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The Pioneer

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When we asked Yewell Lybrand to submit a short story for publication in the first issue of *SPACE JOURNAL*, he warned us that we were asking for trouble. His first short story was bought in 1954 for a Sunday newspaper's magazine supplement. The magazine discontinued its fiction feature before Lybrand's story was published. Last year *BLUEBOOK* magazine published one of his short stories, only to go out of business a few short months later. In June *COLLIER'S* bought one of his short stories, scheduled it for publication, and promptly bought another story from him. The rest is history. *COLLIER'S* suspended publication before Lybrand's short stories were published.

Lybrand is 27, married, and the father of two little girls. He is currently writing a novel, when not working at the Army Ballistic Missile Agency as a publications officer or fishing in the TVA lakes. *The Pioneer* is his first science-fiction story. We like to think that it is the first of many, in spite of his warning.

Early in April Miss Minnie sat on the morning side of her little house at the mountain's foot, her thin, blue hands limp across her lap. She reached down suddenly and picked up the newspaper lying at her feet, unfolded it, and read for the third time that morning:

"MOSCOW, April 3 (AP)—Informed sources reported in an official leak today that a Russian-manned space vehicle will leave tonight for the moon.

"Soviet Minister of Space Research Vladimir Loystok was quoted as saying: 'Tonight we shall do what the United States has failed to do. Our ship will reach its destination'."

Loystok's reference to the ill-fated U. S. Space Ship Lunar brought a red-faced "no comment" from the Pentagon. U. S. officials have refused to comment on the Lunar since its December launching, except to say that "audio contact with Lt. Arnold Lockridge, the Lunar's pilot, was terminated at sixteen hundred seconds after launching. Telemetry indicated that the pilot's physical condition was excellent at time of audio-cut-off, and continued excellent through telemetry cut-off. All instrumentation aboard the Lunar was in excellent working order."

The Department of Defense has refused to confirm or deny a report that the pilot was a victim of severe mental shock.

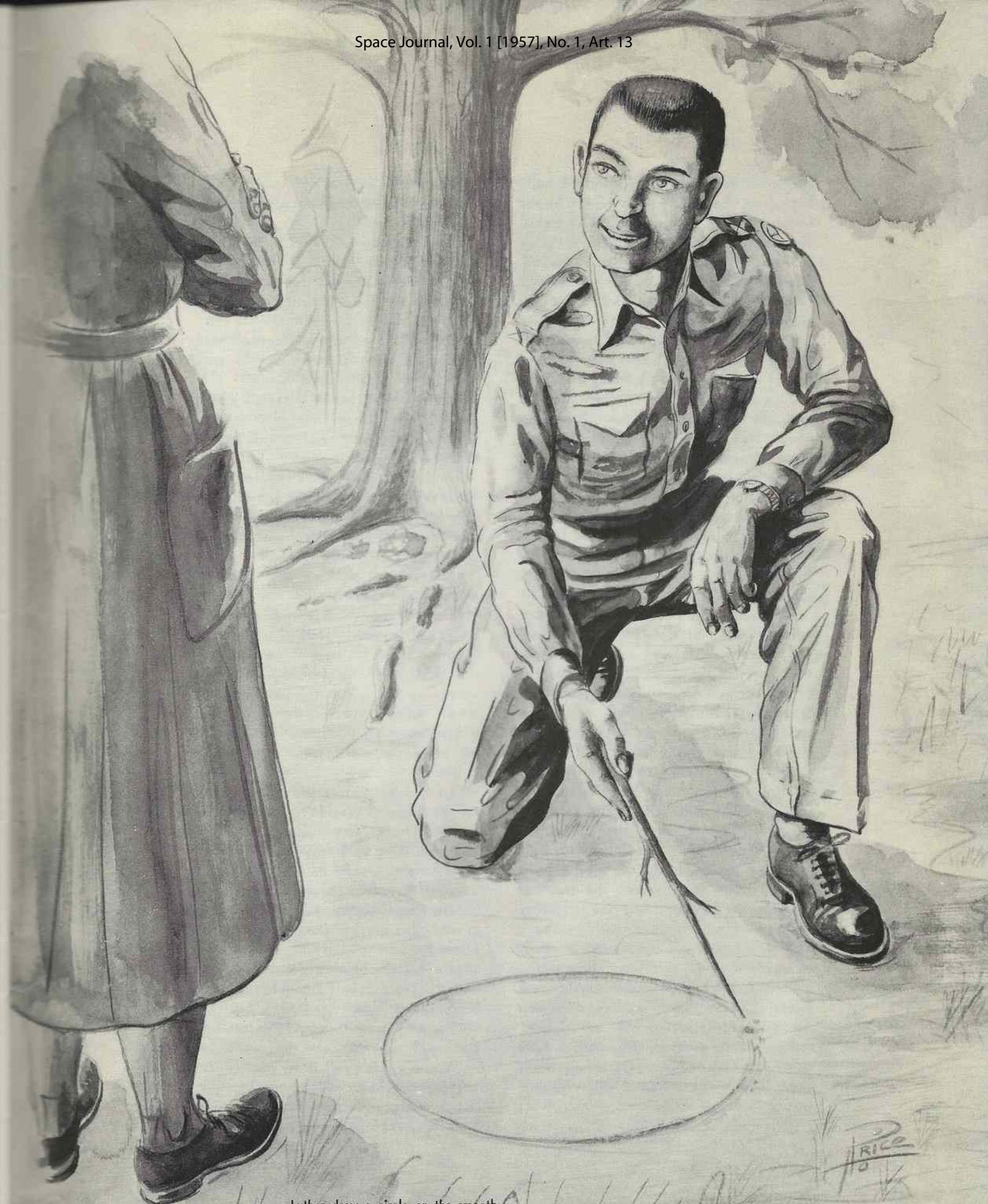
In Appleton, Wisconsin, the mother of the Lunar's pilot refused again to talk with reporters.

