

*THE*  
*LAST PILOT*

---

Benjamin Johncock



First published in the UK in 2015 by

Myriad Editions  
59 Lansdowne Place  
Brighton BN3 1FL

[www.myriadeditions.com](http://www.myriadeditions.com)

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Benjamin Johncock 2015  
The moral right of the author has been asserted

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available  
from the British Library

ISBN (pbk): 978-1-908434-84-5

ISBN (ebk): 978-19-08434-85-2

Designed by Nicola Ferguson

Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,  
Croydon, CR0 4YY

## *PROLOGUE*

---

**I**t was a stretch of wretched land bleached and beaten by the relentless salt winds that howled in off the Atlantic, forsaken by God to man for the testing of dangerous new endeavors. WELCOME TO CAPE CANAVERAL! the sign said. SPEED LIMIT: 17,400 MPH. Three miles south sat Cocoa Beach, the Cape's resort town, so low-rent that even the giant chiggers wanted to escape it. In daylight, Cocoa Beach was cobaltic blue, coconut palms and low-rise motels called The Starlite and Satellite and The Polaris, a replica rocket clasped above each name. The beach was like a strip of asphalt, long and wide and barren and hard. You could bend a spade on it. At sundown, mosquitoes the size of a clenched fist clustered at the water's edge. At night, it was infested with sand flies that stripped skin from muscle. The only visitors were young men racing cars and the occasional couple, lured out of their motel room by the slink of the murky sea and the promise of God knows what on the bare, hardback sand. Cocoa Beach was the kind of place where people ended up.

It was late, past nine, the diner was empty. George's had low

lights, a high bar and a couple of Chesley Bonestell originals hanging on the wall. It wasn't a bad place. He came here because no one else did.

His heart hurt like hell. He pulled a half-pack of Lucky Strikes from his top pocket. He stuck one in his mouth and struck a match and lit it and waved the match until it went out. He looked at his hands, the thick hair on his fingers, his knuckles. He drank the rest of his beer.

Steely eyes gleamed down from a billboard across the street. Was it Shepard or Glenn? He didn't know, or much care; he just wanted the goddamn thing to stop staring at him. He stared at his food. He wasn't hungry.

A couple entered. The man held a gray hat between two fingers and the woman adjusted her dress as they waited to be seated. The waitress gathered plastic menus, ushered them to a table, presented the specials. The couple smiled at each other and he wondered if they were honeymooning. Smoke clung to the pine-paneled walls, tilting slowly toward the linoleum floor. The man approached his table.

Excuse me, he said, sir? Sorry to bother you an all but my wife—he glanced back—we was just wondrin, well, you're one of them, ain't you? What we been hearin about? The New Nine?

He stayed seated, pulled hard on the cigarette, his throat tightened.

I knew it! Honey, I was right.

The woman joined her husband. Her skin looked pale like a lake in late fall.

My wife, Betty, he said.

Pleasure to meet you, she said.

Now, which one are you? You're Borman, right?

Honey—

Lovell? No, wait, I know this.

You'll have to excuse my husband; we've heard so much about you all.

Harrison. Jim Harrison. I knew I knew it. Jim Harrison!

The man looked at the woman and the woman stared at the table.

Sure hope you don't mind us intrudin, the man said.

We've been staying down in Miami; at the Plaza, the woman said. It's been a wonderful three weeks, but the other night I said to Bill, Bill, let's get in the car, let's *explore* a little—

It's a Caddy, powder blue—a coupe.

—so we drove up the coast, the two of us.

I said, we should go visit the world's first *space-port*.

I didn't know what he meant.

But I never thought we'd meet one of you fellas.

A real astronaut, my goodness!

A thing like that!

Harrison put out his smoke and stood to leave.

It sure was good to meet you, Bill said, extending his hand. And thank you, for everything; really, thank you.

Harrison nodded and shook his hand. The couple returned to their table. In the restroom he pissed and thought and stood there for a long time.

At the door, the waitress rang up his check.

Everything all right for you, hon? she said.

