

CLEAR SKIES

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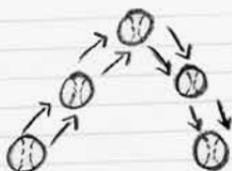
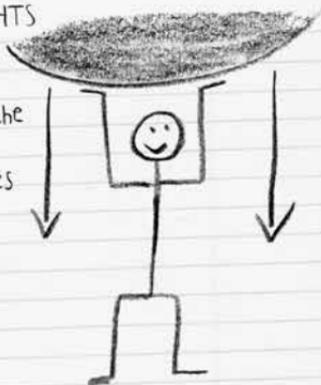
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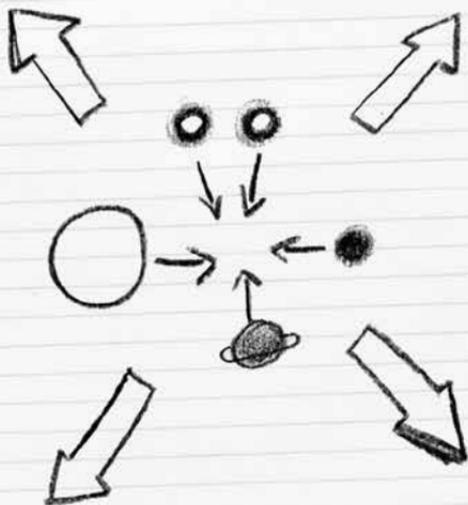
ONE



ARNO CREELMAN'S DEEP THOUGHTS
Gravity is a force that pulls objects like stars and planets together. The bigger the mass, the stronger the pull. So why is our universe expanding, with galaxies moving away from each other?



What goes up must come down.



ARNO SLAPPED A pound of wet clay into the shape of a ball, then plopped the ball onto his desk with a satisfying *whump*. He peered at the open astronomy book beside his lump of clay to read the instructions once again.

Divide the clay into ten equal parts.

“Okay-dokey,” Arno whispered.

He was being quiet so that he could hear his dad’s yellow-and-red Sony transistor radio.

It was 1961. The Space Race between the Soviet Union and the United States was in full swing. Over the past few years, artificial satellites had been launched. The *Saturn I* rocket, meant to carry human beings into deep space, was well under construction. Soviet pilots had even flown into low Earth orbit as test trials.

Which country would be the first to safely land someone on the Moon and bring them back was anybody’s guess.

And in all this excitement, a brand-new observatory was opening the following night in Arno’s

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hometown. It had been built in a wide field on the outskirts where there was no light pollution to interfere with the powerful telescope housed in its dome.

Arno desperately wanted to go to the opening, not only because he planned to become an astronomer when he grew up, but also because his hero, Jean Slayter-Appleton, was flying in as the honored guest to cut the ribbon.

Jean Slayter-Appleton wrote a weekly column about astronomy in the newspaper. Her column was called “Clear Skies.” She ended every article with those two words.

Clear skies were what every astronomer wished for when they set up their telescopes to point at the stars.

Arno clipped all of her articles for his notebook, which contained his deep thoughts about how the universe worked. He would quote fascinating facts from her column whenever he got the chance.

Arno paused to listen to the radio. The station was giving away three invitations to attend the opening of the observatory for contest winners and their guests. All he had to do was be the first to call in with the correct answer to an astronomy-related

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question that the announcer would ask some time throughout the morning.

For now, only surf rock music about girls and cars blared from the transistor radio. Arno turned back to his lump of clay and divided it up like the instructions told him to do. He read from his book again.

Mash six of the parts together and put that on Jupiter's sheet of paper.

Arno had already spread out nine sheets of paper on his desk. He had written the name of a planet on each one.

He mashed the six lumps together as instructed and set it on Jupiter's paper. He paused to listen to the radio.

More surf rock.

Mash three of the parts together and put that on Saturn's sheet.

Arno did so.

Divide the remaining piece into ten equal parts.

Arno did that, too, just as his frisky dog pitter-pattered into Arno's bedroom.

Comet immediately sniffed the wet clay on Arno's desk and wagged his tail like an exclamation mark.

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“Leave it,” Arno warned, pushing Comet’s nose away.

Comet was little and he couldn’t reach the top of Arno’s desk, but still. Arno had once caught him sliding a kitchen chair toward the counter so that he could jump on it to reach some fresh-baked cookies cooling on the racks.

