

The Moon Landing

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For a week now we had all been scientists. Words like "gravity," "ascent," "lunar," "perigee," "orbit" flew from our conversations like rockets leaving a busy spaceport. For students across the nation, this summer was different from all others. Previously, scholarly concerns achieved escape velocity for the summer vacation, not to return from their cometlike orbits until fall. This time, however, scientific books and magazines were bought faster than they could be stocked. That summer "hot" was the kinetic energy of air molecules, "sunburn" was the result of solar electromagnetic radiation, and "watermelons" were oblong spheroids.

The Americans were going to the moon, and Iran had one week to catch up.

The Russians had been preparing longer. Their unmanned Luna 15 left a little after Apollo II was launched--it was to be waiting in lunar orbit when the Americans arrived. The Russian motive was not clear. If they wished to further dramatize the American achievement, the crash of Luna 15 succeeded. We ringsiders were disappointed that the race was not closer. On a historic scale, it was a photo finish, but we hoped Luna 15 was secretly manned and that the Americans and the Russians would be elbowing each other for the choicest landing spot. The small step for man should have been a giant leap out the window to be first to tag the moon.

Among the relatives sentiments were mixed and questions were big. "Did God give his permission for this?" "If He becomes angry, will He take it out on everybody or just the Americans?" "What direction do you face when you pray on the moon-flat on your back?" "This victory is the spoils of war--was it not a German rocket that made it possible?"

The censors had taken much of the color out of the on-the-street interviews aired on national television. They were copies of American on-the-street interviews, the main concern being whether or not the money would have been better spent on food. How could we spend all this money to fill our minds when our stomachs were still empty? Stone Age instinct scrutinized the NASA budget and wondered if it was edible. The interviewer avoided asking why Iranians cared how American tax dollars were spent. He might have asked the wrong person and gotten

an earful of cousin Iraj's ideas as to where the money really came from and who in the country is responsible for handing over on a platter the nation's resources.

Cousin Iraj was a political beast with a temper. We all worried for him. He was playing Russian roulette with a fully loaded weapon: his mouth. Talking to Iraj was impossible. He listened long enough to calculate one's political whereabouts, then he blasted that position to ruins and offered asylum under the umbrella of his own opinions.

One of Iraj's faithful converts was our manservant, Shafa. Shafa was rooting for the Russians. He imagined the moon to be quite accessible and cursed the West for sabotaging Iran's technological progress. Had they not refused us a steel plant for fear we might overtake them? The Russians, on the other hand, were helping us build our first steel plant. With their help Iran could join the space age. I asked him if he would volunteer if Iran needed an astronaut.

"No," he said flatly.

"Why not, you hypocrite?"

"Wife and children."

"You are so petty."

"You are so young."

Shafa and I had locked horns over the moon landing. This was typical—we were always squabbling over the news. I thought the Americans should win because that way we would see more of the moon. The Russians were unreasonably secretive about their space program. Shafa thought the Russians deserved the lunar prize on moral grounds. He was not an easy opponent. He spent hours with the newspaper, carefully reading between the lines. He did not like TV news. Too visual; no lines that could be read between. He had a theory that whatever Americans do, they do for money.

"Is there money on the moon?" I asked.

"There must be or they wouldn't be going."

"What if they find nothing but rocks?"

"Then they won't go back."

He thought the Russians were racing to the moon to show that idealism prevailed over greed. He was amused that a nation of godless people could wage a holy war against Christians.

Shafa sometimes consulted my father about political issues. He knew it was useless; my father never accepted anyone's invitation to discuss domestic politics. "What I think makes no

difference, what I say can get us both into trouble." Iraj used to bait him by suggesting that my father's opinion was probably not tenable anyway. My father's evasion: "I can't make it any more tenable by telling you about it." Shafa once asked him when he thought Iran would have a space program. I knew that my father was very pessimistic about Iran's future. He believed that technology was anathema to our poetic temperament. When the first heart transplant was done, he told me that modernization is like a transplant. To stay alive a little longer, bit by bit we were replacing our parts with dead things.

"Would you rather die than have a transplant?" I asked.

"I don't think I will live long enough to worry about that."

