THE MOON OF ADVANCED LEARNING

by Robert Young
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Mr. Young has, we're glad to say, been published in these pages so frequently of late that there's not much left to say about him here, except that his insight into the lives of steel workers does come from direct experience.

I watch the Moon of Advanced Learning rise as I walk home from work.

Within it the advanced thinkers are deep in abstruse thought. Their giant minds are wrestling with the complex problems that confront mankind today.

The advanced thinkers who came before them were earthbound. They served only to complicate the problems. Perhaps to see with utmost clarity it is necessary to detach one's physical self from the subject of one's thoughts. Perhaps this is why NASA built an oversized aluminous thinktank in space—a visible symbol of knowledge—and put it into orbit between the real moon and Earth.

The real moon is not in the sky tonight. Only the Moon of Advanced Learning is, and the summer stars.

I am a steelworker. My father is also a steelworker. My grandfather was a steelworker before us. He worked on the furnaces, as we do. They were open hearths then, and sometimes during the heats the molten steel would eat deep holes in the furnace bottoms and around the tap-holes, and after a furnace with a bad bottom had been tapped, the laborers on the floor would have to fill the holes with dolomite and tap-hole mix, shovelful by shovelful, hour after hour. The laborers were called Third Helpers. My grandfather was a Third Helper for a long time. Later on, he became a Second Helper. Finally he became a First Helper. He was paid in tonnage as well as wages then.

Now all of the furnaces are oxygen, and almost everything is done by machine. I am a tester. I test samples of the heats to determine the quality of the metal. I could wear a white shirt to work if I wanted to, but I don't. The guys who man the machines would resent it.

I make good money. My father, who is a melter, makes even better money. My grandfather was ill-paid at first for all the back-breaking shoveling he did as a Third Helper. Then the Union really flexed its biceps, and the heyday of the steelworkers began. My father would be a rich man today if he had known enough to put some of his money away. My grandfather did know enough to do so, and now the interest from his savings abets his pension and social security. He and my grandmother now live in Florida. He plays golf the year 'round. That seems to be the reason so many retirees go to Florida.

The Moon of Advanced Learning is partially built of steel, but it is mostly composed of aluminum.

The electricars that have at last come on the mass market are made mostly of aluminum.

Shipbuilding has gone to the dogs, and there are no new skyscrapers going up.

The railroads can't afford to lay new rails.

As though the situation were not bad enough as it stands, foreign steel keeps pouring in.

American steel is sick.

Bethlehem is closing down its mill here in Chenango. The announcement came three months ago.

Soon my father and I will be out of a job.

The aluminous little moon gazes benignly down upon me as I walk home. It was put into orbit shortly after Bethlehem announced its forthcoming shut-down.

Everyone hopes that the advanced thinkers are thinking what should be done about steel. But I know damn well they are not.

The Bethlehem mill virtually gave birth to Chenango. As the plant grew, so too grew the town. The houses and the business places multiplied the way grass does when you water it every day. The gin mills grew like weeds. The steel mill comprises the major part of the town's tax base, and although production at the mill is not what it once was, Chenango still remains big and bustling. The gin mills have survived well. This is partly because of subpay and unemployment insurance. When a steelworker is laid off, he has almost as much money to drink on as he had when he was working, and in most cases he would be called back to work before his unemployment insurance or his subpay ran out. But now none of the unemployed will be called back.

I have not been laid off yet, nor has my father. But soon both of us will be. I can find other work. It won't pay half as much as my present job does, but I will be able to get by. But my father, although not quite old enough to draw his pension, is too old to get a job that will pay more than peanuts.

What will *he* do?

The Moon of Advanced Learning has a per-square-inch albedo twice that of the real moon's. Its radiance puts to shame the feeble glow from the streetlights. Walking in its illumination, I can almost feel the thinkers thinking.

I am of Irish descent. Most of the people who live in Chenango are of Slavic descent, and there are also many blacks. The mill drew poor people to this part of New York State. And the poor people have become rich—or as rich as most poor people can ever expect to get. But most of their wealth lies in future paychecks. They have found out how wonderful it is to have Things, and they have bought Things on time; but now they are afraid that the Things will be taken away.