Comet perked his triangle-folded ears but backed down. Muttering, he trotted over to the foot of Arno’s bed and flopped to the floor, his head resting on both front paws while he watched Arno’s every move.

Arno paused. The radio music had stopped.

The announcer was delivering news and the weather, which called for another unbearably hot August day.

Arno held his breath. Was the contest about to begin?

No. After the weather came sports and then more surf rock music.

“Blast it!” Arno exclaimed.

Comet lifted his head, saw that nothing was happening, then rolled onto his side and closed his eyes for a nap.

Arno returned to his book, which helped keep his jitters in check.

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Add five parts to Saturn's lump. Mash two parts together and put them on Neptune's sheet. Mash two more parts together and put them on the sheet for Uranus. Take the remaining piece and divide it into ten equal parts.

Arno carefully followed the instructions. Four of the nine planets in the solar system were starting to take shape on their respective pieces of paper.

“Okay, Arno. I’m heading out now.”

Arno looked up. His dad was standing at the door in his blue-and-white delivery uniform. Comet scrambled to his paws, then dashed across the floor to greet him, his tail wagging furiously.

“I’ve already fed Comet his breakfast,” his dad said, bending to give the dog a pat. “So don’t let him fool you.”

“Uh-huh,” Arno said, turning back to his project.

“Remember to make your bed. And promise me you’ll get outside,” his dad added. “Today is going to be too beautiful to waste.”

“I won’t waste it. I’m building an accurate model of the solar system.” Arno held up a wet lump of clay.

“Right,” his dad said, checking his watch. He went over to ruffle the top of Arno’s head. “I’ll be home for lunch.”

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Arno was half-listening, what with the demands of building planets and monitoring the radio at the same time. He only vaguely heard the sound of his dad's van pulling out of the driveway. It had big logos on both sides.

Stinky's.

Arno's dad ran a diaper-cleaning service. People left bins of soiled cloth diapers and empty baskets on their front steps for pickup. His small fleet of vans cruised the suburbs, replacing them with empty bins and baskets full of soft, freshly laundered ones.

Arno used to like riding shotgun, but today he sighed in relief as the van drove off without him. He remembered the last time he helped with deliveries.

Arno had been rearranging the towering stacks of baskets in the back of the van while his dad rang the doorbell of a new customer. A sudden wind pushed the van's back door shut with a surprising bang, trapping Arno inside the airless, windowless space.

Arno froze. Everything was black. At first he only heard the sound of his breath. Then his heart started to pound in his ears. He clutched at his chest, which began to feel tight, as if something was pressing down on him. He couldn't catch his

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breath. He imagined the baskets toppling on top of him if he so much as budged.

And what if they did? He'd be crushed! That thought was so frightening, he couldn't even call out for help. Instead he frantically banged on the walls of the van until his startled dad rushed to his rescue.

That wasn't the only time Arno had panicked. His first attack happened back in the spring when one of his older twin brothers, home from college, wrestled Arno to the ground after he discovered that Arno had drunk the last of the milk, leaving his brother nothing for his cereal.

"Serves you right for sleeping in," Arno taunted.

His brother tried to give Arno a wedgie, but Arno squirmed so furiously that he resorted to pinning Arno down with a heavy wool blanket over his head. It was a new move.

Arno would have preferred the wedgie. The thick blanket pressed against his face as if already soaked in his sweat, entombing his every breath and trapping his one and only thought. He was surely going to die if he didn't escape quickly.

His brother sat on Arno in victory and whooped.

"Get off!" Arno tried to yell, but the words stuck in his throat.

"Say uncle!"

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But Arno couldn't. Instead, he burst into hysterics. It even frightened his brother, who rolled off and apologized.

Arno hoped his fright was a one-time thing, but after his second panic attack in the van, he looked up his symptoms at the library.

Claustrophobia.

A fear of tight spaces.

So? Everyone was afraid of something, Arno figured. His mom was scared of birds in the house, so she badgered him about keeping the screen door shut. His dad was scared of horror movies, so he would only take them to drive-ins that showed musicals or comedies.

Both of them coped by avoiding the things that frightened them. It seemed to work.

And that's what Arno would do, too.

Just avoid tight spaces.

