'm hearing don't call me, I'll call you. You don't like porn? Fine. My daddy told me, everybody's entitled to an opinion, you got yours. I respect that. But you gotta realize, I can sell a fuck-flick. My investors understand that.

"So, get with the program, dude. Either we squirt some joy juice in orbit, or we fold right now. Got it?"

We got it. As Mr. Rich explained it, Von Braun made V-2 rockets before he made moon rockets. Was that moral? He got us to the moon. You do what you have to.

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The Gecko was in love. Perfect, pristine beauties, intricately tooled, bigger than houses: five F-1 engines, the most powerful rocket engines ever created by man. The last F-1 engines in the world.

They were stored in a warehouse in Canoga Park, not half an hour's drive from Hollywood. We'd driven out to see them.

The Rocketdyne facility was on a mountaintop, ugly sheet-metal buildings set in some of the most spectacularly gorgeous scenery I'd ever laid eyes on, rugged granite boulders and twisted pines. "Used to be a ranch, belonged to one of the studios," the Rocketdyne rep told us. "They filmed the old Cisco Kid serials here, you know that?"

If you've never been up close to an F-1 engine, it's an impressive sight. They are enormous. Gecko couldn't keep from touching them, running his hands over the fluted channels that circulated cooling through the nozzles, trotting up to the high-bay viewing platform to inspect the gargantuan turbopumps, and then back down to shine his flashlight up into the throats. "Flawless," he said, in awe. He put down his binoculars. "They're in perfect condition." I nodded. "Good." The engines were critical to our plans. They were the power source that pushed the Saturn V into the air, the beast that roared down the moon. Without them, we were nowhere. I turned to the suit who was waiting patiently for us to complete our inspection in the dimly-lit warehouse. "OK, we'll take them," I said. "I'll have a check cut for you as soon as I can get the financing solid; two weeks tops."

"Two weeks won't cut it," the suit said, in the accent of a bored Alabama

good-ol'-boy. "Storing these white elephants is costing us ten thousand dollars a month." He put up a hand to silence me when I was about to break in. "It doesn't matter what you say. You've been telling us you want to buy these engines for over a year now, and we still haven't seen any cash. This is it. End of the month they're going for scrap metal unless we've got a paying customer to pay the storage fees. And I mean a paying customer with cold hard cash, not promises."

The end of the month was three days away.

"Face it, ain't nobody going to the moon again," the suit said. He looked at the engines with scorn. "These puppies are nothing but old useless dinosaurs, taking up space. Time to melt them for scrap, get a little value out of them."

"I'll put it on my credit card," Gecko said.

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Crew selection was difficult.

We were getting californicated by now, rooms in the Beverly Wilshire, dining at La Dome or Dominicks, all on the expense account of Swiggs Productions. Mr. Rich had even taken to wearing Hawaiian shirts, the unofficial Hollywood uniform, although not even Hollywood could persuade the Gecko to switch from his white button-down.

"Four," Swiggs said. We were in his conference suite, which lacked anything resembling a conference table, but made up for it with a pool table, half a dozen pinball machines, two barber's chairs, a small trampoline, three different gum-ball machines and several hundred Pez dispensers. "We need a crew of four, that's bare bones." He ticked them off on his fingers. "Leading man, leading lady, camera, lighting."

"Leading lady?" Gecko said. We ignored him. We'd never told him about the porn part of the project, either.

"Shit, we could use a dozen more," Swiggs said. He raised more fingers.

"Gaffers, make-up, best boy, fluffers--"

"Pilot, copilot," Mr. Rich added. "That's six. Gecko, if we push it to the limit, what's the max we can put on the expedition?"

"Two," Gecko said. He seemed to think for a second, and with an almost invisible smile said. "Three, if none of them need to breathe." That was about as close as the Gecko ever came to humor.

"Shit, dude, you're fucking me," Swiggs said. "Come on now, you got to play with me. We need four; that's a dead minimum. Pull your head out of outer space for a minute and get on the bus. You're playing with the big boys now. Look, you give a little on your end, I'll give a little on mine. What if the cameraman and the lighting guy are midgets? We hire dwarfs, that's what we do. Not for the leads, of course--they have to be real people."

"What, dwarves aren't real?" Mr. Rich asked.

"That's the angle, midgets for the tech," Swiggs said, ignoring Rich. He turned to Gecko. "Work with me. How many can we fly now?"

