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# Apollo 11

Zachary Festini

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## Apollo 11

by

Zachary Festini

“I’m going to step off the LEM now.”

Neil loosened his grip on *Eagle*’s extended ladder and turned away from the lunar lander to face the void. Like a drawn curtain, the expanse of darkness before him stretched out across his entire field of vision and engulfed everything above the bright lunar surface. It was a limitless ceiling of black that expanded onward and onward into uncertainty, careless of the small things in the universe like Neil, who struggled with his cumbersome EVA suit as he descended the ladder. With his head turned, his eyes shifted from the darkness above to the lifeless, gray landscape ahead: *Tranquility Base*. He had given it that name upon their initial landing, and not far above the horizon of its stark terrain was Earth, a small, blue beacon surrounded by nothingness, a hole of light cut into the starless curtain. All Neil had ever known was but a distant image projected out onto a field of black emptiness, and while he feared that thought, it was one he had known too well.

“I’m at the foot of the ladder,” he said, once he had sufficiently lowered himself down toward the surface. Millions heard his voice, yet for the first time in his life he was truly alone.

“The LEM foot pads are only depressed in the surface about one or two inches, although the surface appears to be very, very fine-grained as you get close to it. It’s almost like a powder.”

“This is Houston, we copy.”

Neil turned back and looked at *Eagle*, a construct of metal paneling held up by four stilts wrapped in gold, reflective foil. He stood in the shadow of it. Though it balanced precariously on

the lunar surface and appeared more fragile and makeshift than Neil could recall, he found solace in knowing there was a safe haven nearby. *Eagle's* entrance hatch was flung open, its cabin depressurized, and Neil's partner Buzz was hunched in the opening clad in a bulky EVA suit not unlike his own. It was decorated with the same embroidered patch of their mission insignia. A camera attached to *Eagle's* side was angled down at the ladder and set Neil center stage as he pushed himself off with a single, quick thrust. His left foot hit the ground first.

"That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind," he said. Neil drew back his boot to reveal a perfect footprint stamped into the dull sands. He was the first.

Now, with both of his feet planted on the thin soil, Neil began to slowly move forward toward the edge of the long shadow cast by *Eagle*. Each step he took was muted by the vacuum of space and left him with only the sounds of his steady breathing and the intermittent crackling of his radio receiver.

"The surface is fine and powdery," he said. As practiced, he dug the toe of his boot into the gray sands—not too deep, he had been warned, but also more than shallow—and he moved it back and forth, manipulating the tiny grains as they scattered like ants across the contrasting white of his boot. "I can pick it up loosely with my toe. I only sink in a small fraction of an inch—maybe an eighth of an inch—while walking, but I can see footprints of my boots and the treads in the sand."

"This is Houston, we're copying."

Neil left the shade of the lander and lowered his protective visor. The radiance of the sun beamed down on him like a blinding spotlight brighter than anything he had seen on Earth, and in the heat of it, he felt as if his water-cooled suit was useless as sweat formed on his brow. Behind him, Buzz slowly followed as he climbed down *Eagle's* flimsy ladder, his labored

breaths piercing Neil's ears in a mess of static through the receiver. He bounced in Neil's direction, leaving the lander unmanned, until he reached his partner's side and made the same, sluggish movements with his toe in the sand. Yet even with Buzz beside him, Neil still felt the isolation he had grown so accustomed to through their training. Buzz was right there, he saw, but his presence wasn't. He was just another disembodied voice on the radio, and the silence was everywhere.

"Beautiful view," Buzz said. They looked out over *Tranquility Base* at the sea of rocky gray that stretched on for miles until its collision with the black horizon, and then with Earth, the blue marble hovering above. Neil could see tiny wisps of clouds running in stripes above the oceans and continents of the sphere, and while he felt a strange longing to be home, he was also comforted by the thought that it was rather close.

"Isn't it magnificent?" Neil asked him.

"Magnificent desolation," said Buzz proudly. It wasn't the first time Neil had heard those words, for Buzz, who expressed great enthusiasm for the mission, had uttered them countless times during their rehearsals. He must have been smiling beneath his visor when he spoke them now.

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Forty-seven minutes into the EVA, Neil and Buzz prepared the American flag for raising. Buzz made a second trip back to *Eagle* to retrieve the bundled flag and its supporting pole, and upon his return he mounted it deep within the lunar soil with a stab that seemed far too powerful against the weak sands, and so the pole sank downward quickly. Like children fighting over a blanket, they unfolded the flag and attempted to straighten it out on the pole against the difficulties of zero gravity.

“Let me ask you something,” Buzz said as he struggled with the fabric. He spoke to Neil through their private radio frequency. “That ‘one step for a man’ thing, was that improvised? Or was that NASA talkin’ through you?”

“Oh, that was me,” said Neil, “and it was improvised. Let me tell you—NASA, I think, couldn’t come up with somethin’ nearly as great even if they tried.” Buzz laughed.

“Well, it’s definitely one for the books, Neil. Now help me with this damn flag so we can—”

The transition was sudden. Neil’s radio receiver began emitting static and he lost all communication with Buzz. As the white noise grew in intensity and filled the silence of the vacuum around him, Neil turned and faced his partner, unsure of why the malfunction was happening. He watched as the American flag floating between them abruptly sagged down toward the ground and dangled from its pole, and in moments he felt his EVA suit grow heavier on his bones, and he struggled to maintain his balance. The sensation of weightlessness and isolation vanished as the void exploded into a deafening blast of sound. And from all around the astronauts, above and below, came the sharp hissing of air as it entered the chamber to pressurize. The violent ripping of the wind tore away Neil’s pride as the façade emerged out from the blackness and replaced his euphoric dream of space with a disappointing reality and forlorn hope. As it all faded, Neil clumsily pushed up his protective visor. In the midst of the confusion, the flagpole had fallen over and *Eagle* was toppled on its side with pieces of its gold foil torn and fluttering down through the air like burning tapestries. The entire chamber was covered in displaced dust that clung to the black walls and high ceiling, and even clouded the distant image of Earth in a layer of ash. Buzz was sprawled out on the gray sand, grappling awkwardly with his EVA suit to stand up.

“Damn NASA scientists!” he said, kicking up ash as he scrambled to his feet. Plumes of the faux lunar dust hovered around them like a sick cloud. “Why couldn’t those eggheads install an alarm to give us some kind of warning? Every damn rehearsal ends the same way, with me on my ass and you grinning at me like an idiot!”

“I’m just amazed that you still manage to fall every time,” said Neil.

They removed their helmets.