He did not think he would live long enough to see humans land on the moon either. But here he was worrying about how best to evade Shafa's touchy question.

"We are poets and Sufis," he said bitterly. "What can we discover in the universe that the poet Hafiz has not already told us?"

This was not entirely an evasion. Iranians are convinced that Persian poetry cannot be surpassed in depth and beauty. Whereas our claims to monopoly on other forms of art stem from ignorance, I believe that our high opinion of our poetry is justified. Hafiz is the most beloved of the mystic poets. In times of crisis his *Divan* is consulted like an oracle. Street vendors seek out troubled faces in the crowd and sell them scraps of Hafiz's wisdom. Sometimes the oracle is surprisingly explicit and sometimes disappointingly vague. But always the verses flood the crisis with profound spiritual light. If a resolution exists, it will not remain in the shadows.

My father recited a verse that said everything there was to say, and during the mystical silence that always follows the words of Hafiz, Shafa and I did not feel the need for a moon landing.

When domestic politics were not involved, my father was more cooperative. He believed that the scientific yield of the moon program would probably not justify the costs. It was a good way to pass off military research as peaceful science and attain global prestige at the same time. When he explained things so well, I could tell he was lying. The moon landing was an emotional issue for him, and when emotions were involved, he talked like a college professor and acted like an idiot. All through the week of Apollo's journey he made a point of insulting me.

"America has entertained Iranians with its puppet show (he meant the Shah) for this long, and now they have the entire world watching their space show." Such an open criticism of the

Shah was quite unlike my father. If I had not known him better, I would have said he was drunk. I asked him if he did not wish there to be a moon landing.

"Do you know what fuels those rockets?" he asked rhetorically. I smelled a trap.

"I think it is liquid hydrogen that combines with. ..."

"Our oil." He interrupted patronizingly. He was wearing an I-am-so-profound smirk.

"What do you mean?" I asked, taking the bait. I had never seen him so candid and wanted him to say more.

He shook his head amusedly and said, "That is what happens when you become too American. You stop understanding things even a village boy can figure out."

I walked away chastised. How had I failed him? He had encouraged me all along to admire and emulate Americans. For my own good. Apparently, though, I was not to identify with them to the point of being happy about their successes. I wanted to explain to him that it did not make any difference who landed on the moon. But this was so obvious and deep-felt that if he pretended he did not believe me, I would explode. Getting my goat was his plan, though, even a village boy could see that. He was uncomfortable about the moon landing. I wished he would remarry and take it out on his wife.

Shafa had noticed my father's tauntings and saw his opportunity. Now that my wisdom was being questioned by the master, I was unsure of myself and could be easily defeated in arguments. In this week's frequent debates over the newspaper, he relied less on facts than on insinuations that I was young and gullible. He knew this irritated me and delighted in being able to get back at me for ordering him around.

By the eve of the moon landing, tempers had become quite hot, and it was clear we were going to have popcorn for the show. I lambasted my younger brother for not understanding the significance of the moon landing. The new Iranian imitation-Rolling-Stones record he had bought was monopolizing his sense of awe. Wearing a replica of my father's patronizing smirk, I explained the difference between reality and sci-fi. He told me defiantly that he knew the difference but couldn't see what difference it made. I wanted to torture him until he wept with zealous realization.

To add to the Inquisition atmosphere, cousin Iraj was coming over to spend a few days. I suspected he had been sent away because he had agitated himself to hysteria over the moon landing and his family could not stand him. He might act with more reserve in my father's

presence. Iraj had been preaching to fools like me all week, but our glassy, brainwashed stares had resisted his best efforts. What he needed now was a piece of leather on which to gnaw away his frustrations. My hide would come in handy.

Finally the news came over the radio. The Eagle had landed.

For a few moments we stopped being ourselves. My father excitedly called the relatives to make sure that their radio had said the same thing. They were hard to reach as they were trying frantically to reach us and share the thrill while it was still steaming. I energetically explained to Iraj about "docking" and "rendezvous" and for once he listened. Without being told, Shafa made fresh tea and brought out baklava. Cars were honking outside, and the next door neighbors were louder than ever before.