Gecko thought for a moment. "Two," he said.

Two. It came down to a question of which was more important; a camera man, or oxygen. Midgets or no, it was driven by the mass budget. They needed to breathe.

Mr. Rich designed a camera that could be remotely programmed from the ground. As long as the actors knew their places, it might just work. The spacecraft was going to be so small that they could hardly be off-camera anyway. Gecko figured that the trajectory would be preprogrammed before they launched; they weren't actually flying the ship themselves, although we wouldn't mention that in the film. The moon wasn't a very long time-lag away; problems in flight could be solved on the ground. Lighting was something the actors would have to take care of themselves. The only indispensable part of the mission was the

leading man and the leading lady.

They'd have to pass a class-IV physical, Mr. Rich insisted, and Swiggs had to agree to pick actors who, at a minimum, had a pilot's license and a few hundred hours of solo time. Not that they'd fly the spacecraft themselves, but we wanted people with at least a minimum level of competence, who wouldn't panic out of idiocy when they started floating.

"And if they screw up in training, even once, they're out," the Gecko added.

"No arguments: out. We want that in writing."

"Sure, of course, no problemo," said Swiggs. "What, you think all actors are stupid?"

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"I love films," Swiggs said. I was with him in his penthouse suite, surrounded by mirrors, mirrors on the walls, mirrors on the table. The girl he had massaging the back of his neck was nearly bursting out of her low-cut blouse; I had a mild curiosity what color her hair had been before she'd made it eye-popping yellow.

"I just love 'em. I'm not in this business for the money; I'm not in it for the blow-jobs. I'm an artist. Nobody appreciates that. Nobody knows that a producer isn't just some asshole in a suit, he has to be an artist, he's got to have vision." He pointed his cigar at me, a fat and completely illegal Cuban. "OK, maybe you appreciate it. Nobody else."

The mirror on the table had enough cocaine on it to put down a racehorse.

"You know, the first moment I met you guys, I thought, oh, no, what kind of dweebs did the cat drag in this time? Then you started talking, and I said to myself, 'Jesus, this is one motherfucking killer idea. How do I get to know you better?' "

He looked at me through bloodshot eyes. "Sure you don't need a girl? Not even a hooter?" He shook his head when I answered no. "Shit. You guys are the limit, you know that? The absolute fucking limit."

"So what's the script," I asked. This was what he'd invited me here for, to tell me about the script. He had a story, he said, and it was "wicked pisser."

"Later," he said. "Hey, loosen up. Get in touch with your feelings, drop some acid. You dudes are cool, but you're just so damn uptight."

He leaned back, and the girl massaging his back moved over to start on his chest. "Hey, if I can just get the right cast, this script is going to be killer. Trust me."

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We still hadn't seen the script.

As it ended up, we had no role in casting: one day Swiggs just informed us he had finished casting the leading roles. "Gentlemen, I'd like you to meet the talented—" he winked—"Miss Linda Vixen, our lovely leading lady."

She was spectacularly beautiful—amber hair pruned in thick waves around her shoulders, narrow waist, wide hips, and legs that, even without the five-inch heels, would make any man with a pulse beg and grovel.

Closer up, she wasn't so beautiful. She was older than I'd thought, although artful make-up concealed her actual age. Her face was old. She stared forward, completely lacking in any interest, her eyes utterly blank of expression, as if she'd already seen everything, done everything, and none of it had been worth the bother.

"Take off your clothes, honey," Swiggs said. "Show the boys your assets."

Her bored expression didn't change, but it couldn't have taken her more than

seven seconds to shrug out of her clothing. She stared at nothing, chewing gum, wearing nothing but five-inch stiletto heels.

The Gecko looked on with a puzzled expression. Rich just stared, I don't think he could have closed his mouth if he'd tried. I was less impressed. She had big breasts, sure, but that was her asset. And without her brassiere, they were seriously sagging.

"Shoot," Gecko said. "What the heck is this? We can't use some airhead—I told you, we need somebody with a pilot's license, minimum."

Vixen looked at him utterly without expression, then blew a bubble and popped it in his face.

Swiggs chuckled. "Babe, you got a pilot's license?"

She popped another bubble, then took the gum out of her mouth, dropped it on the carpet, and stepped on it. In her heels, that was a precision feat.

"Aerobatic," she said.

"No way," Gecko said.

She didn't bother to reply.

