

Louis Evans
Published in *Interzone* #286
March 2020

about 4,100 words

Rocket Man

by Louis Evans

Each night I dream of Moscow, bombsight nosecone dreams.

These dreams have no plot and no logic. The city is a plum, a windswept field, a stag's heart. It is an emerald, a green onion, an open mouth.

And me? I am a secant. An abscess. A segment of an orange. Coal-furnace tongs.
A flaw.

In the instant before I wake, sweating, heaving, I am the first gasp of the inferno.

#

Top Secret

STRATEGIC MISSILE EVALUATION COMMITTEE

TO: Hon. Trevor Gardner, Assistant Secretary, U.S. Air Force
Brig. Gen. Bernard Schriever, Assistant for Development
Planning, U.S. Air Force

FROM:John von Neumann

Simon Ramo

Dean Woolbridge

Gentlemen:

This Committee was established to evaluate long-range nuclear weapons delivery systems, chiefly but not exclusively long-range missile systems, and to determine if any such system might contribute to the defense of the United States against her enemies and ensure her success in the event of a nuclear conflict.

The primary obstacle for any such weapons systems is the turbulence zone of the Earth's upper atmosphere. This zone was poorly understood until the past decade, but it is now generally accepted that no known automatic guidance system, whether mechanical or electrical, will function effectively at altitudes above 60 miles.

The research of this committee has been unable to discover any promising prospects for such an unmanned guidance system. An unmanned long-range nuclear missile cannot be constructed.

We propose, therefore, the development of a manned
long range nuclear strike rocket, which—

#

The simplest principle for guidance is the law of inertia.

Otherwise things grow more complicated.

#

—with this attack profile, survival for the rocket's
pilot will be impossible. However, given the experience
with Japanese kamikazes in the Second World War, it is
clear that a suitable cohort of pilots, properly trained
and indoctrinated, may be relied upon to carry out such a
mission. Our recommendation—

#

There is nothing for anyone to do on a rocket base in peacetime, and for rocket
men there is less than nothing. We sit and we wait for the end of the world.

If the red phone rings — it is white, bleach white, bone white, but the name
persists — then we will all climb out of our beds and get into rows and go to our deaths.
Otherwise we sit and wait.

The Air Force knows that this is not the best past-time for men who must remain
in peak condition in the event that they are called upon to climb into rockets, navigate
those rockets into the stratosphere, and then steer them hurtling downward into large
Communist metropolises in order to scourge them with nuclear fire. So the Air Force
occupies our time with daily drills and loyalty questionnaires and exercise and regular

meals and outdated movies and mandatory pickup basketball games. In this way Uncle Sam lays claim to twelve of our twenty four hours.

However, it turns out that twelve hours a day is plenty of time to go crazy in.

Capt. Johnson spends six of his remaining twelve hours in the gym. He is able to lift a large table or a small safe over his head and toss it as easily as I can toss a basketball. He is aided in this pursuit by an illicit stream of anabolic steroids, which a corrupt corporal smuggles to him.

Capt. O'Connell, Johnson's bunkmate, has developed a recreational addiction to the amphetamines that the Air Force makes available to us, in the unlikely event that we get a little drowsy while flying a nuclear missile for twenty minutes to the end of the world. When he is under the influence of this substance he enjoys woodcarving. He can turn an old spoon or fallen branch into a duck faster than you can believe. He only ever carves ducks.

Capt. Wilson is a fanatical masturbator. Though a certain volume of pornography is available through the base's black market, the only aid upon which Capt. Wilson relies is his stash of back issues of *Life Magazine*. The state that Capt. Wilson leaves these issues in beggars the imagination.

And me?

#

A checklist is a sequence of necessities. It is a collection of many questions and one answer: go. Or no go. It is the moon, ten minutes before new: a world of darkness and a thin terminator of light.

Here is one checklist:

T - 10:00	FUEL CELL REACTION VALVES - LATCH
T - 8:30	2ND COOL LOOP PUMP - OFF (verify)
T - 4:10	REENTRY VEHICLE ENGINE LIGHTS - ON
T - 2:15	MISSILE LAUNCH OPERATIONS COMM CHECK
T - 0:45	GYRO DISPLAY COUPLER ALIGN - R=90+AZ, P=90, Y=0
T - 0:09	IGNITION COMMAND
T - 0:00	LIFTOFF

Here is another checklist:

1. Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of the Communist party?
 Yes No
2. Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of any group dedicated to pacifism, nonviolence, or denuclearization?
 Yes No
3. Do you have any family members who presently live in the USSR or any other Communist state?

Yes No

4. Do you have any friends who presently live in the USSR or any other Communist state?

Yes No

5. Do you have any ancestral connection to any place, city, or region presently located within the USSR or any other Communist state?