I have a new electricar. I could easily drive back and forth to work. But in warm weather I never do, since I live only a little more than a mile from the mill. So in warm weather I walk and let my wife have the car.

It is Friday night, and I have the weekend off. I have my paycheck in my pocket. I used to cash my paycheck in one of the numerous gin mills and get drunk, but this was before I got married. Now I take it straight home with me and cash it the next day in the supermarket. I am not afraid to walk the streets of Chenango even though they are infested with kids who like to beat people up and rob them. The people they generally beat up and rob are old and feeble. They don't dare come near me. They remain in doorways and alleys until I have gone by. I am big and broad of shoulder. I could make mincemeat of them, and they know it.

My wife's name is Betty. After we got married, I bought a house in Chenango. Shortly afterward my father built a house in the suburbs and moved there. What the hell, he said, I can afford it, so why not? But he misses living in Chenango.

Although the house I bought is more than a mile from the mill, we get residue from the blast-furnace discharges, and during the warm months when we leave our windows open, we can smell the acrid fumes from the plant. But neither of us has ever minded the pollution. Betty has known it all her life, and so have I. Without the pollution there would be no mill and no paycheck and no house. We've always thought that whatever years the pollution might take away from us would be more than compensated for by the

paychecks I bring home.

The pollution is not so bad now as it was in my grandfather's day. Precipitators have been installed at the mill at enormous company expense. Maybe they are one of the reasons this once mighty arm of Bethlehem has become atrophied. But the people of Chenango did not ask the company to install them. The people of Chenango are like the people of Donora, Pennsylvania. When, years ago, many of them died from fumes from a zinc processing plant, those who survived did not want the plant to move. They saw clearly that without the plant there would be no Donora, Pennsylvania, and that clean air would cost them their paychecks. People can live with pollution, but they cannot live without paychecks.

I wonder if the thinkers in the Moon of Advanced Learning have thoughts like these.

Probably not. Probably they are thinking about black holes.

I buy a sixpack in an all-night delicatessen and walk the remaining distance to my house. It is a well-built house with a full cellar, but the neighborhood is run down. I have painted it and have repaired the veranda, so it looks real nice. But there is nothing I can do about the houses next door or the houses across the street or the bottles the kids break on the pavement or the refuse that keeps accumulating along the curbs. Unfortunately the houses in this section of Chenango were built on narrow lots so that someone living in one house can reach out his side windows and almost touch the side of the house next door. And while all of the houses have long, narrow backyards, none of them has a front yard over three feet in width. But all of them, like mine, are well built. If they are never razed, they will outlast by generations the ranchstyle my father built in the suburbs.

Our electricar is parked in the street. I check to see whether it is locked; then I climb the veranda steps and knock on the front door, which Betty keeps locked after dark. She lets me in and we kiss in the foyer. When I am on the afternoon shift she always prepares a late supper for me. I wash my hands in the kitchen sink (I have showered at the mill) and sit down at the kitchen table and open one of the bottles from the sixpack. The beer is cold—the delicatessen keeps all its beer refrigerated. I drink it from the bottle. Supper is not quite ready yet. Betty knows I like to drink a beer or two before I eat. The kids are in bed—they have had a hard day playing. Janet is five. Little Chuck is four.

Betty is frying pork chops and boiling potatoes. She was a tall, dark-haired beauty in school. She is still a tall, dark-haired beauty, but she has gained weight. She goes to a weight-watchers class twice each week, but so far it has had no effect. Her bottom is firm and neatly rounded. That is the way they say it in books: firm and neatly rounded. She wears tight slacks to make it seem more so, but the slacks can't quite cope with the number of pounds she has put on around her waist. I do not mind this, but she thinks I do. She does sitting-up exercises every morning. Her father is a steelworker too, but unlike my father, he has thirty years in and is eligible for retirement and does not need to worry about the forthcoming shutdown.

As I finish my second bottle of beer, Betty sets the table. She always waits to eat supper with me when I am on the afternoon shift, and presently she joins me at the table. She has had little to say since I got home. She is quiet because she is scared. She has been scared ever since the company announced that the mill is going to be shut down.