The radio announcer was the only voice of reason in the din. He reminded us that Iran's newly acquired satellite connection would bring us pictures live from the moon. This was beyond what we could hope for. The Americans had not only landed on the moon but were giving each of us an on-the-spot, private viewing of a very significant moment in the history of life. My father said that if he died right then, it would not matter. What could happen in the future that could surpass this event? Then he wondered whether the rest of humanity did not feel the same way. He predicted gloomily that human history had reached its climax. Iraj agreed and Shafa was an immediate convert. I would have joined them, but my brother stopped me.

My younger brother, this thick-skulled, insensitive, arrogant lover of strange music, was unmoved by the giant evolutionary step that had occurred just a few minutes ago under his very nose. So he did not agree that history's greatest hour had just gone by. The shrug of his shoulders was humanity's guarantee against peaking out.

Within hours, however, we wrested our individual minds away from history and became our squabbling selves again. Was the moon landing really that important? The Russians were smart to opt for droids. After all, they achieved the first soft landing on the moon. How did the Americans manage to convince us that man on the moon was so important? I had my hackles back up and Iraj stopped listening to me. Shafa was gloating and my brother was a spoiled brat.

At a time when the Americans were freely giving us their best, we were foolishly holding back a triumph we had achieved long ago: the wisdom of our Sufi poets. That night the world was a confused child in need of comforting. We are a nation of poets trained in the art of wisdom. Where are the mystic verses that explain everything forever? Who will help the lost

child cross the street in this rush hour of technology? The descendants of Hafiz were acting like baboons.

The next time Shafa came up with, "Well, we'll see if the Russians get back with the moon rocks first," I told him to shut up. Shafa said nothing, but Iraj told me I had no right to speak to an elder like that, even if he was a servant.

"He is being stupid and so are you."

"Watch it! I am much older than you are."

"Yes, but you are mentally incompetent. That is why they sent you to this loony bin!" I shouted. Iraj turned red. He would have hit me if my father were not there, and I would have hit him back. My father broke into the fight.

"You will not insult a guest in this house. Apologize!" he commanded. But I was in no mood for apologies.

"You too, you imbecile!" I shouted. "Shut up!"

There was silence. This was unprecedented. I had never insulted my father before. He could tell I was ready to escalate further than his dignity could go. There was nothing he could do but grieve. He stood shell-shocked. Shafa and Iraj tried to glare me into shame. Iraj went over to my father and solemnly helped him sit down. I turned around defiantly and left the room.

A few hours later, my brother came to my room and told me that our father had said that if I were willing to apologize to everybody, I could sit with them and watch the moon walk.

"Go tell him that I will apologize to him, but Shafa and Iraj have to apologize to me." He came back and said Shafa agreed, but Iraj would not apologize. I went to the TV room and without saying a word sat straight and stiff in a corner. That was all the apology I would offer. Iraj had his back to where I had chosen to sit and did not adjust his position as politeness dictates. No apology there. Shafa looked up and informed me that the astronauts were about to go out. That was all the apology he would offer.

Like a hippopotamus getting off the bus, the first human on the moon took his time securing his feet on the steps. I felt a door closing quietly behind me: there was no going back. I looked up to see if my father had felt it too. He looked very intense, very sad. If the Russians had been allowed to watch the moon walk, some photographer would have captured the excited defeat on the face of a Russian. But my father had the face of a man who had been left behind, not by a few months or years, but by centuries. And told to shut up to boot.

Then we heard Neil Armstrong say the famous, "One small step for man. . . ." Some magazines, oblivious to the moon dust rhythm of the original, crudely edited this into "One small step for a man."

There are those who believe the moon landing never happened. I enjoy believing in outrageous theories, but by dropping that article, Neil made it impossible. If the moon landing were prerecorded on the Earth, some editor would have had him do that line over. There is a rightness to those words that, like the rhythms of the Koran, testify to their own extraordinary origin.

I was humbled that the Americans had the wisdom to let Neil improvise as he stepped on the moon. This answered a very important literary question that a Russian landing may not have provided: What would the first living being to leave the Earth say to his race when he took the first step on another world? Neil did very well considering his difficult landing. Even the best Persian poets drop their articles to color the rhythm. But how I wish it had been Hafiz there in that space suit.

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