"She'd be all right if she knew for sure that Arnold was dead," a neighbor said. "But this Russian stuff has just got her stirred up again. She read in the newspapers that Arnold might just keep on going for a long, long time."

The morning sun climbed higher, and Miss Minnie folded her paper and dropped it beside her chair again. She sat quietly, waiting for Mr. Bevo to come to see her about her land on the mountain top again. Miss Minnie did not wait long.

She watched them as they parked their station wagon, and then picked their way from flat rock to flat rock up the hill until they had reached the broom-swept nakedness of her front yard.

Mr. Bevo, the oldest man, the one in front, tripped over the roots of the red oak tree at the yard's edge, the same roots that had tripped him on two earlier visits. Miss Minnie smiled. The two younger men, whom she had not seen before, rushed forward and helped Mr. Bevo



Luther drew a circle on the smooth ground. "This is us," he said.

to his feet, and the three continued walking across the yard until a corner of the house cut them from Miss Minnie's vision. She bumped her cane bottomed chair forward, grunted with the jar of the impact, then stood, brushed the skirts of her blue, everyday dress, and walked to the corner of the house.

The three men stopped when they saw her. Mr. Bevo stepped forward and removed his hat. He was a heavy man, perspiring from his climb up the hill, with dark hair combed thin across his balding head. He did not bother to wish her good-morning, but spoke quickly, curtly.

"We've come about the land again."

Miss Minnie nodded. "I read about them Russians. I figgered you'd be up here in a hurry today."

Mr. Bevo smiled and raised his hat as if to place it on his head. "Then you'll sell."

Miss Minnie did not answer. She looked past Mr. Bevo at the two younger men. They were both in their twenties, one of them dressed in a dark gray suit, the other in an Army uniform with the shoulder patch of the military base in the valley.

"Which one of you is Mr. Willis?" she asked.

The uniformed young man stepped forward and laughed softly. His hair was closely cut, giving his broad, tanned face a boyish frame.

