

THE ASTRONAUT

by BRIAN PLANTE

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Inspiration doesn't always take the form you might expect....

In May of 2030, right after school let out for the year, my family moved from New Jersey to Seguin, Texas, home of the world's largest pecan, relocating us to follow the company they both worked for. By June, I was bored to death. My friends (all two of them) were back in New Jersey and I didn't know anybody in the new place yet, and wouldn't until school started up in a couple of months. Each morning, my folks would commute to their jobs in San Antonio, an hour's drive to the west on Route 10, so I was alone most of the day, spending my time just staring at the ceiling of my bedroom or watching the Mars Channel on the holovision. The *Romulus* had been underway for three months, with another three to go before it made its way to the red planet, and even that was starting to get a little boring.

Among the few chores my parents gave me to justify my miserable existence during those long summer months was to keep the lawn mowed. That wasn't such a big deal in New Jersey, where the grass only grew half the year, and the summers were semi-bearable, but in Texas the heat was intense. It wouldn't have been so bad if the house hadn't come with an underground irrigation system, since the grass would have withered and blown away as the land turned back to the desert it naturally should have been, but unfortunately for me this grass was lush and green and it was my job to keep it that way. This was no small task in that scorching heat.

I had the lawn maintenance down to a weekly schedule, and one blistering day late in June it was time to mow again. I was fifteen years old, and like a lot of boys that age, I wasn't particularly industrious when it came to performing slave labor. Instead of mowing the lawn in the cool of the early morning, like any sensible person would have done, I went back to bed after my parents had gone to work. I slept a little more, stared at the ceiling for a while, and watched the transmission from the *Romulus* for a couple of hours. By 11:00, the sun was high and the heat was building outside, and *then* I had the mowing to do. What a jerk I was, huh?

So there I was in the noonday sun, sweating bullets as I finished up the lawn, pushing the loud, stinky mower back into the garage, when I first caught a glimpse of *her*. It was my next-door neighbor, and she was a major distraction. She was probably twice my age, but a real beauty, with a pretty face, strawberry blonde hair and a body to die for, dressed in khaki shorts and a Vikings football jersey. A boy my age with serious hormone problems couldn't have hoped for a nicer neighbor, and I had struck gold.

She was sitting on a fancy riding mower, trying in vain to get the thing started. A damsel in distress. I put away our mower and walked over to introduce myself.

"Hi, I'm Davy Carson, your next-door neighbor," I said. "Got problems with

your mower?”

She looked flustered and startled when I spoke, then looked me over and apparently judged me harmless. “Hello, Davy Carson. Pleased to meet you. I’m Rosemary Horton.” Even though she looked like your typical Texas beauty pageant queen, her voice had a flat Midwestern accent, not the local drawl. It was a wonderful, pleasant voice. “You folks just moved in a few weeks ago, didn’t you?”

“Six weeks already,” I said.

“Oh, that long? I really should have come over sooner and said hello. I mean, we’re neighbors and all. Is your mom at home?”

“No,” I said. “Both my parents are at work. I, um, take care of the house during the daytime. Hey, would you like me to look at your mower? I’m pretty good with my hands.”

“Could you? I mean, if it’s nothing too serious. My husband Richard bought me this stupid thing so I can do the lawn myself, but I don’t know anything about engines.”

Her husband. She was married. I looked at her left hand and there was the ring. I was briefly disappointed—as if I’d really ever have had a chance with an older woman like that! What a jerk I was.

“Let me see what I can do,” I said anyway.

I popped the hood and found the problem almost immediately. It was something simple: a sparkplug wire had come loose and I snapped it back on the plug.

“Try it now,” I said.

Mrs. Horton turned the key and the engine roared to life. She gave it some gas and the mower jerked in reverse, back into the garage, before she slammed on the brakes and stalled it.

“Shoot,” she said. “Say, Davy Carson, you wouldn’t like to make some money mowing my lawn, would you?”

Well, there I was, this horny, pimply teenager with nothing but spare time on my hands, and the gorgeous next-door neighbor was offering me money to work for her. Was I gonna say no?

“I have to call my dad and ask if it’s all right to use our mower on someone else’s yard. He’s a bit picky about his tools.”

“No, that’s okay,” she said. “I meant for you to use my mower. You can drive one of these things, can’t you?”

I hadn't driven a riding mower before, but I wasn't going to tell her that. I said yes, and figured out how to run the thing real quick. I was always good with machines, so it was pretty simple.