"I don't believe it," Gecko said. "Was it hard to get?" Gecko had once decided he would try for an aerobatic rating. The grapevine said that he'd puked all over the cockpit the first time the instructor had taken him out.

She looked at him for a moment, and cocked her head. For a moment I thought her expression might change. "Nah," she said. "It was boring." She looked at Swiggs. "You want me to give the yozzies blow jobs?"

"No, sweetie," Swiggs said. "Not these guys."

"OK." She picked up her clothes and walked out.

After she'd left, I said, "What is this, Swiggs? We can't use her. She's a junkie."

"No, no," Swiggs said.

"Don't try to bullshit me, Swiggs," I said. "I know needle tracks when I see them."

"Hey," he said. "Cut her a little slack. She's good. We're not going to find anybody better, believe me. Everybody in Hollywood has experimented a little; it's no big deal. Don't you know? In Hollywood, people don't say 'Hi, how are you' when they meet, they say, 'How high are you?' "

He snorted at his own joke. "And, besides, just wait until you hear the plot. You'll die."

"Yeah? You've been promising. When will I see it?"

"I'll get it to you tomorrow."

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"It's a draft," Swiggs said. He seemed anxious that I like it. "Just a draft. Something here that doesn't work, we can fix it."

I retired into a lounge beside the kidney-shaped swimming pool to read. I was worried—we hadn't wanted a script at all—but as I turned pages, and started to visualize the scenes, I relaxed. This might be ok.

To my surprise, the script was good. I could see the writer had stolen wholesale from half a dozen old science fiction stories, but the pieces fit together seamlessly. He had me on the edge of my seat.

The heroine was a rich adventuress whose daddy had contributed to the project. The hero was the handsome, dedicated engineer. From the beginning they didn't like each other, but they had to work together to make the mission a success, and, of course, at the last minute the crew ends up to be just the two of them. It had romance, it had adventure, and you could feel the tension building as things started to go wrong—would they make it? And then, they make it to the moon (the script says "shots of scenery and our protagonists bouncing around")—but there isn't enough oxygen left. Micrometeoroid punctures had put tiny pinholes in their tank, too much of their oxygen had leaked out. They blast off from the moon, but there isn't enough oxygen left for them to

make it home alive.

Shit, I thought. It's a cliché, but it grabs you. I could see it on the screen. The audience would believe it. Every one of them would be holding their breath.

We'd have micrometeoroid shields over the tanks, of course. A few layers of multi-layer insulation would do it. But the audience wouldn't know that. The hero makes a great speech about self sacrifice. He says he's going to float off into space so he can save enough oxygen so that she will survive. She tells him no, she loves him too much. They both are wearing their space suits, and as they are talking he is operating the air pump to depressurize the cabin. He's got my attention. She opens the hatch, pops the latches on her helmet, and as her helmet flies away and the air explodes out, with her last breath she says, I love you, and she pushes off from her couch and the camera follows her as she drifts off into space—

What?

Holy shit, I thought. How is he going to get them out of this one? Does he think that she can hold her breath? I flipped to the last page—
The end was, she's dead.

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"It's, interesting," I said.

"What did I tell you?" Swiggs said. "Interesting? It's fucking killer. Am I right, or am I right? Say yes."

"This plot. It's—the cold equations."

"Hey, that's a good phrase. Yeah. What do you think—it's got tragedy, romance, adventure—everything."

"OK. So, how do you think we're going to shoot this? We don't have a budget for special effects—how do you want to do the scene where she opens her helmet?"

Swiggs shrugged. "What's the need for special effects? She opens her helmet."

"But, she can't do that."

"Why not?"

"There's no air in space. She'll die."

"Well, that's the point, isn't it?" He looked at me. "Didn't you tell me that the whole point is that this isn't just make-believe, it's real? She dies. Let me tell you, that will pack the theaters."

Oh, no. This was worse than I thought. It was a snuff movie. "When the police find out that you killed somebody deliberately, they'll shut down the film, and we'll all be in jail."

"Shit, dude, don't be dumb. We don't release the script—that's top secret. Any leaks, we deny everything, and it just adds to the buzz. To the public, it's an accident."

"I'd better talk to Miss Vixen."

Swiggs shrugged. "She's cool with it."

So I talked to the actress. Did she understand what, exactly, the script said?

"Yeah, I die. Big deal." She shrugged. "Live fast, die young."

"You don't mean that."