Yes No

6. Have you ever visited the USSR or any other Communist state for any purpose?

Yes No

7. Do you for any reason hold warm feelings toward any person, place, or thing that is or has ever been within the USSR or any other Communist state?

Yes No

And so on.

Everyone knows what a checklist is supposed to say. Everyone knows what a checklist is supposed to do.

And yet unbeknownst to all, at the heart of every checklist is a lacuna, an absence. A small silent question, implicit and unanswered. A space for free will.

#

On a rocket base, everyone goes crazy, rocket men most of all. Except for me. I don't go crazy. I don't go crazy for a single, simple reason. I have a mission, a secret mission.

Nobody has given it to me and thus nobody can take it away.

My mission is this: I am going to miss.

#

The air is a beautiful thing. I have loved it for a long time; well before my pilot days. I flew kites as a child, kites and balsa-wood models with wind-up propellers and paper airplanes. I loved the paper airplanes most of all.

With paper airplanes if you crease the wings in secret and throw them just right they will pause at the peak of their path and just float. And then they begin to turn.

The way a nuclear missile can miss is nothing like this.

#

I will not hit Moscow and I refuse to miss only to crash into Leningrad or Stockholm or even the Russian hinterland. The warhead has altitude fuses and pressure fuses and if I land anywhere it will detonate. I will not take the risk. I will not trade many lives for few. I will trade many lives for one.

I am going to miss because I am going to *skip*.

The air is a beautiful thing and from space it is just like the surface of a pond. The nosecone, pointed up, is a smooth stone.

I skipped my allotted portion of stones as a child and if they send me out to end the world I will skip one more, just one. I will turn belly up and burn my rockets at the wrong moment and I will skip right through the thin ribbons of aurora and out into the black.

Then I will die, of course.

#

This is my mission and it keeps me sane while I am awake.

It does not seem to do much for the dreams. Every night I dream of Moscow, plotless overpressure bombsight dreams.

Well. Almost every night.

#

I wake in the middle of the night from nameless dreams to the sound of sirens.

“Oh.” I think. “This is it.” I dress. I am hurried to my rocket. The drills are always orderly but this is pure distillate of chaos. Screaming men hurtle pass me. I do not know their faces.

I board the rocket. I strap down. I run through the checklist. Launch control has a voice thick with tears.

The launch is like doing a bellyflop from a skyscraper right onto the pavement below. The launch is like forgetting to breathe.

“This is it,” I think. Pitch. Yaw. Roll.

Up and out. The turbulence of the ionosphere comes upon me. The rocket turns itself off. I turn it on again.

I can only see the barest slit of sky through the windows, above the controls. A curling ribbon of aurora drifts by and is lost.

It is very cold. My fingers go numb; so do my toes. That's good. Better to freeze than to suffocate. And both are better than burning. I am ready to miss.

I am ready to miss and so I do, performing the maneuver flawlessly. As though I had drilled on it for months and years in public, not merely in the shadow theater of the mind. I am ready to miss and so I roll, belly up, and I fire the rockets, and I burn. And there I go, skipping out into the black.

I have not really prepared for this part, the suffocating over several hours. I try to think of the Muscovites I have saved but I find the images do little for me. It is too easy for the mind's eye to drift over the earth, to the targets of my fellow U.S. rocket men, Leningrad and Stalingrad and Kiev, to the Russian missiles which will undoubtedly be landing on New York and Washington and Los Angeles, to—

So I don't think about it and instead try to whistle, a quiet little tuneless tune to draw down my last breaths.

It's about then that I hear the voices.

"Get him the hell out of there," they say, and then the hatch on my capsule opens and outside are a collection of officers wearing a collection of frowns. I have made myself very unpopular.

I am allowed to see my advocate before the court martial. He explains that this simulated attack, this loyalty pop quiz, is a new innovation, cooked up by the CIA to ferret out a suspected Russian mole. He explains to me that I am that mole.

“No,” I say. “I just wanted to miss.”

We do not reach a meeting of the minds on this point.

My advocate argues his theory of the case and I argue mine but we neither of us make much headway. I am found guilty of treason and cowardice and sentenced to death by firing squad.

They offer me a last cigarette but I decline. Rocket men don't smoke and so I had to quit long ago.

I am standing before a brick wall. I am blindfolded.

I am taking one calm, easy breath after another.

When a gun fires it sounds like the end of the world. And when it hits you, it is.

Then I wake up.

#

The simplest principle for guidance is the law of inertia.

#

What really happens is nothing happens. I am a rocket man for a long time and then I'm out. The world doesn't end and neither does the program. There are new rocket men after me and they go crazy in new and fashionable ways.