While I mowed her lawn, she went back into the house, and I couldn't blame her. It was hot enough just standing around watching, but Mrs. Horton's lawn wasn't that large and the riding mower made quick work of it. I was putting the mower back into her garage when she came out with a pitcher and a couple of tall glasses.

"You look pretty sweaty," she said. "Would you care for some iced tea?"

She looked so pretty. Was I gonna say no? We both had a glass, and drank it there in the garage, using the hood of the mower as our table. It was probably the best iced tea I ever had.

"So what do your folks do for a living?" she asked between sips.

"They both work for an electronics company in San Antonio," I answered. I almost asked her what she did for a living, but stopped myself. Women that beautiful probably didn't have to work for a living, and here she was, home in the middle of the day. "What does your husband do?" I asked.

"He's an engineer. He's away on a long-term project right now, though."

"Hey, my dad's an electrical engineer," I said. "What kind of project is your husband working on?"

Mrs. Horton's mouth opened to speak, but then she caught herself. After a pause, she said, "I'd rather not say. It's sort of a secret."

I thought for a second about what kind of engineering projects were secret. It could be government work, some sort of espionage or weapons program, or it might be some overseas thing. Maybe something in the Middle East or an offshore rig. Whatever it was, if she wanted to keep it secret, that was all right by me. It wasn't her husband I cared about.

"I understand," I said, nodding my head like I knew something.

"And what do you want to be when you grow up?" she asked.

Ooh, that hurt. *When you grow up*. To her I was only a kid. I *was* a kid, but back then, fifteen felt pretty grown up to me. I'm sure I blushed, because she looked a bit startled, probably realizing she had hurt my feelings. "I'm sorry," she said. "I meant when you get out of school."

"Well," I said, "I think I want to be a pilot, and fly a spaceship, like the *Romulus*, only we'll probably be going to Europa or Ganymede instead of Mars by then."

Mrs. Horton looked surprised. “Are you following the Mars mission? I didn’t think too many people were interested in the space program these days, since the first couple of landings.”

“Are you kidding?” I said. “Being an astronaut has gotta be the best job in the whole world.”

“Well, maybe not everyone thinks so,” she said. “Besides, the spaceships are all automated these days. They don’t really have pilots anymore.”

She probably thought I was just some starry-eyed dreamer, but I was serious. “Well, pilot or not, any kind of astronaut job would be just great for me,” I said. “I think they’re heroes.”

Mrs. Horton looked like she wanted to say something, but she just dazzled me with her sweet smile and poured me some more tea.

“Davy, would you like to mow the lawn for me every week, as a regular job? My husband won’t be back from his assignment for a while, and I just can’t handle this mower by myself. You seem to know what you’re doing and I’d rather have a friend do the job than hire some stranger.”

She called me a friend. That beautiful woman called me a friend, the first one I had made in Seguin. Was I gonna say no?

She paid me ten dollars for mowing her lawn that day. It was a bit low for a job like that, especially in that heat, but I didn’t say anything. After all, the riding mower practically did all the work, and it was kind of fun riding it. And her iced tea really was the best. And then there was her.

I would have done the job for free.

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A couple of months went by, and I learned that the heat in Texas in June barely hinted at how hot it would get by August. I mowed both our lawn and Mrs. Horton’s all summer long, and drank a lot of iced tea in her garage. We chatted about the weather, the neighborhood, and Texas. She was originally from Minneapolis, and missed having a real winter. I hadn’t been in Seguin long enough to see what a Texas winter was like yet, but we both shared our mutual homesickness.

I also spent some time painting the ceiling of my bedroom. It took some arguing, but my parents relented and agreed to let me paint it flat black, and then decorate it with glow-in-the-dark stars. I even painted in a faint Milky Way diagonally across the room. The overhead lighting fixture in the center of the ceiling became the Sun, and I painted the planets in their proper orbits around it. Halfway between the Earth and Mars I taped a small picture of the *Romulus* that I had printed from my computer, and repositioned it each week to show it approaching the planet. Yeah, it was a geeky thing to do, but it kept me busy.

Mrs. Horton was right about spaceships not needing pilots, and when I investigated the Space Agency's public information database, I learned that the crew of the *Romulus*, typical of the previous two Mars missions, included one geologist, one biochemist, and two flight engineers. The engineers were basically mechanics, to insure that the equipment worked for the duration of the two-year mission.

