

Going to the Moon

Nino Ricci

Windsor seemed a kind of purgatory to me, a temporary stop between whatever hell my parents had left behind in Italy and the vague promise of the skyline that opened up beyond the Detroit River. In winter that skyline's tall buildings stood unnaturally still and crisp in the cold air, on the verge, it seemed, of singing; in summer they shimmered and burned in the heat and smog. But always they had a strange, unreal quality, at once both toy-like and profound, as if my eyes could not believe their own power to hold so much in a glance.

My great uncle Bert had come over before the war, smuggling into Canada after he'd been turned away at New York and then working his way on road crews down the St. Lawrence and along the Great Lakes till he'd arrived finally in Windsor.

'I stopped here because it was so close to the border,' he said. 'In those days there were people who would take you across the river at night, in little boats. But by the time I had enough money to pay them, well, I got lazy.'

Uncle Bert had shown me a picture once of the tiny room at the back of his old shoe repair shop on Erie Street where he'd lived alone for twenty years, a room as grey and bare and gloomy as a prison cell. It seemed astonishing to me that he'd done that, that in all his years in Windsor he'd never so much as set foot in America, though its image had loomed over him daily, close enough to throw a stone at; and astonishing that we had all ended up in Windsor on account of him, family after family, aunts and uncles and cousins, stuck there in our narrow brown brick houses out of sheer inertia, like Dorothy falling asleep on the road to Emerald City. When my parents told stories about Italy they always talked about *miseria*, a word which meant 'poverty' but which conjured up in my anglicized mind images of vague tortures and chastisements; though according to my mother we were poor in Canada as well, owed thousands of dollars to the bank for our house, which was why she and my father both worked their long odd hours, my father at the Chrysler plant or in his basement workshop, building cabinets and tables he sold for extra money, his face always puckered as he worked as if he had just swallowed something sour, and my mother at different places, sometimes at a butcher's shop and sometimes cleaning houses and sometimes picking beans or tobacco on the farms outside Windsor.

My father had built a second kitchen in our basement, our upstairs kitchen too small to eat in comfortably and our dining room, with its heavy polished wood table, reserved for when we had special company, a non-Italian or someone from out of town. Whenever my uncle Mike came in from Ohio my mother made it seem as if eating in the upstairs dining room was something we did every day, putting on a new, strange, friendly personality then, talking to Uncle Mike and his American wife in English and letting their kids call her Aunt Tony instead of Zia Antonia; but normally she guarded the dining room like an avenging angel, keeping the doors which led into it perpetually closed and forever warning my brother Joe and me never to set foot in it while she was away at work. A tall china cabinet stood in one corner, housing small arrangements of silverware and copper pots that emerged from behind their glass doors only for their monthly cleaning; and on the cabinet's top, underneath a clear glass dome, sat a golden pendulum clock which my mother wound every Sunday after church with a special key, bringing an old chair in from the kitchen to reach it and setting aside its dome with a tenderness that seemed oddly out of keeping with the work-swollen ruddiness of her hands, with the hard set of her shoulders and chin. Two copper mementoes, of John Kennedy and Pope John XXIII, hung on the far wall, and velour curtains

covered the window; but the room's gloomy elegance made it seem sad somehow, as if it knew that it didn't belong to the rest of the house, its only purpose to remind us of the things that were forbidden to us.

Joe and I attended school at Assumption Separate. Before I had started there I had looked up to Joe, because he was six years older and had his own paper route; but at school he seemed diminished, some of the older English boys calling him Mustasho because of the dark hairs that had begun to sprout on his upper lip. When the boys began to pick on me as well, Joe muttered insults at them; but I saw from the dark look that crossed his face then, and from the unthinking grimace he made when he found me waiting for him at the school entranceway at the end of the day, that it humiliated him to have a younger brother, to be made more conspicuous by my presence beside him, and I had the sense that we were both of us merely interlopers at school, moving uncertainly through a world that refused to admit us, that we had to hide ourselves within like animals changing the colour of their fur to fit into a landscape.

