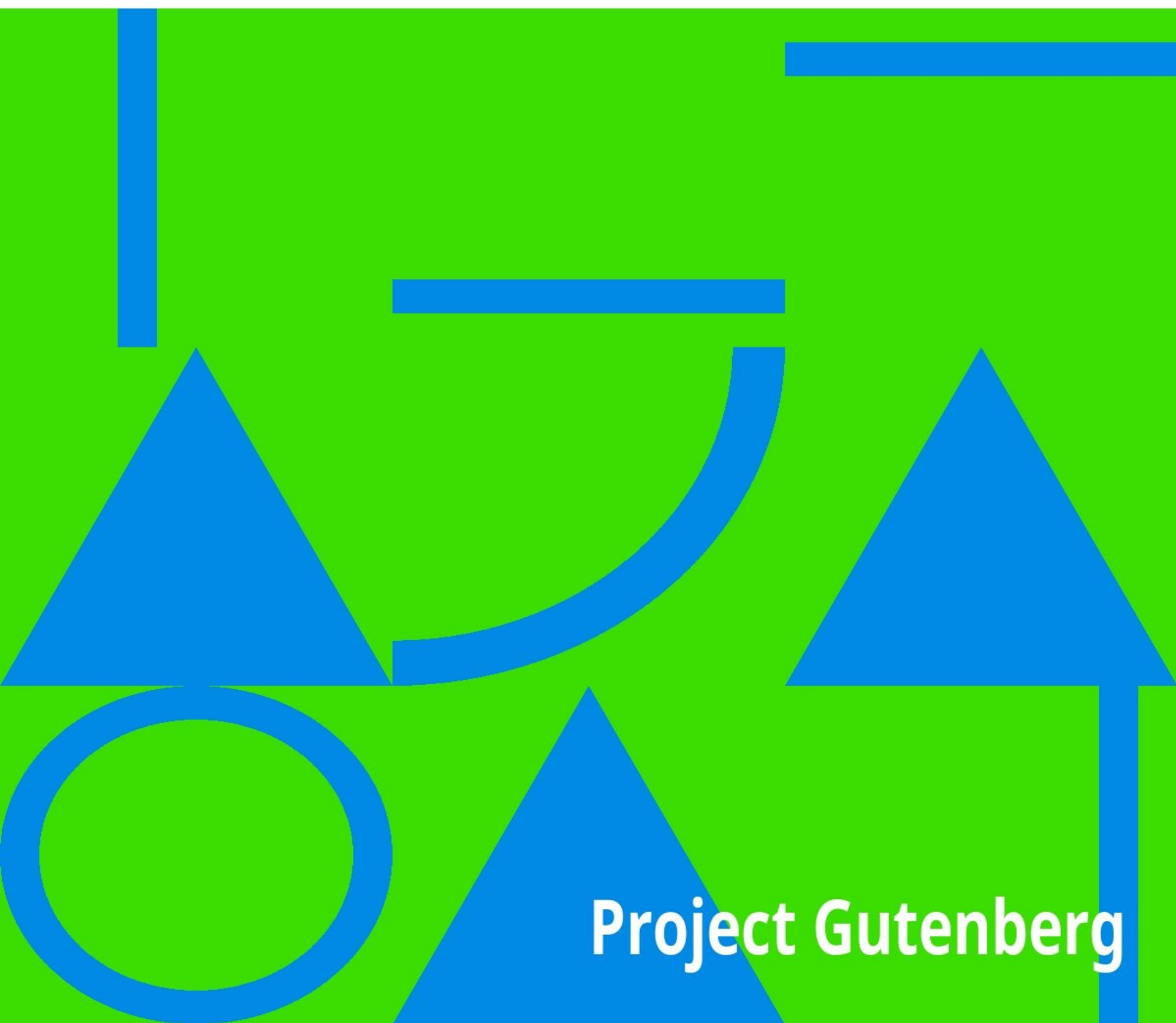


Breakaway

Stanley Gimble



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Illustration



BREAKAWAY

BY STANLEY GIMBLE

Illustrated by Freas

She surely got her wish ... but there was some question about getting what she wanted.

Phil Conover pulled the zipper of his flight suit up the front of his long, thin body and came into the living room. His face, usually serious and quietly handsome, had an alive, excited look. And the faint lines around his dark, deep-set eyes were accentuated when he smiled at his wife.

"All set, honey. How do I look in my monkey suit?"

His wife was sitting stiffly on the flowered couch that was still not theirs completely. In her fingers she held a cigarette burned down too far. She said, "You look fine, Phil. You look just right." She managed a smile. Then she leaned forward and crushed the cigarette in the ash tray on the maple coffee table and took another from the pack.