"Fucking yes. Everybody dies, yozzie, you know that? It's happening. I'd just as soon check out early as late, and why not do it on screen? It's the ultimate kick."

"Don't you want to live?" I said. "There's plenty of experiences. You could have children—"

"Had a kid when I was fifteen," she said. "Died."

"There's more to life—"

"Shit, yozzie, what the hell do I want to live for? I've seen it all, I've done it all, and not one moment was worth the bother of doing again. Life is

no BFD, if you ask me. Sex while sky diving? Yeah, done that. Motorcycling at a hundred miles an hour down Topanga Canyon, dead-drunk and blasted off my ass on acid? Yeah, yeah, done that. I've snorted strychnine for kicks, gang-banged the Hell's Angels, surfed Dead-Man's Rocks in a hurricane, done that, done that, done that. I've got more friends dead than you ever had living. Death? Fuck, bring it on. Dying is just another kind of high."

"I've got the backing," Swiggs said. "One billion little green ice-cubes, payable on demand. We are go for lift-off, kids, and let me remind you that I have controlling interest in this venture, not you. I can buy talent, kids. I can buy rocket scientists. I have the plan, I've got the money, and we're making this movie, with or without you. So, are you in, or not?"

"Hey, Astro-boy, why the shocked expression?" she said. "It's not like I'm not going to die anyway. Take a look at me. I'm sagging." She popped her breasts out of her blouse and shook them at me. "How long do you think I've got left in the industry, two years, maybe three? I'm washed up and faded out. Go out with a bang? Hell, I'd do fucking anything to go out that way." For just a moment her face had an expression; she was wistful. Then her face was blank again. "At least they will remember my name."

"It's out of the question," I said. "No. I veto it."

Swiggs shook his head and smiled. "Take another look at the contract. You can't veto anything. I'm running this project now."

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"The problem," said the Gecko, "is that she'll do it. She's crazy enough to really die, just to get a little screen time."

It was the three of us meeting, alone.

"The real problem is that we've signed over the project," Mr. Rich said. "That includes non-disclosure agreements. If we say word one about this to anybody, Swiggs denies everything, sues us for breach of contract and gets everything we have, and we go to jail, as well. We're out of the control loop here. Even if we drop out, he still goes forward with it."

"You'd do it too," I said.

"What?" said the Gecko.

"Admit it," I said. "You'd be willing to die, if it means that you could get to the moon first."

The Gecko thought for a moment. "Yeah," he said. "But that's different."

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So, I ask you, what should we have done? What would you do?

Yeah, I'll tell you how it all came out. There's not much to tell. The Gecko called up American Express, told them his card had been stolen, it had been gone for a week and he just noticed it was missing. The credit card company found the ten-thousand dollar charge to Rocketdyne, they stopped payment, and the next day Rocketdyne melted the F-1 engines down for scrap. I think that hurt the Gecko more than anything, seeing those beautiful engines melt into scrap metal. But without the F-1 engines, Project Moon was over.

End of story.

Nah, Swiggs couldn't make the movie by himself. He tried suing us, but there was nothing to sue for; we were flat-out bankrupt. He went on making movies, some of them where the actors even wear clothes. Nope, none you've ever heard of, I don't think.

The Gecko took his government pension, and started a new career in the computer industry. Did pretty well for himself, I guess, enough to buy himself a new yacht and a new car and a new wife every couple of years. I sort of lost

track of him after a while. Guess he's retired for good, by now. I hope he found happiness.

Mr. Rich died. Cancer got him; it gets everybody in the end, but it got him early. I still exchange Christmas cards with his wife.

And me, well you see me. I got old.

What happened to the actress? She died of hepatitis. Sometimes I picture her. She straightened out, got married, settled down. She thinks back on her crazy youth and laughs.

We sold our dreams, but we couldn't sell our conscience. And as a result, the project failed. Twenty years later, no moonbase, and the stars look farther away every time we look up.

So, I ask you—should we have sold out?

So now you say you want to go to the moon. You think Hollywood can finance it; you've got it all worked out, you think you've got every detail arranged.

Artemis Project, is it? Nice name.

I just have one question for you, kid. A question you'd better start asking yourself now, since you'll have to answer it some day.

Just how far are you willing to go?

The End

Some of the ideas in the story were developed from discussions about the Artemis project, a project to develop a privately-financed moon mission. You can find out more at the Artemis Society International web site:

<http://www.asi.org/>.