

kelly grogan

MOON

WHEN THE LOTTERY WAS ANNOUNCED, it was all anyone could talk about. *Fly Me to the Moon* — plastered across billboards and newspapers, beaming out of Times Square in rainbow-colored lights, tweeted and hash-tagged and liked over two-hundred million times. *Take the Trip of a Lifetime*. Only one person, one lucky person, would win.

Winslow was given the lottery ticket as a birthday gift from Lucy, a hygienist at the dentist's office he cleaned. Lucy beamed as she handed the card to Winslow, the ticket tucked inside, and he took it and mumbled his thanks without meeting her eyes.

"Do you have anything special planned for your birthday?" Lucy asked. Winslow tried not to notice the way her hair came loose from her bun, framing her smile.

"No. Nothing special," Winslow muttered. He stared at her feet, her sensible flats with orthotic soles, the cartoon animals on her scrubs.

"No dinner, no nothing?"

"I supposed I'll eat something," Winslow said.

Lucy's eyebrows raised, two question marks, but the dentist called from the exam room and she hurried away before she could ask anything more.

Winslow had been hoping to evade the fact of his birthday all day. Fifty-five. The roundedness of the number, the palindromic shape of it. The same age his father had been when he died. Heart attack. Winslow let his gaze wander over the silver-foiled script on the lottery ticket and he tried to imagine the trip of a lifetime. Hurling into outer space, the world receding through the window. His stomach lurched, and he put a hand to his chest and shook his head. He couldn't throw the ticket away — Lucy would see it in the bin when she returned. Winslow folded the ticket in half and tucked it into his wallet, then picked up his mop, dragging it back and forth on the linoleum floor.

By the time the winning numbers were drawn two months later, Winslow had forgotten about the lottery altogether. On a warm Saturday afternoon, Winslow

settled into his rocking chair on the front porch. Every Saturday, the same routine: he tidied his one-bedroom house, carried his laundry four blocks to the laundromat, read the weekly newspaper top-to-bottom and front-to-back, folded his clothes in immaculate piles, and returned home to spend the afternoon on his porch.

There, Winslow hunched over, elbows on knees, and started whittling a thin block of mahogany. It was to be a decorative railing along the eaves of the latest birdhouse he had been building. The birdhouse was nearly finished: a three-story home with a feeding tray jutting out from the bottom and a hollowed-out basin on the roof that formed a reservoir for rainwater.

Wood shavings fluttered to the ground like snowflakes at Winslow's feet. Winslow had never been married or had children, and pets aggravated his allergies, so he'd taken to building birdhouses as a means to pass the time. What started as an idea turned into an obsession. In the twenty-three years since he'd moved to Post Street, Winslow had built over ninety birdhouses, all of them perched delicately on the heavy-limbed elms and the maples that shaded his yard. The birdhouses formed their own neighborhood, colorful tenants moving in and out year-round, and Winslow crafted each one with increasing intricacy. The mahogany railing he'd been working on was wrapped with miniature vines, raindrop-sized flowers sprouting from the ends of curled leaves.

The shadows grew long in the early afternoon, golden light falling through the yellow-edged leaves. Winslow heard a faint commotion down the street. A crowd, voices rising, the beeping of a horn. He leaned in close to the carving and pushed his chisel along the edge, notching the wood lightly at the end of a leaf. The noise of the crowd grew louder as it rounded the corner, and Winslow glanced up from his work. Led by Lucy, smiling more widely than he had ever seen, a parade of cameras and microphones greeted Winslow on his porch, where he sat with an unfinished birdhouse in his lap and a winning lottery ticket folded in his wallet.

Lucy threw her arms around him, and a reporter thrust a microphone close to his face. "How does it feel to know you're going to be the first ordinary civilian to circle the moon?" the reporter asked. Lucy's hand curled over his arm. How did it feel? Like gravity, somehow, had gone away from beneath him.

That night, while he tried to fall asleep, Winslow wondered how he might go about canceling the trip of a lifetime. It'd been difficult to process in the moment, with the cameras flashing and Lucy's hand on his arm. He would gift the trip back to Lucy, that

was the thing to do. She had, after all, bought the ticket. She can't have expected him to win, and now that he had, it was only right that she claim the prize. He imagined Lucy's eyes, her surprised smile when he handed the ticket back to her. "You should go," he'd say, and she'd light up like the moon.