In addition to pork chops and mashed potatoes she prepared a tossed salad and boiled corn-on-the-cob. She also baked a banana-cream pie. I have two pieces. She has only a sliver. "Are we going to your father's on Sunday?" she asks.

"He's expecting us."

"Why doesn't he ever come here when both of you get a Sunday off at the same time?"

"I think he likes to show off his new house."

"I think he's homesick for Chenango," Betty says. "I think he knows that if he comes to our house, he'll get more homesick yet."

"I don't see why. He sees the town every time he comes to work."

"Seeing it and living in it aren't quite the same thing."

She pours coffee and we sit there for a while talking about the kids. Neither of us brings up the subject of the mill. While she is doing dishes I go outside and stand in the backyard. The Moon of

Advanced Learning is almost directly above the house. There is a reassuring quality about its light. The advanced thinkers are multinational. Two of them are Americans, one is French, one is an Israeli, one is English, and one is Norwegian. All have giant brains. Their avowed purpose, according to the media, is to improve the lot of mankind, but I do not think they are thinking of mankind in the present tense; I think they are thinking of mankind of the future. I do not think they are looking down upon us as their little aluminous world whirls round and round the Earth. I think they are looking at the stars.

Betty precedes me upstairs. I check to see if all the doors are locked. When I enter our room, she is kneeling beside the bed. Her hands are steepled on the bedspread and her eyes are closed. She is of Polish descent, and both of us go to early mass every Sunday when I am off, and take the kids with us. But I have never seen her pray at home before. Without saying anything, I undress and slip between the sheets. Presently she slips in beside me. Then I say, "Were you praying about the mill?" and she answers, "Yes." I do not say anything more, but turn off the light. We lie there in the darkness side by side, and then we make love.

In the morning there is a wind from the south, and the sky is a cloudless blue. During the week it was cool for this time of year, and now the weather forecasters are ecstatic as they promise a warm and beautiful weekend. After breakfast we take the kids and go shopping. I cash my check at the supermarket-office window. It is a big check; it needs to be what with the price of food. With kids, shopping is quite a chore. Janet wants everything she sees. Little Chuck is too young to know what he wants and keeps grabbing at bright packages. We return to the car and unload the two carts we have filled. Betty loves to shop. Her eyes become glazed as she inches up and down the aisles. She buys everything that is on sale, whether we need it or not. She thinks she is saving money. I am always tempted to point out to her that the only realistic way to save money is not to spend it, but I never do. With the money I make, there is no need to be frugal.

The supermarket is four blocks from our house. We drive home beneath a sky to which smoke from the mill has lent a yellowish cast. Many of the business places we pass are closed, their windows boarded up. There are numerous houses for sale. Employment at the mill is not what it once was, and although on the surface Chenango is still big and bustling, it has been gradually dying for years. My grandfather used to tell me how it used to be in the old days. There were twenty thousand men working in the mill then, and the unemployed used to beg at the gates to be let in so they could apply for work. No one dreamed in those days that the mill would ever die. It was as dependable as the sun coming up in the morning. But my grandfather is no longer interested in such matters. He is too busy in Florida playing golf.

Saturday afternoon I cut the lawn. It takes me only fifteen minutes. Afterward I replace a cellar window one of the neighborhood kids broke. Late in the afternoon I have a bottle of beer and sit on the back porch steps, watching Janet and Little Chuck play. We have steak for supper—tenderloin. Afterward I watch TV for a while; then Betty and I get dressed to go out. She puts the kids to bed, and a teenage girl from down the street comes in to babysit.

We go to Braidish's. We almost always go there Saturday night when I have the weekend off. Tonight we go with Ron and Dolores Krupak. Ron works with me at the mill, and he and Dolores are about our age. Braidish's is located near the outskirts of Chenango and is a notch or two above the average gin mill. On Saturday nights a dance band comes in at nine and plays till two.