He came to her and touched his hands to her soft blond hair, raising her face until she was looking into his eyes. "You're the most beautiful girl I know. Did I ever tell you that?"

"Yes, I think so. Yes, I'm sure you did," she said, finishing the ritual; but her voice broke, and she turned her head away. Phil sat beside her and put his arm around her small shoulders. He had stopped smiling.

"Honey, look at me," he said. "It isn't going to be bad. Honestly it isn't. We know exactly how it will be. If anything could go wrong, they wouldn't be sending me; you know that. I told you that we've sent five un-manned ships up and everyone came back without a hitch."

She turned, facing him. There were tears starting in the corners of her

wide, brown eyes, and she brushed them away with her hand.

"Phil, don't go. Please don't. They can send Sammy. Sammy doesn't have a wife. Can't he go? They'd understand, Phil. Please!" She was holding his arms tightly with her hands, and the color had drained from her cheeks.

"Mary, you know I can't back out now. How could I? It's been three years. You know how much I've wanted to be the first man to go. Nothing would ever be right with me again if I didn't go. Please don't make it hard." He stopped talking and held her to him and stroked the back of her head. He could feel her shoulders shaking with quiet sobs. He released her and stood up.

"I've got to get started, Mary. Will you come to the field with me?"

"Yes, I'll come to say good-by." She paused and dropped her eyes. "Phil, if you go, I won't be here when you get back—if you get back. I won't be here because I won't be the wife of a space pilot for the rest of my life. It isn't the kind of life I bargained for. No matter how much I love you, I just couldn't take that, Phil. I'm sorry. I guess I'm not the noble sort of wife."

She finished and took another cigarette from the pack on the coffee table and put it to her lips. Her hand was trembling as she touched the lighter to the end of the cigarette and drew deeply. Phil stood watching her, the excitement completely gone from his eyes.

"I wish you had told me this a long time ago, Mary," Phil said. His voice was dry and low. "I didn't know you felt this way about it."

"Yes, you did. I told you how I felt. I told you I could never be the wife of a space pilot. But I don't think I ever really believed it was possible—not until this morning when you said tonight was the take-off. It's so stupid to jeopardize everything we've got for a ridiculous

dream!"

He sat down on the edge of the couch and took her hands between his. "Mary, listen to me," he said. "It isn't a dream. It's real. There's nothing means anything more to me than you do—you know that. But no man ever had the chance to do what I'm going to do tonight—no man ever. If I backed out now for any reason, I'd never be able to look at the sky again. I'd be through."

She looked at him without seeing him, and there was nothing at all in her eyes.

"Let's go, if you're still going," she finally said.



They drove through the streets of the small town with its small bungalows, each alike. There were no trees and very little grass. It was a new town, a government built town, and it had no personality yet. It existed only because of the huge ship standing poised in the take-off zone five miles away in the desert. Its future as a town rested with the ship, and the town seemed to feel the uncertainty of its future, seemed ready to stop existing as a town and to give itself back to the desert, if such was its destiny.

Phil turned the car off the highway onto the rutted dirt road that led across the sand to the field where the ship waited. In the distance they could see the beams of the searchlights as they played across the take-off zone and swept along the top of the high wire fence stretching out of sight to right and left. At the gate they were stopped by the guard. He read Phil's pass, shined his flashlight in their faces, and then saluted. "Good luck, colonel," he said, and shook Phil's hand.

"Thanks, sergeant. I'll be seeing you next week," Phil said, and

smiled. They drove between the rows of wooden buildings that lined the field, and he parked near the low barbed fence ringing the take-off zone. He turned off the ignition, and sat quietly for a moment before lighting a cigarette. Then he looked at his wife. She was staring through the windshield at the rocket two hundred yards away. Its smooth polished surface gleamed in the spotlight glare, and it sloped up and up until the eye lost the tip against the stars.

"She's beautiful, Mary. You've never seen her before, have you?"

"No, I've never seen her before," she said. "Hadn't you better go?" Her voice was strained and she held her hands closed tightly in her lap. "Please go now, Phil," she said.

He leaned toward her and touched her cheek. Then she was in his arms, her head buried against his shoulder.

"Good-by, darling," she said.

"Wish me luck, Mary?" he asked.

"Yes, good luck, Phil," she said. He opened the car door and got out. The noise of men and machines scurrying around the ship broke the spell of the rocket waiting silently for flight.

"Mary, I—" he began, and then turned and strode toward the administration building without looking back.