Winslow rolled onto his other side, his gaze falling onto the pale glowing crescent through his window. How far away was the moon anyway? His father would have known. When Winslow was young, they would sit together on the fire escape at the back of their tenement and his father would tell Winslow his favorite story, the one about Neil Armstrong taking man's first steps on the moon. If he closed his eyes, Winslow could see the way his father's face was illuminated in the glow of light from the kitchen window, achingly familiar: the lines on his forehead that crinkled when he smiled, the way his hands punctuated his sentences.

You were too young to know what was happening, his father said, just playing with your blocks, completely oblivious. I almost forgot you were there. I held my breath as the astronauts climbed from Apollo 11 and bounced along the moon's surface. The memory wavered dreamlike, his father's voice echoing over a great distance, flickering in and out like static. Then the camera shifted, he continued, and there it was. Earth. And I thought of all of us, of you and I and our neighbors and the city and the entire country, all those millions of people watching together, peering into a television, and at what? At ourselves. So small, so far away. Winslow couldn't remember how his dad finished the story. He'd said he'd always dreamed of being an astronaut, and there was something else he'd said, something strange; but it was gone now, and his father too.

What would his father say about Winslow winning the trip of a lifetime? There was no question — his father would become so obsessed with the trip that Winslow would worry he was going to leap into space just imagining it. His father would accept the ticket in a heartbeat, even his last. "What are you so afraid of?" his father would ask, laughing at the concern etched into lines around Winslow's eyes. He would not answer, but it was a familiar fear — that if he left, he might not come back.

Winslow rose from bed and walked barefoot to his kitchen, where the unfinished birdhouse rested atop the table. Tiny picture windows gave a glimpse of the perfectly constructed inner chamber: a grassy, woven mat decorated the floor, a delicate mural of leaves along the walls, and a sky-blue ceiling with wisps of cloud. More than a house — a home. A home the birds could return to each season. He was different from his father, he would have to be, at least in this. He could go to the moon, take the journey for his father; and then return home, at the end of it, to care

for his birds and his house. Lucy would never accept the ticket anyway, Winslow knew. She wanted him to have it all along. As the early dawn gave shape to the darkness and the songbirds warbled outside, Winslow watched the moon fade to blue sky and decided he was going to see it up close.

The towering metal rocket that would carry him to the moon that it had been named the *Peregrine*, though as Winslow stood before it the day prior to the launch he saw a slim, metal bird without wings. Still, the name seemed to Winslow to be a good omen. He'd researched peregrine falcons obsessively after catching a glimpse of one during his father's funeral. He read that the name came from the Latin *peregrinus* – to wander – the same etymological root as *pilgrim*. Together, Winslow and the Peregrine would wander through space, on a pilgrimage through the universe.

The ship's captain spoke to him, but her voice was muted as Winslow felt himself, already, starting to drift away. While she described the living quarters aboard the rocket, the private sleeping chambers and communal kitchen, Winslow imagined emptiness. Space. How large the Peregrine seemed before him, stretching to touch the clouds; and how small it would feel once they were out there, in the vast and endless sky.

"Are you alright, sir?" the captain asked, and Winslow realized with embarrassment that she'd been staring at him.

"I'm fine," he said. "Just fine."

"There's nothing to be afraid of," she said. "It's just like flying in an airplane."

A reporter ambled up to them before Winslow could respond, out of breath from carrying an assortment of bags filled equipment to document the journey. He was paunchy and disheveled with sweat beading on his forehead, and his fingerprints smudged the frames when he pushed his glasses up his nose.

"Sure, just like flying in an airplane, if airplanes traveled three thousand miles per hour." His laugh was just a little too loud. "Sorry, afraid of flying." He extended a clammy hand, and Winslow fought the urge to wipe his palm on his pants after shaking it. "Rick Gaines. I'll be documenting your journey. This is a great shot, do you mind?" Winslow didn't have time to answer before the reporter raised one of the cameras slung over his shoulder and pressed the shutter, clicking away.

The captain posed beside Winslow for a few shots and then hurried away to finish preparing for the launch. The reporter took a couple more shots and then lowered the camera, staring at the Peregrine next to Winslow.

“Are you excited?” the reporter asked.

“Sure,” Winslow lied. He noticed the way the setting sun painted the Peregrine pink and gold. He tried to see it as just a different kind of birdhouse, built just for them. “Everything seems to be in order, in any case,” Winslow added, but the reporter was already shuffling back to the base, back bent from the weight of his cameras.

Rick Gaines was right: it was nothing like an airplane. Strapped into his seat, a shuddering deep beneath him as the Peregrine’s engines warmed up, Winslow turned to ask the reporter if was ready for liftoff. But looking at Rick’s grey complexion and jittering hands, Winslow decided it was better not to say anything at all. He turned instead to the only window in the cramped flight room, peering at the thick beams and jumbled steel wires on the other side of the glass.