But each morning when my class filed into the grade one classroom and I saw again the varnished desktops, the polished floors, the multicoloured alphabet that ran across the tops of the blackboards, I felt the small bright hope that my life could be different, that the things which marked me out could be erased, a hope made urgent, desperate, by the love that I felt for our teacher Miss Johnson. Miss Johnson was one of the few layteachers at Assumption, and she stood out from the stiff formality of the priests and nuns like a burst of colour in a grey landscape, coming to school in lipstick and high heels, in dress suits with trim vests and jackets, in blouses of shimmering silk, and leaving behind a fragrance of herself when she passed our desks that lingered like a friendly ghost; and we were all in love with her, proudly, self-importantly, all vied with barely-masked vehemence to sit beside her during our reading circles, all hoped to be chosen by her to wipe the blackboards or fetch chalk from the store room. I felt protected in that common love, in the importance I gained in sharing it, as if I'd been included in a game that could have no losers, no chance for ridicule or shame. Once near the beginning of the year Miss Johnson picked me out to stay in at recess to help her with a bulletin board, and while she stood shoeless on the seat of a desk, reaching down a braceleted arm for the pictures and pins I was to hand to her, she began to hum some song softly to herself as if she had forgotten that I was standing there beneath her; and it made me feel oddly relieved to be taken for granted like that, to have been drawn unthinkingly into the small private sphere of Miss Johnson's aloneness as if there were nothing strange or remarkable about me.

During first term Miss Johnson taught us about stars and planets. Every day she set some new vision before us like a brightly wrapped gift, brought in pictures and models of our solar system, read us stories about space travel and distant life. When we had learned to write she had us each compose in our careful inch high letters a question to the astronauts at NASA, stuffing all of them afterwards into a large brown envelope; and a few weeks later, as if we had sent out like Noah a messenger who returned now with proof of a world that existed outside our own, a large packet arrived for us from NASA filled with brochures and posters and satellite photographs, so that while all the other classes in the school were doing up bulletin boards about Lent or All Saints' Day or the next year's Centennial, our own boards were filled with the heady images of space, our prized centre pieces a fold-out of an Apollo rocket and a poster-sized photo of the moon's Sea of Tranquillity.

One afternoon for art Miss Johnson had us push all our desks to the sides of the classroom and then covered the floor with two adjoining lengths of newsprint, shimmying along them in stocking feet to join them together with long strips of masking tape. We spent the rest of that afternoon on hands and knees, paint trays and brushes and jars full of tinted water spread out on the floor around us as each of us, assigned to our own little squares of terrain on the newsprint, painted out our private versions of a lunar landscape. We ended up with a great hodgepodge of strange forms, green mountains vying with eerie yellow cities, four-armed monsters perched over ocean-filled craters, and in one corner Miss Johnson's

own contribution, two bubble-headed astronauts looking out over the whole scene with expressions of alarm. When the paint had dried we folded our landscape at the seams, rolled it up, and deposited it at the back of our cloakroom; but thereafter, whenever rain kept us inside for recess or we had been especially well-behaved, Miss Johnson would ask us again to move our desks into tight little rows at the sides of the classroom, and we would know that we were going to the moon.

To get to the moon we had to strap ourselves firmly into our seats and close our eyes. Miss Johnson would start the countdown, and on zero our space ship would lift off and begin to climb; and as the earth receded and our ship veered off into space, Miss Johnson, to hide the crinkling of paper as she laid out our landscape, would lead us in our moon song:

Zoom, zoom, zoom,
We're going to the moon.
Zoom, zoom, zoom,
We're going very soon.
If you want to take a trip,
Step into my rocket-ship.
Zoom, zoom, zoom,
We're going to the moon.

Now stray comets and satellites were flashing past our windshield as the moon, balanced in the vastness of space, grew slowly larger and larger, until with a bump and a lurch we touched down and opened our eyes to see its surface unfurled beside us; and when we had removed our safety straps and taken off our shoes and packed ourselves carefully into our spacesuits, we stepped out into space finally, our bodies moving weirdly because of the lack of gravity, and set off like tiny gods across the water-colour strangeness of the moon.

In the new year, Miss Johnson pinned to the centre of our largest bulletin board autographed photos of the three astronauts who would be flying Apollo I in February, the caption 'Bon Voyage' stapled beneath them in black cut-out letters. She promised us she'd bring a television into the classroom the day of the launch so that we could watch the lift-off together; and in a lower corner of the blackboard we kept a running countdown of the days remaining, all of us competing every day to change the number, anxious to show our excitement over an event which Miss Johnson had deemed worthy of our attention. But the lift-off never took place: with twenty-five days still left on our blackboard counter, the astronauts whose faces had become so familiar to our class were burnt to death when a fire broke out in their cockpit during a pre-flight test. I saw pictures of the fire at home on the television news, of the billowing smoke, of the burnt-out rocket, the charged solemnity of the reports stirring in me a vague memory of when John Kennedy had died; and it was strangely thrilling to see so much attention being paid to a thing that I had thought of as merely personal, as belonging only to Miss Johnson and our grade one class, as if suddenly something which had been a kind of fiction, a story which Miss Johnson had made up to indulge us, following its fixed course, had become pressingly, dangerously real, unpredictable, unknown.