Inside the building it was like a locker room before the big game. The tension stood alone, and each man had the same happy, excited look that Phil had worn earlier. When he came into the room, the noise and bustle stopped. They turned as one man toward him, and General Small came up to him and took his hand.

"Hello, Phil. We were beginning to think you weren't coming. You all set, son?"

"Yes, sir, I'm all set, I guess," Phil said.

"I'd like you to meet the Secretary of Defense, Phil. He's over here by the radar."

As they crossed the room, familiar faces smiled, and each man shook his hand or touched his arm. He saw Sammy, alone, by the coffee urn. Sammy waved to him, but he didn't smile. Phil wanted to talk to him, to say something; but there was nothing to be said now. Sammy's turn would come later.

"Mr. Secretary," the general said, "this is Colonel Conover. He'll be the first man in history to see the other side of the Moon. Colonel—the Secretary of Defense."

"How do you do, sir. I'm very proud to meet you," Phil said.

"On the contrary, colonel. I'm very proud to meet you. I've been looking at that ship out there and wondering. I almost wish I were a young man again. I'd like to be going. It's a thrilling thought—man's first adventure into the universe. You're lighting a new dawn of history, colonel. It's a privilege few men have ever had; and those who have had it didn't realize it at the time. Good luck, and God be with you."

"Thank you, sir. I'm aware of all you say. It frightens me a little."

The general took Phil's arm and they walked to the briefing room. There were chairs set up for the scientists and Air Force officers directly connected with the take-off. They were seated now in a semicircle in front of a huge chart of the solar system. Phil took his seat, and the last minute briefing began. It was a routine he knew by heart. He had gone over and over it a thousand times, and he only half

listened now. He kept thinking of Mary outside, alone by the fence.

The voice of the briefing officer was a dull hum in his ears.

"... And orbit at 18,000-mph. You will then accelerate for the breakaway to 24,900-mph for five minutes and then free-coast for 116 hours until—"

Phil asked a few questions about weather and solar conditions. And then the session was done. They rose and looked at each other, the same unanswered questions on each man's face. There were forced smiles and handshakes. They were ready now.

"Phil," the general said, and took him aside.

"Sir?"

"Phil, you're ... you feel all right, don't you, son?"

"Yes, sir. I feel fine. Why?"

"Phil, I've spent nearly every day with you for three years. I know you better than I know myself in many ways. And I've studied the psychologist's reports on you carefully. Maybe it's just nervousness, Phil, but I think there's something wrong. Is there?"

"No, sir. There's nothing wrong," Phil said, but his voice didn't carry conviction. He reached for a cigarette.

"Phil, if there is anything—anything at all—you know what it might mean. You've got to be in the best mental and physical condition of your life tonight. You know better than any man here what that means to our success. I think there is something more than just natural apprehension wrong with you. Want to tell me?"



Outside, the take-off zone crawled with men and machines at the base of the rocket. For ten hours, the final check-outs had been in progress; and now the men were checking again, on their own time. The thing they had worked toward for six years was ready to happen, and each one felt that he was sending just a little bit of himself into the sky. Beyond the ring of lights and moving men, on the edge of the field, Mary stood. Her hands moved slowly over the top of the fence, twisting the barbs of wire. But her eyes were on the ship.

And then they were ready. A small group of excited men came out from the administration building and moved forward. The check-out crews climbed into their machines and drove back outside the take-off zone. And, alone, one man climbed the steel ladder up the side of the rocket—ninety feet into the air. At the top he waved to the men on the ground and then disappeared through a small port.

Mary waved to him. "Good-by," she said to herself, but the words stuck tight in her throat.

The small group at the base of the ship turned and walked back to the fence. And for an eternity the great ship stood alone, waiting. Then, from deep inside, a rumble came, increasing in volume to a gigantic roar that shook the earth and tore at the ears. Slowly, the first manned rocket to the Moon lifted up and up to the sky.



For a long time after the rocket had become a tiny speck of light in the heavens, she stood holding her face in her hands and crying softly to herself. And then she felt the touch of a hand on her arm. She turned.

"Phil! Oh, Phil." She held tightly to him and repeated his name over and over.

"They wouldn't let me go, Mary," he said finally. "The general would not let me go."

She looked at him. His face was drawn tight, and there were tears on his cheeks. "Thank, God," she said. "It doesn't matter, darling. The only thing that matters is you didn't go."

"You're right, Mary," he said. His voice was low—so low she could hardly hear him. "It doesn't matter. Nothing matters now." He stood with his hands at his sides, watching her. And then turned away and walked toward the car.

THE END

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