

Father's Choice

by R.W. Perkins

Jacob was watching the moon. He wasn't thinking of the late hour, nor of the trouble he was probably in for. For now he was watching and the watching was enough. The view from the ridge was good tonight, as it always was, and it was likely he was joined that evening by many others. It was a perfect spot to see the heavens clearly, away as it was from the glare of the city to the south. So Jacob watched, at this time only slightly conscious of the stink his parents would raise when they discovered his small el-car gone and he along with it. That he could deal with later. Right now he was watching the moon. He gazed at it, fascinated as always by the colored blotches that never varied, and by the faces and forms he found in those shapes every night without fail. He watched, entranced by the wisps of white and gray that were never still, and by the flares and strange glows that often played upon its face.

As Jacob watched, he thought. His mind had kicked into the frantic high gear typical of eight year old boys and he found himself lost in pursuit of that distant sister world. He was certain of the possibility that someday there would be one (himself perhaps?) who would find a way to go there. And why not? At present he himself had developed no less than fifteen schemes that would propel him beyond the grasp of gravity and on to the moon. Never mind that at least three of these had resulted in minor damage to his father's garage, accidents that had somewhat dampened both parents' enthusiasm for Jacob's 'creative energy'. Nor of course had he come right out and said exactly what it was he was trying to do. But Jacob's mother and father

were very mainstream parents and nowadays that meant support, both verbal and material, for any technical curiosity. So, confident in winning them over, he was madly concocting yet another device that he was sure would do the trick. Had the chaotic workings of his mind been audible, it would have made his father's present task of finding him much easier, a job normally next to impossible in the clutter of rocky canyons and peaks where Jacob now found himself.

Adam Berkey, Jacob's father, had arrived home that evening fully anticipating some kind of crisis, major or minor. It wasn't that he was cynical by nature. He was however a practical man and as such, prepared himself each day for the results of Jacob's regular and lately somewhat more disastrous ventures. Despite this, Adam was very proud of his son. Everything he had heard about raising children said they should be encouraged in the talents that surfaced. He was himself an engineer from a great line of engineers with a centuries-long tradition of innovation. His ancestral family had become one of the most renowned in its field by constantly encouraging their young to imagine and to create. Those same children had become the adults that had founded the technology of their world. Like each of the fathers in his line, Adam was given to patience in the hope that his son might follow in their paths.

All this considered, as well perhaps as the simple telepathy married people seem to develop after years together, Adam had removed his helmet but none of his outer clothing as he parked his cycle in front of the house. He settled the cycle onto the driveway and saw the clouds through the living room window as they gathered over Katya's watching figure. He was pretty sure he would be airborne again soon. Katya, his wife of twelve years, was also a woman typical of the

ancestral line. The women of the family had carefully nurtured and passed down the exasperation of decades as their boys (among which their husbands never failed to be numbered) continued by an unspoken tradition to put discovery above personal safety. The four wheeled all-terrain vehicle, Jacob's favorite transport, was missing from its usual spot at the recharging station. That, plus a few words from Katya, had sent Adam back to his air cycle. Adam was not so indulgent as to allow unannounced and unsupervised treks into the small mountainous area not far from their home. He was now following the general locator beacon he had installed in Jacob's car for just such occasions. It would guide him to within a hundred yards of the vehicle, but in the rocky area Jacob had headed for it would still be difficult to find the exact spot. Jacob had been asking disturbing questions of late about the moon and the stars and Adam suspected that the car's lights would be shut off, making the task that more difficult. He began to search the rocky areas higher up that would be accessible, yet still provide a good view of the night sky.

The unease Jacob's questions brought was as natural to Adam as the pride he felt for his son's potential, although why those questions should bother him he would not have been able to explain. Time had left strange scars on the face of humanity. One of them was a universal distrust of the regions beyond their small world. As capable as man had become, he had long since abandoned any attempts at leaving the planet. Much of what was out there was considered dangerous and unpredictable. A few vague historical references spoke of burning and death, but it was more than caution or lack of interest that had grounded mankind. Neither of these things had ever held man back for long.

Stronger than either was the pressure of centuries of tradition. Somewhere in the distant past, a taboo had weaved itself into the social structure of humankind. Man had become adamant about leaving the skies to whatever gods inhabited them. Old men encouraged young men to turn their efforts to the tasks more beneficial and immediate, and those that did not take the encouragement received stiff rebuke. No one knew why. It simply was so, and that was reason enough. As a child, Adam himself had endured a crushing reproof from a beloved teacher, his own father, after expressing a desire to take up the problem as a class project. Despite having long ago forgotten the incident, that first forced step had led him to the same conclusion it had led his forefathers to. Keep your feet on the ground and your mind and hands busy. Yet even as he pondered his concern for Jacob's misplaced interest, a faint echo of the child he had been was stirring.