No big deal.

Arno listened a beat, his hands wet with clay, as his dad put the van into first gear and drove away.

Freedom! Arno smiled.

Arno's mom was away, helping his Aunt Faye with her new baby in Ferndale. It meant that

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Arno had the whole house to himself, at least until lunch. He had no intention of going outside in the scorching heat. Not until his solar system was done, at any rate. And making his bed was at the rock bottom of his list.

Arno returned to his book.

Take nine parts and add them to Saturn's lump. Divide the remaining piece into two equal parts.

Arno did so, all the while listening for the radio announcer to come back on. Comet, who had followed Arno's dad to the door, returned to Arno's room and eyeballed Saturn.

"Don't even think about it," Arno warned without glancing up from his book.

Comet reluctantly sat, as if he was on the lookout for the right moment.

Comet was sly.

And patient.

Put one piece on Earth's sheet. Divide the remaining piece into ten.

Arno paused to admire the completed globes. Earth was so tiny compared to Jupiter! He hugged the book to his chest in a moment of pure happiness. Each chapter promised a hands-on activity guaranteed to help unlock the universe. And he had the rest of the summer!

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Arno set the book back down and continued to read.

Mash nine pieces together and place on Venus's sheet. Divide the remaining piece into ten equal parts.

The endless music continued to play, as if the radio announcer had gone on a long coffee break.

Mash nine parts together to make Mars.

Arno admired his work some more. Meanwhile, the music ended and the announcer returned to the mike.

This was it! Arno stood, ready for the question.

“Our sun is like the vast majority of stars, a gigantic ball of hydrogen and helium elements all held together by gravity and creating light and heat in a process called nuclear fusion. But, dear listener, how old, exactly, is our sun?”

“It’s 4.5 billion years old!” Arno shouted.

Jean Slayter-Appleton had written about it in one of her columns. She had also written that the Sun accounted for ninety-nine percent of all the matter in the solar system, and that the rest of the planets, moons, asteroids and comets added together made up the remaining one percent. That was why they revolved around the Sun. It had the most mass and therefore the strongest gravitational pull.

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But that was beside the point.

Arno dashed into the kitchen and was about to grab the telephone mounted on the wall to call in his answer when he realized that his hands were covered in wet clay. He ran to the sink to wash them. By the time he called the radio station's number, all he got was the busy signal.

Too late.

"Blast it!" Arno shouted in the empty kitchen.

He returned to his room, his incomplete solar system somehow looking less exciting now. The radio announcer was congratulating the winner. He went on to say that the Sun was 109 times wider than Earth and that it was middle-aged.

"I knew that, too," Arno muttered. "The Sun's going to burn out in five billion years, give or take." Arno turned to Comet, who always listened with fascination to anything Arno said about the universe. "And when it does, it's going to swell until it engulfs the orbits of Mercury, Venus and Earth to eventually become a white dwarf star."

Comet applauded with several tail wags.

The radio returned to playing music.

"Blast it," Arno said again, shoulders slumping.

Comet trotted over to lick his hand.

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“It’s okay, Comet,” Arno said, scratching behind the dog’s ears. “It’s not over yet. There’ll be two more chances. We just need to be vigilant.”

Comet shook his ears. Vigilant was his middle name.

Arno picked up the remaining piece of clay, which was very small indeed. He read from his book.

Divide the last piece into ten equal parts. Mash nine of those pieces to make Mercury. Place the only piece left on Pluto’s sheet.

“Wow,” Arno said. “Look at you, teeny tiny Pluto. You’re barely a planet at all!”

But wait. Where was Saturn?

Arno wheeled around to survey his room.

“Comet!” he shouted, just as his dog, Saturn in his mouth, dashed under Arno’s bed. “Give it back, Comet!”

He knelt down to peer at Comet. Comet scooted farther back into the darkness. He gently held Saturn by the tips of his pointy little teeth.

“I mean it, Comet. Bad dog! Give it back!”

Arno thrust his arm under the bed like he meant business, but his sweeping hand came nowhere near Comet.

“Don’t make me come after you!”

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Comet thumped his tail in glee but otherwise didn't budge.

The solar system was nothing without Saturn. Arno peered under the bed to survey the situation.

It was dark under there. It was a small space. He might get stuck with no one home to rescue him.

And then what?