At school the pictures came down, the blackboard counter was erased, Miss Johnson wheeling the school television into our classroom finally to watch not a lift-off but a long funeral procession; and for a few days we wore our sorrow for the astronauts as self-importantly as we had worn our love for

Miss Johnson, wanting to be true to the grown-up sense of tragedy, of loss, which Miss Johnson tried to impart to us. But afterwards, when our bulletin boards were done up with Centennial themes like the boards in other classrooms, our lunar landscape forgotten now under the bench at the back of the cloakroom, and when the songs we sang were Centennial songs, as devoid of meaning as the hymns we sang in church, I felt cheated somehow, felt that I had touched for a moment some larger world that had receded again, that had remained as elusive finally as the promise of the tall buildings across the river or of the golden pendulum clock that sat in my mother's dining room.

All my life, it seemed suddenly, was merely a waiting for the fulfilment of that promise, for a redemption from the narrowness and meanness of the world I came from; but it seemed possible finally that nothing would change, that I was stranded in my own small world as on some barren planet, with no way to bridge the gap between the promise and the hundred small humiliations which kept me from me it, which refused simply to fall away from me like an old skin. When the chrome zipper on my winter coat split and my mother, instead of buying me a new coat as I hoped she would, as I thought others mothers would, merely sewed buttons down the coat's front and cut crude holes for them along the track of the broken zipper, I was certain that the kids at school, that Miss Johnson, would see in those makeshift repairs my mother's swollen hands, our poverty, our strangeness; and the next morning I left the house in only my sweater, my parents already at work and Joe merely shaking his head at my stubbornness as if he couldn't be bothered to fight with me, to pretend that he didn't understand. But at school one of the teachers saw me shivering outside the entranceway and sent me inside before the first bell had rung, and by then I had understood already how hopeless my situation was, how my humiliation was not something that other people did to me but something I carried inside me like a sin, that was there even if other people did not see it. I had begun to cry by the time I got to my classroom, and knowing that Miss Johnson would be there, making her silent mysterious preparations for the day, I slipped into the cloakroom and huddled onto a bench at the back, not wanting her to see me like that; but she must have heard the sound of my crying, for suddenly she was standing over me, with her silk blouse and her limpid eyes and her perfume smell, and she was so beautiful and soft and gently rounded, and her quick sad concern for me so misdirected, so much the promise of all the things I would not have, that I only cried harder, only thought, we'll never go to the moon again, we'll never go to the moon.

That summer Uncle Mike's son Benny was killed in the war in Vietnam. They had been to visit us at Easter, Benny in his uniform, seeming much older than I remembered him, and afterwards my mother and father had had an argument.

'He's an idiot,' my father had said. 'He thinks the war is a game.'

'He has to go, he doesn't have a choice.'

'He doesn't have to go, he volunteered, your brother told me himself.'

But when the news came that Benny had been killed there were no arguments, only an awkward, oppressive silence that seemed to carry some unexplained burden of guilt. My father could not get time off work for the funeral but my mother went down on the bus, dressed strangely in a dark dress and hat and in nylons and high heels. I thought that going to the States would change her in some way, or that she would return with some unexpected gift, something exciting and strange, that could not be found in the Woolco mall; but she came back a few days later empty-handed, changed only in that she was more short-tempered and curt than usual. I thought she was angry about the time she had missed from work; but one evening before bed I caught a glimpse of her through the kitchen doorway sitting at the table with her head in her hands as if she were crying, and I understood then that she had been carrying the shame of Benny's death inside her the whole time, that his death was not a special thing like the deaths of the

Apollo astronauts but was merely private and grim, a blemish or failure that needed to be hidden away and forgotten like any other.

That was the summer, too, of the riots in Detroit, and for days the news was filled with images of fires and gunfights and broken windows. My mother forbade Joe and me to leave our neighbourhood while the riots were still going on, but when the two of us stole down to the riverfront one evening with two of our cousins we found that Windsor outside our own neighbourhood was still much what it had always been, people talking on street corners as if nothing had happened, traffic flowing unabated on the main streets, the river wrapped in its usual twilight gloom. But across the river, the streets, cloaked in the shadows of dusk, seemed almost deserted; it was only when I stared hard that I began to make out some movement along the riverfront, the dim outlines of jeeps and cars, a few shadowy figures. Higher up, though, where the afterglow of sunset still held the sky in unearthly blue, great clouds of dark smoke had formed, and were leaning against the taller buildings as if to topple them into the river; and for a long time we sat at the water's edge staring silently at the skyline as if we were watching a movie, were waiting for it to draw to some inevitable conclusion. But then night settled in around us, leaving us stranded there at the river's edge as on an island; and finally we rose up together and began to make our way home.