"That's me, mam. Luther Willis." He pointed to the young man in the gray suit standing beside him. "And this is Harold Mabry."

"You come from around here somewhere?"

"No, mam," Luther answered. "I'm from North Carolina." He grinned. "But it's the same mountain."

Miss Minnie grunted. "My daddy's folks come here from North Carolina. Don't know they ever mentioned any Willisses, though."

"No, mam," Luther said.

"You got nice teeth."

Luther blushed and looked at his feet.

"Thank you, mam."

Harold laughed. "It's his bicuspid that always gets them."

Miss Minnie turned to face Harold. "You and Mr. Bevo just set on the porch. I want to talk to Mr. Willis."

When the two men had settled themselves into rocking chairs on the porch Miss Minnie again faced Luther.

"You ain't scared of this crazy mess, Luther?"

Luther laughed. "Just scared enough to be careful."

"And that other feller, the one I read about who went out there and just kept right on goin' and never did come back and never will come back, that feller, he was careful too. Ain't that so?"

Luther's grin left his face. "Yessum. I guess he was right careful."

Miss Minnie grunted. "Bein' careful didn't do him much good, did it?"

Luther shook his head. "No, mam. But this time it will be different. This time we've learned a few things. That's why we are going to . . . why we want to build a new launching platform. The new ship will be bigger, and better. But we've got to hurry."

"I asked 'em before and they answered me somethin' I couldn't even get half sense out of. How come you have to build this thing up here? There are plenty of mountains around here. And the government already owns most of 'em."

"No roads," Luther said. "This one has a road. No electric power. This one has power."

Miss Minnie pointed down toward the valley. "You own half a county right down there. Use it."

"It's too crowded, mam. We need this up here."

"S'pose I don't sell it to you."

Luther frowned. "Miss Minnie I wouldn't like to see you do that. They'd condemn your land and get it anyhow, and that

would mean a lot of court trouble. And a lot of time. And we don't have much time."

Miss Minnie grunted.

"Miss Minnie, you got any reasons for *not* wanting us to build a launching site up here?"

She grunted again. "I don't reckon I'm obliged to give you a reason for not sellin' what's been mine for forty years."

He blushed. "No, mam. I just thought maybe there was some religious..."

Miss Minnie laughed, a harsh laugh that caused Mr. Bevo to cough. "You just like them. You think ever'body born on the side of a hill thinks anything new is sinful." Miss Minnie stepped closer until she could hear Luther breathing. "I reckon it this way: the Lord give you or them or somebody enough sense to wonder about what was out there, so I reckon that gives you the right to try and find out. Only not me. I don't care nothin' about what's out there. I don't even care nothin' about what's down there in the valley, except my married sister down in town."

"But that..."

"Don't tell me nothin'," Miss Minnie said. "I don't want to know nothin. I got no quarrel with the way folks live nowadays. That's fine and dandy. But it don't put no grits on my table."

"They'll pay you. Forty thousand dollars is a lot of money."

"Money!" Miss Minnie's voice rose and up on the porch Mr. Bevo stood quickly. "You git sixty-nine years old and lose your teeth and your neighbors that you growed up with and lose even the way you're used to doin' things and see how much you care about anything but the land you was brought up on."

"Miss Minnie, have you done any thinking about what's going to happen to your land when you aren't here to take care of it?"

Miss Minnie bit her lip. "Mister Luther Willis," she said evenly, "I reckon you're too young to a-heard a woman cuss, but

what happens after I'm dead and gone is just another one of them things I don't give a damn about."

Luther looked down at his feet. "Yes, mam," he said. He looked up. "Miss Minnie, I'm sorry we're causing you so much worry. Maybe I shouldn't even have come up here. This isn't my job, but they said you had read about me in the papers, about me and the Project. They thought I might be able to influence you."

Miss Minnie grunted.

"We need this mountain pretty bad now, mam. We can build somewhere else. But this is closer. It will cost less money and take less time. If we wait much longer they'll have Mars too."