Jacob noticed the lights from his father's cycle about the same time he heard it. He again wondered at the funny way sound didn't seem to work as well out here as it did in the house. He remembered his father saying something about it once before, but was interrupted in his thoughts by the expression on his father's face. For a second he considered waiting while the cycle flew over. Then, deciding he had probably bought himself enough problems for one day, he switched on the running lights and stood up next to the car. The cycle immediately swerved and began descending. It blew up a little dust as it settled onto its three kickpads.

"Having a nice outing, Jacob?"

Jacob knew better than to say that, yes, right up till now he had been having quite a good time.

"Now son, I know you're good with the car. I know you take care of

your suits and that you've got sense enough not to drive too far to get back..."

Jacob's left foot started twisting in the dirt, digging in for an extended assault.

"...and I can see," said Adam, looking at Jacob's shifting feet, "that you think you have a pretty good idea of what I'm going to say. Well, you probably do. You know how I feel about unescorted trips this far from home. You know, or at least have heard me tell you what might happen if even one seal failed on your car or your suit. Can you at least tell me what made a trip up here so necessary that you chose to ignore all these things?"

"I came to watch the moon," Jacob said.

A shadow crossed Adam's face. "And?" he replied.

"That's all Dad, honest. There's too much dust and light in the air around the houses and you really can't see good enough."

"What is it you think you are going to see that anyone hasn't for hundreds of years?" said Adam, a little harsher than he had intended.

"Nothing I guess. I don't really expect anything but..."

He paused, caught in the child's trap of needing to know and not knowing if the asking would provoke his father's further displeasure.

It was a topic that, in the past, had produced a strange friction.

This time however, as often before, his brain skipped ahead on its own and pushed him into it.

"Haven't you ever wondered what makes the colors? or the glows? or if you can stand on it anywhere or if it's all fluid like the kids in school say. What if maybe there's someone like me up there that is looking at us the same way and wonders what we are like?"

Adam started to say something and paused, frowning. As one might

guess, he had asked himself just these questions at one time or another. His son's voice was slowly waking a child in himself that had slept for many years. He heard the same questions echoing in his head, with his voice. He had, like Jacob, never received what he thought was a satisfactory answer. Adam was finding, despite all he thought he believed in, that he wanted to do better for his son. Was it even possible today? Jacob's world left little place for things that were not firmly anchored to life on the ground. The measure of success in his world was a keen mind and clever fingers that had somehow combined to make new ideas work or produce a new twist on something already at work. Through the years, however, humanity had turned its eyes upon itself. Anything not immediately concerned with improving life here and now had no place. At last he spoke.

"Yes Jacob, I have thought about it once or twice. Although all we really know says that our moon is not such a nice place to be." Adam was not satisfied with his answer.

"Yes Dad, but has anyone ever really gone there?"

"I'm sure many have dreamed of it, but with all there is to occupy our time with here, I doubt anyone has thought of it seriously."

"Then how can anyone say anything so beautiful can be bad, if no one has ever been there?" was Jacob's instant reply.

Adam found he had no answer to that, and was silent for several minutes. He felt suddenly very tired, very old. He heard his own voice echo in each question. He was struck suddenly with an image of a hundred boys and a hundred fathers standing at the fork of a hundred paths between the earth and the sky. The father's path ending and the boy's beginning. He felt a hundred minds ask, "Which way to send him, which dream to destroy?" For a hundred generations the answer had

always been the same, to destroy the soaring dream. Could he change that? Should he? He finally spoke.

"Well, I don't think either of us will ever really know for sure. I do know that if we don't get home soon we'll both be in more trouble than you are already in." He was very unsatisfied with that answer as well.

"I was hoping you'd forget."

Adam laughed a little at that. "Not much chance of that. There will have to be some restrictions made after this one I think you know."

Jacob's face fell. "Yea."

Adam saw a hundred boys walk, eyes downcast, shoulders slumped, to the road that led downward, the safe road. He saw them as they walked away from their fathers. Then he was alone, alone with his son.

"Well Jacob, I think it won't have to be too severe if you promise to check with me first before you haul off again. That way I can check in with you on the radio from time to time."

Jacob's eyes widened. None of his friends were *allowed* solo trips.

"Don't get all excited mister," Adam said sternly. "Your next excursion is still a ways off. This is something you will earn."

Jacob looked properly penitent. He was getting off easy and he knew it.

"Now, take your time and check your gear. I'll follow you back to the house."

Too excited even to reply, Jacob walked carefully back to his small car. He got in and closed and locked the cabin door. Anxious to appear responsible, he made sure Adam was looking as he cross-checked his seals, repressurized the cabin, and checked the oxygen levels before taking off his suit helmet. This he locked in place above his head carefully should he need it quickly. The atmosphere was getting

thicker every decade, he knew from school. He also knew he would never live to see the day when suits would not be needed, or when a broken seal wouldn't blow you up because of the air inside you. He took another moment, looking through the glass at the blue and white ball sitting there, far beyond the reach of any air car. It looked quite large and beautiful against the inky blackness of the sky. Despite what his father had said, he was going to go there someday.

"Someday," he said to himself.