We take a table near the dance floor and have a few rounds while the band is setting up. Betty drinks screwdrivers; the rest of us order beer. Usually she confines herself to two or three drinks, but tonight, even before we begin to dance, she has four. The band is an old people's band—it plays Lawrence Welk style and alternates between old favorites and modern numbers, which it plays exactly the same way it plays the old favorites. Tame stuff, but when you have a wife and two kids, it's time to start being tame.

Between dances the four of us talk of this and that, but never once does one of us mention the mill. Mostly we talk about our kids. Ron and Dolores have two boys and a girl. Betty keeps downing

screwdrivers. I tell her to ease up, but she only grins and says Saturday night only comes once a week. She is tipsy when at last we leave. We go for coffee at an all-night diner. After one swallow of hers Betty gets sick and runs for the women's room. Dolores helps her back to the table. Shortly afterward we leave. Both Ron and I have driven our cars. As soon as I get home, I pay the babysitter and tell her she can go; then I put Betty to bed. I have never seen her drunk before. It makes me sad, particularly because I know why she got drunk.

My father's house has a big lawn in front and an even bigger lawn in back. Last year he had an in-ground swimming pool put in. The house is white-shingled and looks larger than it really is. There is a tiny porch in front and a big patio in back. The patio overlooks the swimming pool. All of the trees in the yard are young. Some of them are Schwedler's maples; some of them are silver birches. There are two dogwoods in the front yard. He cuts the grass twice each week from late spring to early fall; he has a riding mower. There is an inbuilt double garage, although he has only one car. In the backyard he has built a special shed to keep his tools in and covered it with shingles to match those on the house. I have never told him so, but despite its shingles it looks like an outhouse.

The minute we get there Sunday afternoon Janet starts hollering that she wants to go swimming, and Little Chuck joins her. My mother gets both kids into their suits, gets into hers, and soon Janet and Little Chuck are splashing gleefully in the shallow part of the pool under my mother's watchful eye. My father gets a sixpack out of the refrigerator in the kitchen, and he and I and Betty sit at the rustic wooden table he built for the patio. Betty refuses a bottle of beer—she is still sick from last night. My father and I drink our beer from the bottle. He is a couple of inches shorter than I, and stockily built. His barrel chest is no longer distinguishable from his belly. His hairline is receding, and his brown hair has flecks of gray in it. But despite the grayness and the lines in his face he does not look his forty-nine years.

Usually when we get together we talk shop. Today he does not even mention the mill. At the mill he works in Two Shop and I work in Three, and we seldom see each other at work. The last time Betty and I and the kids were out to his house he was depressed and said next to nothing all the while we were there. My mother reflected his mood. Today he is in excellent spirits, and my mother seems to be having as much fun as Janet and Little Chuck are as she monitors them in the pool.

I am determined to talk about the mill whether my father wants to or not. Its forthcoming shut-down is a fact that has to be faced. He is soon going to be among the unemployed, and if he remains among them, he is going to lose his house. Some way, somehow, he is going to have to find another job, and a good one.

But I do not bring up the subject of the mill directly. Instead I ask him how many more years his mortgage still has to go. "Twenty-five," he says. "Hell, you know when I bought the house."

"I didn't know you took a thirty-year mortgage."

"Everybody does these days."

"Young people do. How in hell are you going to pay it off?"

"You're worried about the mill, aren't you."

"Not on my account."

"Well, don't worry about it on mine."

"You owe for your car too. Not to mention the swimming pool."

"They haven't pulled out yet."

"They're going to."

"They only said they were going to. Things can change."

"There are two things that never change. Profit and loss. If they figure they can make more money or lose less money by pulling out they'll pull out."

"When they pull out is when I'll start to worry," my father says He takes a big swallow of beer.

Betty looks at him. "You believe, don't you?"

"You bet your life I do."

"I don't," Betty says. "But I keep trying."

I stare at her and then at him. "Believe what?"

Neither answers me.

I finish my beer and set the bottle on the table. "I'm going for a swim," I tell them.

I take each of the kids out into deeper water. "I can swim! I can swim!" Janet shouts, and I loosen my grip on her and let her paddle furiously till she begins to sink. Little Chuck has big blue eyes. He doesn't say anything when it is his turn, but his eyes get even bigger. "Swim! Swim!" he says after I take him into deeper water, and I let him paddle realistically away, all the while wondering what my father has up his sleeve that Betty doesn't quite believe in.