I wasn't particularly good at biology or interested in rocks, so if I was going to become an astronaut, it would probably have to be as a flight engineer. It didn't sound nearly as exciting as "pilot," but I was good with my hands, so it looked like I was going to be studying engineering, like my dad. And apparently, like my next-door neighbor.

Since school hadn't started, I still hadn't made any friends in the neighborhood yet. Hardly anybody went outdoors in the summer heat, so I just didn't have any opportunity to meet anyone. As a result, Mrs. Horton became the sole relief from my monotonous life. I started mowing more often than once a week, and doing maintenance on her mower—cleaning it, sharpening the blades, changing the oil, plugs, and filters—just so I could see her again and share an iced tea more often. I was smitten with her.

The rest of the week, when I wasn't watching the Mars Channel, I spent a lot of time peeking out of my window, hoping to catch a glimpse of her coming and going. I rarely saw her outside the house except for mowing days, and I never saw any visitors show up at her doorstep, so maybe she was lonely, too, what with her husband away so long.

One morning, while I was sleeping in, I was awakened by a phone call from Mrs. Horton.

"Davy, I need you to do a big favor for me," she said. Her voice sounded a bit shaky on the other end of the phone. "I got called away unexpectedly, and I need someone to look after the house for a few days."

"Sure, Mrs. Horton, anything you want."

I would have painted the house if she'd asked me.

"I have a house key hidden on the patio in back," she said. "There's a big geranium pot on the far end, and the key is underneath it."

She was trusting me a lot. I felt proud of that. "What do you want me to do?" I asked.

"Could you please take in the mail and make sure the water's not running? Maybe turn the air conditioning down a little—the thermostat is on the wall between the kitchen and the stairs. Oh, and water the houseplants in the breakfast nook and the foyer."

"Okay," I said. "Is there anything more I can do? Is everything all right?"

“There’s been a little problem,” she said. “But I don’t think it’s too serious, now. I should be back in a few days. I’m sorry to hit you with this at the last minute, but I know I can count on you.”

That made me feel proud. She was thinking of me as a friend, not just the kid next door. I wondered what sort of situation could have called her away. A medical emergency? A death in the family? But I didn’t want to pry.

“Thanks, Mrs. Horton,” I said. “I’m glad you’re my friend.”

“You’re a good boy, Davy,” she said, and hung up the phone.

Ouch, she still thought of me as a boy. But I still loved her. I would always love her.

The key was right where she said it was, under the geranium pot. I took the mail out of the box and I let myself into the house through the back door, into the kitchen. The whole two months I was mowing her lawn, I had never been inside the house before.

I glanced at the mail before leaving it on the island in the middle of the kitchen. There was a bill from the electric company, addressed to one Mr. Richard Keyes. Who was Richard Keyes? The name sounded familiar. There were a couple of pieces of junk mail made out to Rosemary Horton. Finally, there was a letter from Randolph AFB in San Antonio for one Col. Richard Keyes.

Okay, Richard Keyes was her man, all right, but were they really married? She wore a wedding ring, but she didn’t have the same last name. Perhaps there was still hope for me yet! Maybe she was just living with the guy—if he ever showed up, that was.

And he was a colonel, presumably in the Air Force. That made some sense, since it might explain the secrecy. He was probably on some sort of military mission, and Mrs. Horton’s saying he was an engineer was probably just a cover story. Maybe he was a spy.

Mrs. Horton’s house was mostly like my own, only a bit nicer and slightly larger. I turned the air conditioning down a bit, made sure the sinks and toilets weren’t running, and watered the houseplants. I was so curious about Mrs. Horton that I just *had* to look around a bit.

In the refrigerator was a pitcher of iced tea, ready to go. I almost took a glass, but thought better of it. She had trusted me with the key to her house. Was I breaking that trust by snooping? I decided to keep everything exactly as it was. But I couldn’t help myself—I still looked.

The kitchen seemed too orderly. The floor was spotless and the countertops neat and tidy. Only a single coffee cup in the sink gave any indication that someone lived there. The dining room looked like it had never been used—the dark cherry

wood table shined as if it had been polished every day, and the six upholstered chairs looked as if they had never been sat in. Fancy museum-piece china filled a glass cabinet.