Me I leave the air force and I start driving a truck. Sometimes I think about how I'm headed on a thousand-mile cruise mission, me in the capsule and my heavy craft

behind me, but mostly I don't think about that. I get a trucker tan and a trucker paunch and a trucker hat.

Also I start writing. Short stories, poems. I keep a tape recorder and a typewriter in the passenger seat. When I'm driving I say what I'm thinking and at night I type up the good bits. I submit to magazines in Los Angeles and San Francisco and Boston and Portland and St. Louis. The replies miss me over and over, mail following me across the country in the U.S. Postal Service's red-white-and-blue truck-missiles. Skipping across the map like stones on a pond. They are rejections.

A year, two, three. I was told that the dreams would stop but they don't. So one day I get out the notebook and I start writing. "Every night I dream of Moscow, bombsight nosecone dreams . . ."

And so on.

This story I submit to a prestigious New York magazine and what the hell they want it. The contract finds me within days; the mail is right on target.

Out comes my little story and what do you know it makes a splash. When we went up in the training rockets we would come down in the sea, splash, and so I know about splashes. It is not about the prose, not really. The country is ready to have an argument about the rocket men, and so my story is the word that gets the whole room talking.

I am visited in a truck stop diner by two of Mr. Hoover's FBI men. They do not accept my offer of french fries and instead tell me that Uncle Sam is not that happy with the story I wrote and my decision to publish it like a gutless Commie spy rather than

burning it with my lighter. I say tough tits. It turns out the FBI have nothing on me and so they leave.

Then I get a series of calls from editors, agents, publishers, journalists. They are not as able to travel as Mr. Hoover's boys but they are just as eager to get a hold of me. "Can you write—" "Do you have—" "An interview with—"

A few years back Andy Warhol said that in the future everyone would be famous for fifteen minutes, and where does a rocket man live but the future?

I do newspaper interviews and radio shows and I go on television. The FBI men sit in the audience and they stare but they don't say anything about me and so I don't say anything about them. I talk about becoming a rocket man. I talk about the dreams. Everything else is classified. I write more stories and they sell but only the ones about rocket men get talked about. That's fine.

Eventually I have a book coming out. For this I am expected to travel around the country making appearances and promoting its release. Apparently some authors are picky about this sort of travel—cheap, frequent, unpleasant—but I am a trucker; this is very ordinary. More unusual is appearing in bookstores. More unusual is standing up to speak and finding that five or ten or thirty people are listening, in silence, that some of them are actually taking notes. Such regard is disconcerting.

In this way the eventual hecklers come as a relief. They wear air force patches or American flag hats and they interrupt. They call me a traitor and a spy and a coward. They shout and rage and have to be removed by bookstore employees, a contest that does not always favor the bookstore. I find their presence, their hatred, bracing.

Until one day a man stands up as I am reading an excerpt and says "fuck you!" and I realize it is Capt. O'Connell, of the amphetamines and wooden ducks.

I fall silent. He stares at me. I never understand a man's intentions in his eyes.

His hand dips into his jacket and then whips out. My lips are forming the word "gun".

They should be forming the word "duck".

Capt. O'Connell, it turns out, can throw a carved wooden duck with remarkable speed and accuracy. It glides over the audience and hurtles toward my forehead. I wonder if that wooden duck thinks about my cranium the way I once thought about Moscow.

In the moment of impact there is behind my eyes a flash of light.

Then I wake up.

#

In a supercritical mass, fission, once begun, will proceed at an increasing rate.

#

Night after night I dream of Moscow, burning, and day by day I eat, I work, I lie, I hide my mission and then, one lunch, tin spoon halfway between plate and mouth, I snap. I am placing my spoon neatly down on my tray. I am stepping onto the chair, up onto the table. My boots are scattering trays and plates. People are beginning to rise, confused, disgruntled.

I stand in the middle of the table and I say, "I am a rocket man, and I am going to miss."

Everyone is talking over me and so I shout it.

The silence when they understand my meaning is the silence of the shadows the bomb left on the walls of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Nobody speaks or moves. Spoons and forks pause halfway through their trajectories and they hang for an endless instant. Everyone is looking up at me and I am looking down at them from the top of a parabolic arc.

Then Capt. Wilson climbs up onto his table. "I will also miss," he says. And Capt. Johnson, and O'Connell, and Janowicz, and Hiller, and —

Pandemonium in the mess hall. Someone, I think it is me, begins chanting: "Miss. Miss. Miss! Miss!" and the tide sweeps across the room and crashes off one wall and another, forcing the word out of every throat, the enlisted men pounding on the tables, flipping them, howling.

Eventually the military police arrive, square men in white helmets, batons at the ready. "Miss! Miss! Miss!" and we do not resist as they take us into custody.