“Countdown commencing. Ten...nine...eight...” The captain’s voice crackled through the room, and Winslow thought about birds, the way they hopped into the air, weightless. “Seven...six...five...” He thought about his father, about how he’d wanted to be an astronaut, how he’d once dreamed up of every part of this impossible moment. “Four...three...two...” He gripped his arm where Lucy’s hand had been the day he won, and he hoped it wasn’t the last time he’d see her. A roar swallowed all other noise as the Peregrine lifted from the ground. Through the tiny rectangular window, Winslow watched steel beams give way to the erasure of clouds and a faint red glow of the fire that propelled them skyward.

The earth held on. The captain had warned them of the effect of G-force, but Winslow wasn’t prepared for the way it squeezed the air out of his lungs, tugging his blood and his skin and his teeth and bones back, back, back to earth, back to the ground they’d left behind, back to his birdhouses and his janitor’s job and Lucy’s smile. Winslow could barely breathe. It felt like he was being squeezed into two dimensions. He tried to lift his hand, but he could not even move a finger.

And then, with a humming and a slight bump, the pressure eased and Winslow was lighter than he’d ever been. Where before the seatbelts were cutting through him, now they barely kept him from floating up and away. His chest filled with air and he unclenched his hands from the armrests.

Winslow glanced again out the window. Ribbons of white clouds and streaks of blue earth wavered below them, a kaleidoscope of hues that pulsed with light. The line of the earth curved away from the window and sunlight gleamed against the

metal of the ship. He pressed his palm to the glass, the blue earth glowing against his fingers.

“We did it,” Winslow said to no one in particular. His smile cracked open like a tin can. “We’re flying.”

The speed with which they vaulted from the earth seemed to ebb once they had broken through the atmosphere and slung in a long trajectory toward the moon. Out there, Winslow felt like the three-ton chunk of metal surrounded by space was no more than a speck of algae caught in the great open ocean.

Once the rocket was pressurized and the gravity system normalized, the captain led Winslow on a tour of the ship. Rick followed with his cameras, clicking away and peppering Winslow with endless quips and observations. Winslow wished he would leave them alone, but the ship was too small and Rick was determined to document every single moment.

They reached a heavy metal hatch, and the captain turned to Winslow and Rick and smiled. “This is the best part of the *Peregrine*,” she said, and she pressed a button on the wall. The door lifted slowly and then closed once they’d passed through and entered a narrow tunnel ending in another thick door.

“The gravity system is going to turn off,” the captain said, and with a hiss, Winslow felt himself suddenly grow lighter. He tried to take a step forward and he lifted in a long, slow arc, bumping into the ceiling. Rick’s camera rose from his hands, as though lifted in wind, and the captain laughed at their stunned expressions. She pushed herself along the wall to the end of the tunnel and lifted a panel, pressing another button.

The second door hissed open, and Winslow had to stop himself from shouting out. The captain had opened the door to outside, where darkness spread before them in every direction. Rick froze, camera drifting away from his horrified expression as the captain floated through the doorway, but Winslow saw a glimmer in the darkness, something curved and solid. Glass. A clear, round sphere that hugged the nose of the rocket like a bubble, giving them a panoramic view of space.

“We call it ‘The Looking Glass,’” the captain said as she drifted back to the doorway, gripping a slender rail to keep herself steady. Winslow floated past her, breathless as his terror gave way to wonder. Stars were strewn across the sky, as far as he could see and farther still, this endless glittering of tiny secrets. A speaker in the entrance cackled with faint static and then a song came through, a pianist playing

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Clare de lune, and it sounded to Winslow as though the stars themselves were making music. The rocket turned through darkness, and milky light pooled at their feet as the moon rose into view.

"This would make a beautiful shot," the captain said behind Winslow, and he turned away from the view so Rick could snap a photo, but the reporter was ashen as he pushed himself backward through the tunnel to the first door.

"I don't like it here," Rick said. "I feel nauseous. Let's go back inside."

And at that, Winslow knew that he had found his home aboard the *Peregrine*.

Each day thereafter, Winslow returned to the Looking Glass after breakfast and bobbed like a jellyfish before the view of the moon, glowing incandescent and mysterious with the milky way scattered brightly behind it. Craters and ridges darkened the chalky surface, oceans and mountains made of dust. Spots of light danced over long unwavering lines that the captain told Winslow were from meteorites. From where Winslow hung suspended in glass, the moon appeared vast, near-planetary, while the earth spun in a distant blue haze far away.