The breakfast nook looked nearly as untouched, except for one of the chairs. The chair was pulled away slightly from the knotty pine table. Looking closer, I noticed that the varnish at the end of one of the armrests was marred—chipped away in hundreds of tiny ruts, perhaps by the repeated drumming of fingernails.

In the family room, the Hortons had one of the biggest holovision sets I'd ever seen. I found the remote and turned it on. It was tuned to the Mars Channel. So Mrs. Horton watched that, too. But instead of the usual live transmission from the *Romulus*, a studio anchor at Mission Control was reading some news copy. Apparently, while I was sleeping late, there had been an important story.

During the night, a fire had broken out aboard the *Romulus*. The crew had to don their pressure suits and evacuate the air from the cabin to put the blaze out. It was dicey for a while, but everyone was okay and the mission was continuing. They were still one month away from Mars.

I turned off the set and put the remote back where I found it. I should have left the house then, but I wanted to look upstairs. I wanted to see *her* bedroom. I was a horny teenager and she was the most beautiful woman I knew, so I wanted to see where she slept. It was a betrayal of trust, but I *had* to see.

Upstairs there were three bedrooms, just like at my house. The one that was like my bedroom was being used for storage, with cardboard moving boxes stacked four high. Another bedroom had an ironing board, a sewing cabinet and a dress form. Mrs. Horton sewed. I didn't know that about her before.

The last bedroom was the master suite. A simple oak bedroom set, with the standard furniture and room setup: a queen-sized bed, a couple of night tables, a dresser, and an armoire. Nothing too fancy. The bed was made up with a plain blue bedspread and four pillows. I don't know what I was expecting, some sort of pleasure den or something. This looked more like a hotel room. I couldn't even tell what side of the bed she slept on.

Off to one side of the bedroom was the door to a bathroom. On the sink were two toothbrushes—the pink one used, the green one brand new. I'm ashamed to say, I opened the medicine cabinet and looked in there, too. I wasn't going to steal anything, but I was just curious and wanted to know everything about her. There was the usual assortment of analgesics, antihistamines and cold remedies. A digital fever thermometer. Bandages. Also one pregnancy test, unopened.

I left the bathroom and went back out into the bedroom. On the dresser was a studio portrait, a wedding picture. There was Mrs. Horton, radiant in her white dress, hugging the tuxedoed Mr. Horton. Or Colonel Richard Keyes. They really *were* married, the lucky bastard. In the photo, he looked thirtyish, handsome, and in

pretty good shape—exactly the kind of guy a lady like Mrs. Horton deserved. He was everything I was not.

I started to leave the bedroom, but was stopped short by the sight of another framed photograph on the wall by the door. It was a picture of him, Colonel Richard Keyes, in uniform. It was an astronaut's pressure suit.

He was *that* Richard Keyes, the one on the *Romulus*. An engineer. A *flight* engineer. He was Mrs. Horton's husband and my next-door neighbor, a real astronaut.

But why would she keep it a secret, especially knowing I wanted to be an astronaut, too? Why didn't she take his name? Why did they live out here in the boonies of Seguin instead of Houston, where the Space Center was?

I recalled the first time we met I told her that an astronaut had the best job in the world and she said not everyone thinks so. Maybe she didn't like being an astronaut's wife. Perhaps she didn't want the publicity.

I really felt guilty then. Here I was, some geeky, horny teenager snooping through their house. And how I went on and on to her about becoming an astronaut, while all the time her husband was a real hero on his way to Mars. I was even starting to delude myself that I might ever have a chance with a woman like that. God, how pitiful I must have seemed to her.

Mrs. Horton had her secrets, and now, so did I. It was only because of my snooping that I knew her husband was aboard the *Romulus*. If she didn't want to tell me that, then I wasn't supposed to know.

I locked up the house and put the key back under the geranium pot.

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A month later, the *Romulus* finally landed on Mars after its voyage of six months. It was a huge story for me, although most of the world greeted the news with a sigh. The crew would be on the planet for a little under a year, and the media just couldn't keep people excited about anything for that long. This was the third manned landing on the red planet. It had already been done.

I started school as a sophomore at Seguin High that month. Making friends was pretty tough, as most of the cliques had already been formed in freshman year and I was the new kid. I buckled down and worked hard on my math, entering the honors program. Engineers needed math.

I continued mowing the lawn for Mrs. Horton after school and on weekends. She also gave me odd jobs to do around the house, like painting the garage and cleaning the gutters. I would have done anything for her.