His heart started to race, just like it had at the thought of tumbling baskets back in the van. He remembered the feeling of the heavy wool blanket over his head. His neck became clammy and his mouth went dry.

Parched, even.

The doorbell rang.

Comet dropped Saturn like yesterday's newspaper, then scooted out from under the bed to race to the front door.

Arno studied Saturn's location. It was still way out of his reach, and the bed was too heavy to move.

He stood.

"I'll get it later," Arno muttered.

He went to answer the door.

TWO





New moon Waxing crescent First quarter Waxing gibbous



Full moon Waning gibbous Last quarter Waning crescent

ARNO CREELMAN'S DEEP THOUGHTS

Was our moon formed when an asteroid hit the Earth, knocking off a big enough piece to form a natural satellite? Or was Earth formed at the same time as our moon?



Earth as seen from the Moon

BUDDY CLARK STOOD at the door with beads of sweat on his forehead and a peeling nose from a nasty sunburn. He was wearing shorts and his ridiculous cowboy boots. They made his knobby legs look even skinnier.

“Hey, Arno.”

“Hey, Buddy.”

“Hey, Comet.”

Comet jumped up on Buddy, who held out his hands for Comet to lick, which Comet vigorously did.

Buddy took Comet’s enthusiasm as an invitation to come in. He rough-housed with Comet for a bit, then galumphed down the hall, not bothering to take off his dopey boots.

Comet scampered after him, his claws making *clippity-clip* sounds on the polished linoleum floor.

“It’s going to be another scorcher,” Buddy said over his shoulder as he beelined it to Arno’s kitchen. “Is your mom still away?” He yanked the fridge door open and peered inside.

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The fridge was chock-a-block full of tinfoil-covered meals that Arno's mom had prepared before she left.

"Yeah," Arno said, trailing him into the kitchen after retrieving the transistor radio from his room. He set the radio on the kitchen counter. "Careful you don't scuff the floors."

Buddy still needed reminders like that. It drove Arno nuts. If Buddy wasn't the only other boy on the block who was Arno's age, Arno probably wouldn't have to spend so much time with him.

But summers were long and friends were in short supply, so there they were.

"Got any Tang?" Buddy asked.

Buddy brought up Tang whenever he could. His dad worked for an advertising agency that got celebrities to say they used various products to boost sales. NASA planned to send up different foods with astronauts to see how eating was affected in low gravity. His dad was trying to convince NASA that astronauts should include Tang in those experiments.

"No Tang," Arno said, but he was thirsty, too. "I'll make lemonade."

"Lemonade?" Buddy scoffed. "Get with the times, Arno. It's the Space Age. Once NASA signs

up with Tang, it's going to be everyone's favorite instant breakfast drink. It has real orange flavor."

Unlike Arno, Buddy wanted to be an astronaut when he grew up. When he found out that NASA's new Manned Spacecraft Center — the home of Mission Control Center for the US human spaceflight program — was located in Texas, he begged for a pair of cowboy boots for his eleventh birthday. They lived nowhere near Texas, but he had been parading around in his stupid boots ever since.

Arno didn't think Buddy would make the grade. After all, astronauts were the *crème de la crème* of fighter pilots. They were top dogs. Only test pilots could apply for the Project Mercury mission, and just seven of the five hundred who did were selected. From what Arno could tell, they didn't clomp around in ridiculous cowboy boots that rubbed their bare calves red.

Arno plucked his mom's handwritten recipe card for lemonade from the fridge door where she had taped it next to Aunt Faye's phone number written in gigantic orange crayon.

"I'm making lemonade. Want some or not?"

Buddy sighed, as if this was the worst news since the Soviets successfully launched the first

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astronaut into outer space months ago, ahead of the Americans.

“So you don’t have any Tang?”

“Correct.”

Buddy sighed again.

“Just lemonade?”

“Roger that.”

Buddy rocked on his heels, contemplating his choices.

“Aren’t your feet sweaty?” Arno asked.

“Nope,” Buddy said, looking down to admire his gaudy boots. Then he smiled, which reminded Arno of a toad. Toads always smiled no matter what they were thinking.

Arno pulled the lemons from the fruit bowl and read the recipe out loud to ward off further conversation about astronauts, which he knew was the only thing that Buddy liked to talk about.

10 lemons.