It was beautiful, without question, and yet Winslow experienced a peculiar coldness as he studied its pale, eerie face. The moon felt increasingly distant even as they traveled closer to it. On earth, when he had looked at the moon with his father on the fire escape or watched it rise through the trees from his porch on Post Street, Winslow thought it gazed at the earth lovingly, some nights wistfully. Out there, in outer space, it transformed — it was a mirror for the light of the sun, but never for its warmth. The shadow that curved along the bone-white rim spoke of something empty and cold, a body that had never seen the light.

Winslow tried to focus instead on the vastness of space and distant stars. On the sixth day, as the *Peregrine* angled downward, the moon moved to the top of the Looking Glass. He spun to the glass beneath him and watched a fiery path trailing through the distance, a streak of color through the sky from a Van Gogh painting. A comet, perhaps, or a meteorite. Winslow wondered about the eons of its trajectory, what far reaches of the universe it might carry light into. He wished his father could

see it. Rick had lent him a camera for the Looking Glass and he raised it to his eye and snapped a picture of the fading light. He would show it to Lucy when he returned, perhaps, if she asked about the trip at all.

In the glass, with the dark night around him, Winslow lowered the camera and caught the faint reflection of his face peering back at him. He looked so much like his father. Winslow closed his eyes and saw his father's face, eyes closed, turned up to the sun in the daytime. He opened his eyes and saw his father's eyes open, peering up at the faraway moon. Dreaming of nothingness, dreaming of flight. This was the peculiar coldness that embraced him when he stared at the moon; a ghost, a haunting. A memory, that there was always a side to his father that remained untouchable, that remained tucked away from the light. There was a pause in the music that wafted from the radio, and the static sounded like the sea as Winslow floated through perpetual night.

The Peregrine set a course to boomerang around the moon, pulled along by the same force of gravity that tugged at the oceans on earth. "When we go behind the moon, around the dark side, we will lose contact with the base for forty-seven minutes," the captain had warned in orientation. "But not to worry — every aspect of the journey has been carefully choreographed."

As planned, the Peregrine was positioned to the left of the moon, and, as planned, the captain slung it around the shadow side and Winslow watched through the Looking Glass as the moon began to wane before him. The earth, too, waned; a turquoise crescent thinning to nothing. As planned, the crew checked in with the command base one last time to confirm their position before the radios gave way to static and the earth disappeared from view. Here, in the deep-end of space where the last sliver of sunlight flickered out, the plan went awry: the Peregrine shuddered to a pause, then switched to backup power.

"It's going to come back, right?" Rick asked the room where everyone gathered. He'd already asked several times. The captain nodded and tried to smile, meeting Winslow's gaze while she spoke, her voice measured and even.

"Once we complete the circumlunar navigation we can re-establish contact with earth, and they'll be able to figure out what happened," she said, her voice practiced and steady. "Command can run diagnostics and reset the systems. We have a protocol."

"Wouldn't want to get stuck out here forever," Rick said, forcing a laugh that

only made Winslow's anxiety rise. Winslow glanced out the window, that small rectangular view of the dark as Rick's voice echoed out through the room. He tried to picture his tidy home all those thousands of miles away on Post Street. Something in his chest constricted. Winslow took a deep breath and the air felt thin, as insubstantial as his memories — the apartment he'd grown up in, his dad's bass-note laughter and too-big dreams, the straggling city trees that grew through cracks in the sidewalk. Was his life flashing before his eyes, as before dying? Winslow tried again to picture his porch, his yard, his windows, his birdhouses. So small, so far away. Nothing that would notice his absence. Rick's desperate, unanswerable words circled through his mind. *Wouldn't want to be stuck out here forever.* But would it really be so bad?

Then Lucy's smile shimmered in Winslow's mind like starlight, distant and twinkling. Would she miss him? The thought of not seeing her again tugged at the soles of his feet like gravity. Why had he never told her? He caught Rick's eye and noticed tears there, the wild fear in his pupils. Winslow moved to sit beside him and, surprising himself, took the reporter's greasy hand in his own. "It's going to be okay," he heard himself saying from a distance, the words coming forth from some space within him. "They've got it all under control. We'll be home before you know it."

The trembling in Rick's hand eased against Winslow's palm and he fell silent. Winslow could not tell if minutes had passed or hours, but a sliver of light appeared through the window, cracking wider as they rounded the moon. The fiery edge of the sun breaking through the distance, beckoning from far away. Then the earth emerged before them, a blue eye opening from sleep.