It is my first time in the stockade but in my heart there plays is the ultrasonic song of the uncaged bird, because from lockup they will not summon me to the rocket, no matter what happens. MP sergeants and CIA spooks and generals and shrinks come to berate us, interrogate us, browbeat us, and we sit on our benches, two to a cell, and chant: "Miss. Miss. Miss."

This goes on for days, but then, there is nothing to do on a rocket base anyway. Capt. Johnson performs clap push-ups by the hundreds and when the lights go out it

happens that Capt. Wilson no longer requires the erotic ministrations of his beloved *Life* magazine in order to achieve, as it were, seminal liftoff. Good for him.

It is clear that the generals and so forth would prefer to come up with something truly medieval and do it to all of us, but on the other hand, there are only so many rocket men in America, and if a few dozen of them were taken out of circulation, Comrade Brezhnev might start feeling his oats. So we are at an impasse.

And then the news reaches us: we are not alone. At the other USAF rocket bases the same thing has happened – and, impossibly, miraculously, the wave has also spread to the USSR. I do not know the Russian word for “miss” but I suppose I will have to learn.

So suddenly the boot is on the other foot. We are now wheedled, cajoled, enticed. It does not matter. We are obdurate in our demands. “Miss. Miss. Miss.”

The Americans and the Soviets meet about the problem. They keep us from meeting. The separation does not daunt us; what would we say to each other? Only this: “Miss. Miss. Miss.”

Resolution is fast and clean and pure. A treaty is signed. An amnesty is issued. The rocket men disappear and so do their rockets. On the day they let us out of the stockade, we march past the skeleton of my rocket. They have cracked open its skull and taken its teeth and bones away for scrap.

As a result of the amnesty I end up with an honorable discharge and then I am immediately recruited into another department of the air force. There is a new interest in the civilian uses of rocketry. Telecommunications, science, navigation. Automatic

satellites can function perfectly well in deep space, but only manned rockets can put them there. My skills are too valuable to cast aside.

Soon enough I'm going up every other week. I have a partner, a Lt. Nicholson. I fly the rocket; he operates the claw arm that throws the satellites into space. In college I drove a moving van at the beginning and ends of semesters; it is a lot like that.

One mission we're up there and we've finished deploying a baker's dozen satellites and we're ready to come back home. "Ready to come back home," I say, into my microphone. Then my hands move over the controls. Pitch, yaw, roll, burn. I have done this countless times.

It is perhaps a minute or two or three before anyone realizes it is the wrong maneuver. There are voices in my headphones – ground control, and Lt. Nicholson. "Your angle's wrong – captain, what's happening – what the hell –"

My hands know what they are doing.

They are trying to skip.

Now we're plunging downward, nose up, headed into the elastic bosom of the stratosphere, headed toward a bounce that will send us out into deep space. There are zero more days of food and zero more days of water and perhaps another twenty four hours of air. Lt. Nicholson is shaking my shoulders and I want to give him the yoke but he is not flight certified.

"You're going to miss!" he is screaming in my ear.

Down we go and the ribbons of aurora shimmer past us like the hair of a lover as they rise from your bed. Down we go, belly into the thing, and just when I see our

altitude level and begin to climb something inside me snaps back. I bring the nose straight down and we fall into the sky, into the turbulence zone that shakes our tin can like a baby god's rattle, into the plain and beautiful blue, and splashing down into the Gulf of Mexico.

For a stunt like this they will take away your pilot's license and they do. I walk around on the good earth and don't step foot in even a flight simulator. There's not a lot of money in my pocket and nowhere on the globe I am needed.

So of course I end up in Moscow.

The city is nothing like my dreams. It is just a place. I ride the metro through the darkness, a subcutaneous circle around the city. Taking orders from my travel book, I go to Gorky Park and watch an East German punk band shred the stage. At night I drink in expat bars. With the treaty there are more of us here than ever before.

Still it's ultimately a Russian woman I go home with, Yelena. One night, two. A week. She is a writer. Satirical poems and one-woman plays. We eat cheap perogis and truly atrocious hot dogs from the first Howard Johnsons to open in Red Square. Eventually we sleep together.

Yelena is the first woman I've been with since the rocket base. When we make love I do not think of solid and liquid fuel; of booster stages, of thrust and yaw, of reentry. I am grateful for that.

Afterwards it's the middle of the night and I roll over in bed and there is an impossible brightness on the horizon, too bright for the eyes to bear, and I think, oh my God they did it anyway, hundreds of arrowhead bombers so much slower than my

rocket but still with the same bitter fruit inside brighter than can be dreamed or borne
and I wait for the overpressure and the light to take me to pieces—

Then I realize: it's just the sunrise.

And then: I wake up.

#

What happens, what really, truly happens, is—

Every night I dream of Moscow.

And over time, the dreams change.

END