We have barbecued chicken for supper. My mother prepares it outdoors on the rotisserie after parboiling it in the kitchen. Barbecued chicken, french fries, a tossed salad, sliced tomatoes and corn-on-the-cob. Betty and my mother have coffee, the kids pop. My father and I have beer. In the yard next door the people are having barbecued chicken too. It is a suburban custom.

Both the beer and the meal make me sleepy, and after supper I fall asleep on a lawn-style chaise lounge on the patio. It is beginning to grow dark when I awake. Betty has her bathing suit on and is in the pool with the kids. My mother and father are watching TV on a portable set they brought outside. "It'll be full tonight," I hear my father say.

"Yes," says my mother.

I realize they are talking about the Moon of Advanced Learning. "They can think better when it's full," I say wryly.

"I wonder," my mother says, "if they got my letter yet."

I sit up straight in the lawn chair and stare at her. "You *wrote* to them?"

"Yes. About the mill."

"Mom, they can't do anything about the mill!"

"Why can't they?" my father asks. "Why in hell do you think they were put up there?"

"Why, to think, of course."

"Right. To think. About us."

"But they don't think about us individually. They think of mankind as a whole—about how to keep it from going down the drain. They think about the growing population, about the dwindling food supply, about ecology—things like that. They think of our future."

"That's what I mean," my father says. "Our future."

"Dad, I'm talking about the stars. They're thinking of ways we might get to the stars. They're theorizing about space. About black holes. Black holes may be the answer."

"The answer to what?" my mother asks.

"To our finding inhabitable worlds."

"Nonsense," my father says. "They're thinking of this world and people like us. Probably they didn't know about the mill. But now they do—they must have got the letter by this time. I told your mother it wouldn't do any good just to pray."

"Pray?"

"Yes, pray. By prayers alone they might not have got the message."

"Now they'll know what we're praying about," my mother says. "They'll know exactly what mill we mean."

"They're not gods! They're six mortal human beings going round and round the Earth in an aluminum tin can!"

"Betty prays too," my mother says. "She told me."

"Look, it's rising," my father says, pointing to the east.

"Yes," my mother says quietly, leaning forward.

I do not look at the Moon. I look at Betty. She is kneeling at the pool's edge drying Little Chuck with a towel. Then she becomes aware of the rising Moon and turns toward it. She is still kneeling. She must feel my eyes upon her, for she turns back quickly and resumes drying Little Chuck.

Beside me my mother says, "I'll bet they can almost look down and see the mill."

"They'll never let it be shut down," my father says. "Not in a million years!"

We are a long time saying good-bye. My mother always hates to see the children leave. So does my father, although he pretends not to. I keep looking at this hard-working Catholic who has apotheosized six scientists who aren't fit to tie his real God's shoes. I keep looking at my mother. My mother wrote a letter to the men in the Moon. Please save our steel mill.

I drive home slowly. I can see the Moon of Advanced Learning above the housetops. It shines like a silver dollar. "Did you write them a letter too?" I ask Betty.

"No."

"I wonder if my mother sent hers special delivery."

"Don't make fun, Chuck."

"I'm not making fun. I just can't believe you people."

"What're we supposed to do? What am *I* supposed to do?"

"Guys like them developed the A-bomb."

"What kind of a job can you get compared to the one you have? We have a big mortgage on the house and we owe for the car, the refrigerator and the living-room set. And I can't work because of the kids."

"Well, at least you don't believe."

"No. Only hope."

It is well after ten by the time we get home. Betty takes the kids upstairs to bed, then calls down that she is going to bed herself. I tell her I will be up shortly.

I go out and stand on the back porch and look up at the Moon. It grins down at me.

A pantheon of six moldy old men.

The upstairs lights in the house next door are on, the downstairs lights are out. Probably our neighbors are praying too. Please save our mill. Betty should be done by now. I reenter the house, lock the door and go upstairs to bed.