Miss Minnie grunted. "You and all the rest of the world talk about it like maybe you owned every square foot of it. Like maybe you and Russia and God was goin' to sit down and draw straws for the moon."

Luther grinned. "No, mam. We've lost the moon."

"You think they'll get there?"

Luther nodded. "I know they will. That's why we've got to hurry." Luther looked briefly away from her at the mountain which rose behind the house. "And besides all that, mam, I want to do this more than anything I've ever wanted. Next year I'll be too old. They'll pick out somebody else, then. Maybe Harold, the young boy up there on the porch. He's next in line."

"How do you know you'll get there?"

Luther looked around him, squatted suddenly, picked up a small stick, and drew a circle on the smooth ground. "This is us," he said. He looked up at her and grinned. "You and me, Miss Minnie. And this," (he began drawing again) "this is the way we're going around the sun. And this... this here is the way this other planet is going. It's closest to us right here." He looked up at her. "And right here's where we've got to jump off, mam."

"How you know that?" Miss Minnie asked.

Luther pointed toward the porch. "Mr. Bevo. I guess he knows more about this stuff than anybody."

Miss Minnie stared at Mr. Bevo. "I don't mean nothin' personal by this, but he don't look like he knows much more'n anybody else."

Mr. Bevo coughed again. "Well, Willis?" He called from the porch.

Luther stood and dropped his stick. "I guess we can go, Mr. Bevo."

Mr. Bevo walked down the steps, the young man close on his heels. Mr. Bevo began smiling when he looked at Miss Minnie. He held his hat lightly in his hands and walked toward her. "Well, mam. What have we decided this time?"

"We've decided," Miss Minnie said, "that somebody down there at the Army base is sure spendin' a lot of money on gasoline, havin' a bunch of new folks drive up here ever' two or three days."

Mr. Bevo put on his hat. "We thank you for your time. Goodday." He walked tight-lipped between Luther and Miss Minnie, with Harold close behind him.

"Goodbye, Miss Minnie," Luther said. He held out his hand.

Miss Minnie smiled. "You wait just a minute." She hurried up the steps and into the house. When she returned Luther was still waiting, and below them, at the foot of the hill, Mr. Bevo was tooting the horn of the station wagon. "You take this back with you," Miss Minnie said. She handed him a small jar. "It's crabapple jelly and it's a little dark, but it's good."

"Thank you, mam." He grinned at her. "And I sure do wish you'd change your mind."

"You go on," she answered. "And you tell that pro-cure-ment man down there to quit writin' me so dadblamed many letters. I'll sue him for cloggin' up my mail if he don't."

"Yes, mam."

Luther turned and walked across the

yard. He reached the first flat stone and began stepping down the face of the hill.

"And Luther," she called after him, "you come back. You come back to see me. You hear?"

He waved to her, but did not answer.

His picture was in the valley paper that night, Luther Willis standing beside the ship. Miss Minnie read the paper at supper, then folded the page with Luther's picture and propped it against the bowl from which she'd eaten her corn bread and buttermilk.

She stared at the picture for a few minutes, then arose, moved the paper aside, and began washing her dishes. When she had finished this Miss Minnie picked up the paper to place it atop the neat stack of back issues which she kept on the top of her kitchen cabinet. She looked at the picture again and grunted. "I bet he didn't even hear me," she said aloud.

When Luther returned to her house the following morning Miss Minnie was sitting on the top step of her front porch waiting for him.

She shoosed him around to the warm side of the house. Luther removed the galvanized tubs and they sat on the white wash bench and drank thick, black coffee.

"Boy," she began, "I was layin' there lookin' out my window last night and I got to thinkin', and I prayed a prayer for you."

"Thank you, mam. I figure I might need more than a few."

"The way I reckon it you'll need more than a few."

"This coffee's got chicory in it."

Miss Minnie nodded. "Talk to me. Tell me somethin' I want to know and don't start preachin' to me about bein' a hypocrite."

