

Space Flight

It was the fall of 1958. Yuri Gagarin and Alan Shepard would not make their historic flights into space for another three years. But that didn't mean that seven year-old boys weren't already dreaming about space flight. Even boys in a small farming town like Yodersburg Indiana.

I was in second grade at the time, although we shared a classroom and a teacher with the third grade. Miss Lovejoy would spend 30 minutes teaching us while the third graders worked on an assignment, then she would give us an assignment to work on while she taught the third graders. Sometimes I would peek up from my work to see what they were learning. That day it was some bewildering form of higher mathematics called "long division." I didn't think I'd ever figure that out.

Our classroom was in the old part of the school. The new part was built in the early 50's to accommodate the initial flood of the baby boom. It had modern equipment, like green blackboards and metal desks painted the color of Silly Putty with wooden tops that lifted up to reveal a storage compartment underneath. The old part of the school hadn't changed much since my parents went there in the 1930's. We had wrought iron desks bolted together in long rows, with hard wooden seats and ink wells. We also had a "cloak room" by the entrance to the classroom, although no one was quite certain what a cloak was. We just hung our coats there, and in the winter it also held our hats, gloves, galoshes, and snow pants.

Even though no man had yet flown in space, we knew it was coming. We read about the space race in *My Weekly Reader*. In addition, I devoured every book I could find in the library about space flight. Classic science fiction like Jules Verne's "*From the Earth to the Moon*," children's science books like "*The Big Book of Rockets and Missiles*," and strange fantasies like "*Elevator to the Moon*." Occasionally I got my hands on modern science fiction short stories, but those were generally restricted to the Adult section of the library. I remember one short story in particular that had an exciting description of riding on top of a multistage rocket – the noise, the vibration, the sudden jerk when a stage fell off, and the crushing acceleration which mashed the astronaut into his seat. In the story, this acceleration caused a piece of gum which he was thoughtlessly chewing at launch to become incredibly heavy as he fought to keep it from sliding to the back of his throat and choking him.

I was on the "second bus" that year, which meant that when the school day ended I got to stay in the classroom with a handful of other lucky souls while the "first bus" delivered kids to their homes. After 45 minutes or so, the bus would come back to the school and pick up the rest of us for our ride home. If we had homework, we could work on it then. Otherwise we could read or play quiet games. Miss Lovejoy would sit at her desk and grade assignments, occasionally looking up to make certain no one was getting rowdy.

I read a science fiction story and then tried to imagine what it would be like to blast into space. I put the book down and closed my eyes so I wouldn't be distracted by the real world. I

could see the control panel filled with dials and switches in front of me. I could hear the thunder of the rocket as my seat trembled with power. The acceleration pressed me into my chair with crushing force. I could not lift my arms. There was a sudden jerk as the first stage separated, then I was pushed even harder into my chair. Another jerk, and suddenly I was floating weightless in space. I could see the earth far below me. It was beautiful . . .

Did you ever have the uncomfortable feeling you were being stared at? That sensation slowly penetrated my brain and pushed my fantasy of space flight aside. I opened my eyes and was startled to see the concerned face of Miss Lovejoy staring intently into my face. The rest of the second bus kids were clustered around her, staring at me with open mouths and expressions of shock.

“Are you OK?” Miss Lovejoy asked.

“Yeah, sure. I’m fine.” I tried to hide my embarrassment but I’m sure my voice was more of a squeak than a pronouncement.

“You were trembling uncontrollably” she announced. “Your arms were rigid at your sides. Then you jerked a few times like you were having spasms, and you started weaving.”

“I, I was imagining what it would be like to go into space” I answered weakly. Miss Lovejoy still had a concerned look on her face, as though she wasn’t certain whether or not to believe me, but she straightened up. There was a titter of giggles from the kids behind her.

“Well, just let me know if you don’t feel well” she said as she returned to her desk.

I picked up my book and hid my face behind it. I was still fascinated by the idea of going into space, but I decided that in the future I would keep my eyes open while I daydreamed. At least when I was at school.