1 cup superfine sugar.

2 cups cold water.

Ice.

Strain the lemon juice through a fine sieve into a pitcher to get rid of the pulp and seeds.

Add sugar, stirring until it dissolves.

Stir in the water, then the ice.

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Top with sprigs of fresh mint from the garden.

“I guess I’ll have some,” Buddy said grudgingly, sitting down at the kitchen table. “If that’s all you’re making.”

Arno said nothing. He had learned to let Buddy’s comments bounce off him like meteoroids ricocheting off Earth’s outer atmosphere.

He grabbed the first lemon. When he sliced it cleanly in two, the lemon exhaled its tart warning into the dry summer air. He placed one half on the reamer of his juice press. He took a deep, steadying breath and cautiously cranked the press.

“Blast it!” Arno hollered, blinking furiously after he was squirted right in the eye.

He blindly grasped for the faucet and turned on the water to splash his face. Nothing burned like the sting from an angry ripe lemon.

Comet, who had settled on his bed in the corner, drooped his ears and whimpered in sympathy.

“Guess what doesn’t sting when you make it?” Buddy said as he leaned back in his chair, his cowboy boots making scuff marks beneath the table.

Arno ignored him.

When the stinging subsided, Arno turned off the faucet and reached for a tea towel to pat himself dry. The towel smelled of laundry soap and sunshine.

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Undaunted, he placed the other half onto the reamer to wring out the juice. He turned the crank so slowly, it was like watching the Moon rise in the night sky.

At first the lemon squeezed perfectly. A miracle!

But then Arno got cocky. He cranked a little faster and took another squirt to the eye.

The *other* eye.

“Blast it!” he bellowed, rubbing furiously, blinking back tears.

Comet sadly tilted his head, his golden eyes softly trained on Arno.

“With Tang, all you do is pour the crystals into ice-cold water, stir, and presto. You’re done,” Buddy declared. He picked at a scab forming at the back of his leg where the top of his cowboy boot rubbed and flicked it onto the floor near the scuff marks.

Arno ran more water at the kitchen sink to splash his face.

“Enough with the Tang,” Arno growled. “One more word and you’ll get nothing.”

Buddy didn’t flinch. He seemed to like pushing Arno’s buttons.

After the lemonade was made with several more squirts to the eyes, Arno poured two tall glasses. The boys carried them and the pitcher out to the

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shaded front porch where it was a few degrees cooler. They sat in the two wooden chairs that were planted side by side. A small table stacked with magazines was wedged between them. Comet stretched out under Arno's legs.

Even though it was still morning, the Sun blazed. Grasshoppers buzzed loudly in waves.

There was no breeze, not even a puff.

The street was empty. Everyone was staying inside, hiding from the punishing heat.

"Bet I can hold off taking a sip before you do," Buddy said, turning to Arno. Buddy was always up for a competition that required some kind of physical endurance. He'd go on and on about how astronauts faced hardships all the time.

Arno gave Buddy a level glare, then took a long, delicious sip. He smacked his lips and said, "Ahh-hhh." He took another long sip.

Besides, he knew that Buddy would win any physical competition hands down. Buddy had proved this to everyone when he entered the school's Spring Fling fundraiser several months ago.

A local bicycle shop had donated a Raleigh Deluxe Space Rider to the school. The three-speed came with white sidewall roadster tires,

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a multi-spring saddle, a kit bag for tools and a pump, a lamp bracket with a generator light and a kickstand.

“It’s even painted a metallic color called Neptune Blue,” Arno told his parents over dinner after he saw it on display.

Everyone agreed it was the bike to have.

The school then sold tickets for an endurance contest in which the bike stood in the gymnasium, and participants had to continuously touch a part of the bike for as long as possible. If a participant let go of the bike even for a split second, that contestant was out of the competition.

The rules were clear. Contestants were only allowed ten-minute washroom breaks once every hour. The person who held on the longest would win the bike.

At the start of the competition, there must have been thirty kids jammed together and jockeying for space while touching a part of the coveted bike. The rest of the school sat on bleachers in the gym and cheered them on. The school band played to keep everyone entertained, and the parents’ association sold popcorn.

About half of the contestants quit within the first fifteen minutes, including Arno. The crowd

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of kids pressing in made his stomach start to twist. As much as he wanted that bike, he did not want to risk being embarrassed by having a panic attack in front of the entire school.