"See?" Winslow said. "That's where we're headed. That's where we're going. Home."

A crackling static whispered through the radios and the Peregrine flickered suddenly to life. The crew cheered as ground control suddenly burst out of the static on the radio, mid-sentence, not having realized they could not hear anything coming through. "...coordinates, at your ready."

The captain let out a long sigh, the corners of her mouth curling up into a now-familiar smile as she pressed the mouthpiece of the radio to her lips.

"Commence return," she said, then turned to Winslow and Rick. "Let's land this bird."

Riding in the town car to his house on Post Street, Winslow couldn't shake the

feeling that he'd been gone for a very long time. He half-expected to find his house cobwebbed and dusty, the molding gone yellow and the porch steps splintered. But everything was exactly as he'd left it only three weeks prior. He stood on the steps to his porch and watched the light-dappled sidewalk, shadows dancing as the wind rustled through the leaves.

The birdhouse he'd been building was still on his kitchen table, propped on its side, prepped for finishing touches, but Winslow was ready for something different now. He pushed it to the side and disappeared into a chaos of materials. Winslow built through the night and into the next day without any interruption, gluing and carving and sanding and painting until his eyes glazed over and his muscles cramped. The phone rang, once, then twice, then on a loop that punctuated the afternoon. It stopped after midnight, falling silent while Winslow worked without pause. His kitchen was a mess, but this was going to be the most beautiful birdhouse he'd ever built.

As he worked, Winslow kept thinking about his father and the moon, the story about watching Neil Armstrong. How had his father finished the story, anyway? What had he said? No matter. There was no time to linger on it now. He had to focus on the birdhouse. He needed to finish it before the weekend. Only when he finished would he pick up the phone. Only then would he call Lucy, to invite to come over to his house.

Winslow hung the newly finished birdhouse from the largest maple tree in his yard, where it dangled from a thick branch over the steps to his porch, just in time. As he stood back to look at the newest addition to his neighborhood, he turned and saw Lucy approaching along the sidewalk, her smile even brighter than he'd remembered.

"Look at that," she said, standing beside him beneath the maple. "It's perfect."

She was right. The birdhouse was perfect. Half of its three-foot-wide spherical surface was painted pearl-white, pocked gray in places, faint shadows tracing the silhouette of a face that smiled gently through windows and over fire escapes. The craters, the light-lines from meteors, the mountains of ash — everything exactly as he remembered it. The other half of the birdhouse was coated in layers of the deepest black he had been able to mix, stroke upon stroke of glistening iridescent oil. When the wind passed through the trees, Winslow's moon-house waxed and waned before their eyes.

"Look," he said, and tipped the opening toward her so she could see. Inside, a

mural of the galaxy: pinprick dots of blue-white stars and cloudy Milky Way swirls, the faraway splash of the gleaming sun, a distant blue-marble earth, and, far off in the distance, a Van Gogh comet arcing into the night.

Winslow led Lucy to the porch, where they sat side by side in his rocking chairs and watched the sky as it darkened to indigo, the brightest stars already twinkling and the moon rising round and yellow on the horizon. For a moment, he wasn't sure what to say, but Lucy seemed comfortable to just gaze out at the yard alongside him, as patient as he'd seen her with the nervous children that came to the dentist for fillings.

"It must be so strange," she finally said. "To look up at it now."

"It's pretty hard to describe," Winslow said.

"You could try," Lucy said.

"The view looks different. It's like the sky is emptier, somehow. Like it's made of distance." It was like an ocean with no bottom. Like light without interruption. Without the weight of his body, without the unyielding tug of gravity on the soles of his feet, he would drift, out, out into the eternal blue. Lucy smiled, and then took his hand in her own, pulling him back to the porch. Something trembled inside of Winslow, some breath of fear and excitement, a falling surrender to scope, to the smallness of himself, to the enormity of a single moment. The moon waxed and waned in the wind.

The memory came to him unbidden, his father's voice still familiar even after all these years. *All those millions of people watching together, peering into a television, and at what? At ourselves. So small, so far away.* Winslow remembered the end now, how his father had finished the Neil Armstrong story: they stared up at the moon as Winslow stared at it now, a spotlight breaking through the sky. *That's where we're headed,* his father had said. *Someday. That's where we're going.* The words felt large, unruly in the way too-good-to-be-true dreams are. *That's where we're going.*

And Winslow remembered what he'd said to Rick when the Peregrine circled the dark side of the moon and the earth reemerged from the darkness. Winslow squeezed Lucy's hand and he turned to her with a smile, ready to tell the whole story. *There's where we're going. Home.* ❊