"Yessum?"

"What's it like out there, Luther?"

He set his coffee cup down on the edge of the bench and leaned forward, resting

his arms on his knees and interlacing his fingers.

"It's black, Miss Minnie. And cold. And it's a long way there and back." They sat in silence for a moment.

"It's not easy for somebody like me to think about things like this, boy."

"No, mam."

"I mean," she began, and paused, and in a lower voice continued, "I mean, when you ain't even rode in an airplane it's a little hard to think about anybody ridin' in something even worse. And farther. And then I get to thinkin' about my kind

of folks. This ain't somethin' that my kind of folks would set out to do, Luther."

"I'm you're kind," he answered.

She nodded. "That's what worries me."

"And something else," Luther said. "I saw a copy of the abstract which your granddaddy recorded on this land. It was bought from Indians."

Miss Minnie grunted. "Bought is one way to put it, I reckon."

"And he drove a ramshackled wagon behind a yoke of oxen all the way from North Carolina, didn't he?"

Miss Minnie grunted. "And walked his-

"I came to see Luther," she said, "the boy that's goin' to ride in that thing."



self ever' step of the way and stopped once to help his wife bear a young'un."

Miss Minnie looked quickly at Luther. "It ain't the same. And don't say it is."

"No, mam." Luther said. "It's sure not the same. And the big difference isn't the time. And it isn't the difference between what he was walking beside and what I'll be moving in. There's something bigger, like, how'd he ever get the guts to try it in the first place?"

Miss Minnie grinned, then laughed. "You didn't know my granddaddy. What drove him here wasn't guts. He was starvin' to death where he was."

"Do you know what I really meant?" Luther asked.

She nodded. "I know. You meant somebody had faith in my granddaddy and if you'll look me in the eye and tell me you know you're going to be able to go out there and come back in one piece, I'll not only sell you the mountain, I'll go with you."

Luther shook his head. "That's just what I don't know. Nobody knows, really. We work it out on paper. We build the . . ."

"The covered wagon," she interrupted.

Luther nodded. "The covered wagon. And then we try. But what counts most is that we believe we can do it. We've kept on believing we can do it, even when nobody else did."

"And that young boy, Arnold. Did he believe he could do it, Luther?"

Luther stood suddenly and picked up a small sand stone. He threw it high above the red oak and watched it arch into the hollow below the house. "No, mam," he said quietly, "I reckon Arnold didn't believe in anything much. The last thing he said was 'I'll show 'em, Luther. I'll show 'em'."

Luther returned to the wash bench and the two of them sat quietly, waiting as time softened the silence between them.

Miss Minnie grunted. "I'll go down to the valley and stay with my sister until

this thing is over with. Tell 'em to build their laun . . . laun . . ."

Luther grinned. "Launching site."

Miss Minnie nodded. "Tell 'em to build the damn thing."

.

They had not touched the house, and as she climbed up the hill on the flat stones she told herself that she would move back into it, regardless of the noise. The tower rose tall and gray from the mountain behind the house, smaller than it had appeared to her in the photographs which the valley newspapers had published.

She did not pause at the house, but walked quickly around it and began her slow climb up the mountain path to the launching tower. A man in a uniform stopped her before she reached it.

"I came to see Luther," she said. "That boy that's goin' to ride in that thing."

He was being strapped into the passenger capsule when she found him.

"You don't have much room in there," she said.

Luther laughed. "That's all right. I don't plan to do much walking around."

"I brought you somethin'," she said. "And I reckon I better give it to you. They said I could only stay two minutes."

She handed him a small jar. "It's the same batch, a little dark," she said. "Hope there's room for it."

"I'll make room," Luther said, and nodded.

"And Luther," she said, before the uniformed men began urging her away from the tower, "Luther, explain it to me agin."

Luther grinned and drew an imaginary circle with his finger. "This is us," he called to her, "And this is where we jump off."

"You and me, Luther," she said quietly, and walked away toward her little house at the foot of the mountain.