He stared at the register. Hard cracks crossed the linoleum under his feet. His heart beat hard in his head.

Outside, the air was cool. It felt good on his bare arms. He stopped and stood on the near side of the sidewalk, against the mottled concrete wall of George's backyard. He held his head. He had to think. All he ever did was think. A man walked by and stared.

An hour passed. Inside the diner, lights were switched off in pairs, the couple left. Behind the wall, garbage sweltered and stunk. His breathing was heavy and his chest was wet. He felt dizzy. He had to move on, fill his mind.

The steely eyes followed him across the empty street. He could smell the sea; the salt and the sky. Wolfie's Cocktail Bar & Pantry was still open. Voices leaked out onto the sidewalk and echoed inside him. He walked on, past waiters licking spoons, clearing tables; past bars closing up. Air-conditioning units clung to gloomy walls, whining melancholic laments to men not yet home. The wind was hard with salt, the moon curled large and still. He reached Walt's Bar and stopped. He felt tense. Christ, he thought, I need to walk. I need to get to bed.

He got back to the motel at two. There were still people by the pool. Girls, mainly. A few men. They'd arrived soon after the first Mercury flights, the girls; eager young things, keen to become acquainted with the world's first astronauts. Cape cookies, Shepard called them. They'd been staying here since the beginning, the astronauts, enjoying the hospitality of Henri Landwirth, the Holiday Inn's manager. The rooms were stacked like cardboard boxes across two floors, encircling a bright blue swimming pool and a pink cocktail bar. Plastic chaise lounges, white like gulls, fanned the water. A racket of cicadas and crickets clattered loudly in the background.

Harrison entered the lobby. Standing by the pay phone at the foot of the stairs was a girl in a towel.

Hello, she said.

He didn't say anything. Smoke from a cigarette slunk around the brim of her straw hat. He could see small droplets of water on her bare shoulders.

Are you coming out to the pool with the rest of the fellas? she said.

I'm going to my room.

That's a much better idea.

That so.

It is.

What's your name?

Jane, she said.

She smiled, pulling the cigarette to her lips.

You drink whiskey? he said.

Got any ice?

He opened the freezer.

You're in luck.

He fixed two drinks. She sat in a chair, folding her legs over one of the arms. He stood.

Your room is kinda tidy, if you don't mind me saying so.

I don't.

Been here long?

A while.

Training?

He nodded.

Where you from?

You ask a lot of questions.

I'm a curious girl.

He held his drink at the back of his throat then swallowed it.

So we're going to the moon, she said.

Not yet.

How's that?

Takes time.

You fellas getting distracted? she said. It's been three years since

Glenn went up. Now that was something; felt like I had my own Lone Ranger watching over me.

Four days there, four days back, he said. Glenn was up for four hours.

Eight *days*? That even possible?

Record is thirty-four hours, nineteen minutes, forty-nine seconds. Gordo Cooper, Faith 7; the last of the Mercury flights. Hell of a mission. Took a nap on the pad during countdown. Ol Gordo, yeah; he's okay. Not the best, but he's all right.

Not the best? she said.

There's an old saying in flight test, who's the second best pilot you ever saw?

I like that, she said, lifting the glass to her lips. You going up?

You bet.

She looked around the room, then said, why are you living in a motel?

He tipped the rest of the slug down his throat. How old are you?

Nineteen.

Where you from?

Kansas.

You're not in Kansas anymore.

You've finished your drink.

She moved from the chair to the bed, tucking one leg beneath the other. He stared at the floor for a long time.

Tell me what you're thinking, she said.

He didn't say anything. He picked up the bottle, poured himself another.

You should go home, get some sleep, he said.

She emptied her glass slowly, eyes locked on his, ice accumulating along lips glossed with whiskey.

You sure about that? she said.



He stared at her and her legs unfurled and she walked toward him and placed a hand on his cheek. He shut his eyes.

Whatever it is, she said, it's okay.

She pulled the door tight behind her. He stood, eyes shut, bottle and glass hanging from his hands. He felt black, like he was falling, and he couldn't stop.