Over iced tea, I'd occasionally bring up the notion that I still wanted to be an astronaut and was preparing for a degree in engineering.

Mrs. Horton would always smile and say, “That’s nice,” but I often wondered if she really meant it. After all, her husband was an astronaut, and she didn’t seem too eager to let anybody know about it.

When the *Romulus* landed, she was away for three days, presumably in Houston at the Space Center. I didn’t ask. I just took in the mail and watered the plants.

At home I watched the four men on the Martian surface. While everyone else may have lost interest after a few days, it was still the only thing worthwhile on holovision for me. How jaded could people have become to lose interest in something as astounding as men walking on Mars?

Fourteen months went by. It was November and I was a junior at Seguin High, and I watched the Mars Channel every day. The crew of the *Romulus* had finished their work on the planet and were halfway home. In another three months, Colonel Richard Keyes would finally return and I’d lose my job mowing Mrs. Horton’s lawn, but I’d get to meet a real astronaut!

Mrs. Horton switched from iced tea to lemonade for some reason that autumn. It was good lemonade, but I missed her tea. She still never let on that her husband was an astronaut, and I played along with not knowing. Eventually, I’d get to meet him, and then I’d say in surprise, “Hey, you’re that astronaut guy from Mars!” and the jig would be up. But for now, it was still a big secret.

Once, when I was mowing her lawn, some astronaut groupie pulled up to the curb in his car and started snapping photos of the house. I stopped the mower and asked him what he was doing.

“This is the home of Colonel Keyes, isn’t it?” he asked.

“Keyes?” I said in mock consternation. “No, this is the Horton residence. Can I help you?”

He took a few more photos and drove away.

A couple of weeks later, over lemonade, I was joking around that Mrs. Horton looked like she was putting on a little weight. What was I thinking? You *never* tell a woman that you notice something like that. I was getting older, but I wasn’t getting any smarter.

“Well, Davy, that’s because I’m pregnant,” she said.

I nearly choked on the lemonade, and Mrs. Horton thumped me on the back a few times until my coughing subsided.

What I should have said was, “So that’s why you stopped making the iced tea—cutting back on the caffeine for the baby!” But what I really said was, “But how is that possible? Your husband hasn’t been around for—”

I cut myself off. What a jerk, what an absolute jerk I was. If her husband had been gone for two years and now she was pregnant, then that meant that Mrs. Horton ... no, it *couldn't* be. Could it?

“No, it’s not what you’re thinking,” she said. “Richard is coming home soon. Before he left, we decided to start a family when he returned. There was the possibility of some exposure to dangerous radiation on this assignment, so we took a sperm sample before he left. Now that the dangerous part of his project is over and he’s coming home, I decided to go ahead so the baby would be here when he returns. It’s sort of a welcoming-home present.”

I gulped the rest of my lemonade. Perhaps I was relieved that she wasn’t cheating on her husband, but I was a bit jealous. Even from millions of miles away, the famous Colonel Richard Keyes, the great hero, knocked her up. And I was just the lawn boy. It was stupid. I was stupid.

“Um, do you, like, need a Lamaze partner or something?” I asked.

Mrs. Horton laughed, that pretty, musical laugh. “Oh, no, Davy. Richard will be back in time for the birth. I wouldn’t have him miss that.”

Then I really felt foolish. Imagine, thinking that she would have me, the lawn boy, in the delivery room while she gave birth. I could feel my cheeks flush with embarrassment.

Mrs. Horton noticed I was blushing and smiled. I looked away, and she put her arm around me and pulled me close in a hug. I could feel the swell of her breasts against my neck, and smell her faint perfume up close.

“That is so sweet that you’d offer to do that,” she said. “You really are a true friend, Davy.”

And then she kissed me. A friendly buss on my cheek, but a kiss nonetheless. It only lasted seconds, but it was the first time I’d ever been kissed by someone who wasn’t a relative. My first kiss from an astronaut’s wife.

Later that night, I started looking at MIT’s course catalog.

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Three months later, the *Romulus* had made its way back and taken up orbit around Earth. The crew was transferred to an orbital ferry for the final short leg home. Mrs. Horton asked me to keep an eye on the house for a few days, saying she had some business to attend to, still keeping her secret until the last possible moment. I knew she was really going to the cape to welcome her husband home on landing.