Another quarter of the contestants quit within an hour. More trickled away as time passed.

Then it was down to six kids.

Mindy Venetia.

Anton Spagnolli.

Heimlich Fester.

Sam Preeble.

Abe Wooster.

And Buddy Clark.

All six grabbed hold as if they were astronauts in a space capsule seizing the controls during the final countdown. Except this went on for hours, well into the afternoon. The crowd began to thin and the popcorn ran out. It was getting close to dinnertime.

Something had to be done.

“New rules,” the principal announced into the microphone. “Contestants must now keep *both* hands on the bike.”

The thinning crowd murmured their approval.

All six contestants clamped both hands on the prize, determined as ever.

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Minutes later, Mindy sneezed. She politely covered her mouth with her hand.

“Bless you,” Buddy said, and he chuckled.

Mindy was out.

“No fair!” she complained.

The loud round of applause put a quick end to her protests.

Anton Spagnolli got a charley horse from sitting cross-legged so long. He, too, was out when he rubbed his calf for relief.

“What a shame,” Buddy said, then grinned from ear to ear.

The audience applauded. Anton was out.

Heimlich Fester fell asleep and rolled over.

“Sweet dreams,” Buddy teased, poking Heimlich with his foot.

More applause. Heimlich was out.

Then Sam Preeble and Abe Wooster failed to return with Buddy after their ten-minute wash-room break. The audience assumed the two had quit.

Buddy won the bike.

Only later did everyone learn that Sam and Abe had somehow been locked inside the boys’ wash-room. The janitor came to their rescue after he happened to find his mislaid keys by the water

fountain near the washroom and heard them pounding on the door.

Arno still couldn't shake his suspicions about who had locked those two boys inside.

That Raleigh Deluxe Space Rider was now leaning against Arno's front porch. Buddy never went anywhere without it, constantly popping wheelies for anyone who was willing to watch.

"Astronauts have phenomenal lung capacity," Buddy said after taking his own sip of lemonade. "You know how —"

"Your dad once met John Glenn," Arno answered quickly, because he knew Buddy was dying to tell him all about it.

Again.

Arno did not relish hearing in great detail about the time Buddy's dad sat in on a meeting with NASA officials at the Manned Spacecraft Center about the Tang account, and later spotted John Glenn in the elevator.

Given the chance, Buddy would report that John Glenn had even *spoken* to Buddy's dad after Buddy's dad introduced himself. The astronaut replied, "Nice to meet you," and shook his dad's hand.

"It was out of this world!" Buddy would say.

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Arno leaned over to turn up his radio.

“I have great lung capacity, too,” Buddy said, unphased by the blaring music. He yelled above it. “Want to see me perform the astronaut balloon test?”

He didn’t wait for an answer. He dug out several rubber balloons from his pocket. They were orange with Tang’s brand printed on each one. He began to blow them up, one by one. His face got redder and redder.

“Look,” Buddy said between balloons, his chest heaving. “I’m not even winded.”

He was blowing up the fifth balloon when Arno realized that the music on the radio had ended, and that the announcer was asking another astronomy question.

“Shhhhh!” Arno insisted, reaching over with both hands to pop the balloon from Buddy’s mouth.

The balloon zoomed off the porch and landed beside the Raleigh Deluxe Space Rider.

“You can think of the Moon as Earth’s only natural satellite,” the announcer said. “It is relatively big, being the fifth-largest satellite in our solar system. But, dear listener, why can we see only one side?”

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“Because the other side is dark!” Buddy exclaimed.

“Wrong!” Arno shouted as he rushed into the kitchen to call the radio station. “It’s because the time the Moon takes to rotate on its axis is around the same length of time it takes to orbit Earth!”

His hands were shaking as he dialed.

Busy signal.

Too late.

“Blast it!” he shouted. If he hadn’t been distracted by Buddy, he might have reached the telephone sooner.

“So, there isn’t really a dark side?” Buddy asked, following Arno into the kitchen.

“No,” Arno grumbled, both hands planted on the counter, his head hanging. “It’s just the far side we can’t see from here.”

“Oh, good,” Buddy said. “When I become an astronaut, that’s the side I’m going to visit.”

Buddy smiled like a toad as he rocked back on his scuff marks.