The reentry was late on an afternoon in May, and I decided to watch it on Mrs. Horton’s big holovision set. I let myself in, after school, and sat in her family room in front of the huge screen.

You couldn't see the hunk of space debris on the live feed from the orbital ferry. One minute everything was fine, and the craft was starting the burn that would bring it down, then the next moment there was an explosion and the whole ship seemed ablaze, with sirens going off and lights flashing. The picture broke up a few seconds later.

The news anchor who took over seemed not to know anything more than what everyone had just seen on the live shipboard camera: something had gone terribly wrong. It was several minutes before they would confirm that the ferry had broken up and all of the crewmembers had perished in the accident.

I turned the holovision off, locked up the house, and trudged home. I didn't cry until I got back to my bedroom and shut the door.

Do astronauts ever cry? What difference did it make if astronauts cried or not? I cried, but I was just a stupid kid.

Over the next few weeks, the whole world went into mourning. It took the death of those four astronauts to make the space program big news again. The mission was, overall, a success. The *Romulus* and all its samples were still in orbit. All the data collected was safely stored in computers on the ground. Only the crew didn't make it home.

I watched the memorial service on holovision. Mrs. Horton was easy to spot—her strawberry blonde hair and pregnant figure easily recognizable in the crowd. The press briefly picked up on the story that one of the astronaut's wives was eight months pregnant, but she refused all interviews. The press identified her as Rosemary Horton Keyes.

I never saw her again.

A few weeks later, an army of house movers came and packed everything up, and then a huge van took it all away. A "For Sale" sign went up in front of the house the next day.

A professional lawn care company took over, mowing the lawn once a week, regular as clockwork. I checked the mailbox, but the mail was already being forwarded somewhere else. I let myself into the house one last time with the key. The movers had done a thorough job. There was nothing left—no sign that anyone had ever lived there. In the bedroom, only a few dim marks in the freshly vacuumed carpet showed where the furniture had been. There was nothing I could take, no memento, no souvenir of my friendship with the astronaut's wife.

I left the key in a kitchen drawer and pulled the back door locked behind me on the way out.

Much to my parents' relief, I asked if I could repaint the ceiling in my bedroom white again. It took me four coats to cover the black background. I didn't

care much about planets and stars anymore.

Three more months went by, my most boring summer ever. Instead of the Mars Channel, I had started watching baseball. I hate baseball. Some days I didn't get out of bed until noon. I was seventeen, and about to start senior year at Seguin High, although I had no idea what I wanted to be when I grew up.

And then I received her letter. It was postmarked from Minneapolis.

* * * *

DEAR DAVY,

I'M BACK IN MINNESOTA WITH FAMILY NOW, AND LOOKING FORWARD TO A REAL WINTER AGAIN. SORRY I DIDN'T GET A CHANCE TO SAY GOODBYE, BUT I GUESS YOU KNOW WHY. WHEN DID YOU FIRST KNOW MY RICHARD WAS ON THE *Romulus*? YOU'RE SUCH A SMART BOY, I'M SURE YOU FIGURED IT OUT LONG AGO. AFTER THE ACCIDENT, I JUST COULDN'T GO BACK TO THAT HOUSE. THAT WAS OUR HOUSE, AND BESIDES, I ALWAYS HATED TEXAS.

HERE'S A CHECK FOR THOSE LAST FEW WEEKS YOU WERE TAKING CARE OF THE HOUSE. I DIDN'T MEAN TO RUN OFF OWING YOU MONEY. I'VE ALSO ENCLOSED A LITTLE SOMETHING FROM RICHARD'S THINGS I THOUGHT YOU MIGHT LIKE TO HAVE. AND A PICTURE OF THE BABY. THE BABY IS BEAUTIFUL, AND HEALTHY. HIS NAME IS RICHARD DAVID KEYES.

LOVE,

ROSEMARY

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I never cashed that check. It wasn't for a very large amount, but I figured Mrs. Horton needed the money more than I did, what with little Richard David to support. It would feel like taking advantage if I cashed it.

The photograph showed mother and baby. The baby was small and pink, but perfect. Mrs. Horton smiled, but sadness spoke through her eyes.

The final item in the envelope was a round embroidered mission patch from the *Romulus*. It showed the ship in silhouette against the red Martian globe.

I looked in the mirror, and held the patch up to my shoulder. It looked *right*. A week later, I received my letter of acceptance from MIT. It would be another ten years before I would again be kissed by an astronaut's wife.

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