~5170 words

The Astronaut

The Astronaut and the Cosmonaut gazed into the celestial abyss, watching the swirl of nebulas, the dance of comets, the chorus of twinkling stars. Marbles floated past like islands and the Astronaut called to them with a gloved finger: Cynthasus, Xion, Morkin-VII. They were beautiful masses, complete biomes of various stages of life, some with silver clouds, others screaming sandstorms of glass. The loudspeaker of the *Archimedes* announced the entrance into the Milky Way and for all those signed up for the fourth dimensional excursion to please be in the docking bay in the next twenty minutes.

The Astronaut and the Cosmonaut walked along the side of the *Archimedes*, passing maroon rectangles where people played tennis and handball, glistening pools and hot tubs, an artificial beach, a race track, a full buffet, three satellite bars, the entrance to the ball room / night club, the concert hall, rooms 1122 – 1155, which were the higher priced quarters but offered complimentary water with ice from the ice age and port side windows so you can see the stars drift by while getting dressed (the Astronaut and the Cosmonaut had not paid for these rooms; they had instead splurged on the all the excursions, feeling that a honeymoon shouldn’t be about relaxation but *adventure*). They passed a raw bar, a dry bar, a salon, a yoga studio, an anti-gravity yoga studio, a double decker weight room, and a simulacrum of some alps, where you could rent a snow board and ski through holograms of pines and snow-capped mountains, but all things considered it was more well done than you would think.

 The Astronaut and the Cosmonaut met at the loading bay with the other temporal tourists: couples on their own honeymoons, recent retirees, thrill seekers. The guide was a young man with a thick mustache and a wiry body that reminded the Astronaut of the scarecrows they saw a couple of days ago when they toured the Japanese rice fields circa 1900. The guide instructed them to go into their assigned pods and made sure they were strapped in. The decal from the ship was attached as a pin to his shirt: a red crescent imprinted with the word LUNA within its bend, which was the travel company that helped the Astronaut and the Cosmonaut and all the others book this trip. After determining everyone was snug, the guide stepped into the center terminal and directed his attention to all the open cylinders, reminding everyone that *everything that will happen has already happened*, which really took the moral and existential edge off old theories like the “butterfly effect” and “being your own grandfather”. They filled up each time capsule with a purple liquid to ensure that it would not run out of energy jumping between the fourth dimension.

 Without further ado, the guide pressed a button and the capsule doors closed, but not before the Astronaut waved goodbye to the Cosmonaut. Their excitement only rivaled that of the other, with their only agreed complaint that the temporal vessel they were commissioned could have just been *a little* larger. With the doors shut the machines started up to transport through time and space with intention, as per the guide and the statutes of the excursion, to meet at the same location just outside of Luna Park, Coney Island 1914.

 The machine rattled and atomized and made funny sounds that reminded the Astronaut of electric eels for reasons he couldn’t entirely explain. Above this was the calming orchestral music overlayed sounds of a babbling brook, birds chirping, sabers of wind cutting across rolling hills. A relaxing mist sprayed into the pneumatic seats and the astronaut made sure to inhale all the mist because this was designed to calm the travelers as they journeyed. With the Astronaut well sedated, he read the pamphlet for this day’s excursion:

 *Coney Island – Circa 2014.*

*Visit Luna Park! Go to the Cyclone & The Thunderbird! The Slingshot is still “New”!*

*Remember to activate your beacons to return to the* Archimedes Space Cruise Line™*. If you are a platinum member, do not forget to pick up your voucher for a free Nathan’s Hotdog and exclusive access to timeskip to the hotdog eating contest.*

The Astronaut and the Cosmonaut were not platinum members, which was fine, especially since the Cosmonaut was a vegetarian anyway and grew potatoes and beets in their vegetation capsule back home on Marnon-IX.

There were no windows showing the capsule shift through time, but this was probably for the best because the Astronaut had read in the guidebook that witnessing time travel in real time made one nauseous and potentially filled with existential dread. After ten minutes (or not) the pneumatic capsule landed with a soft thud, followed by the sound of the antenna erecting from the top of the shuttle to spray the neurochemical mist called Forgetto-Gas™ that made anyone within seventy feet of the timeshuttles’s fourth dimensional triangulations temporarily docile and confused so no one would notice a shuttle appear seemingly out of thin air. These timeshuttles are also equipped with an automatic Technoscrambler™, which frazzles any technologies that might be in the area and could possibly record, and thus upend, the entire time tourism industry. Back in the day, time tourists needed to be extra cognizant about activating this feature, especially in those weird decades of time when recording equipment was sparse but still available. Now the transport simply recognizes the time you are in and in exchange of only an additional second (or not) or wait time, you are free of the mental responsibility of cloaking yourself, which really, all things considered, made time tourism quite the accessible for the masses.

The Astronaut’s pneumatic time shuttle opened and he stepped out, the mist uncurling at his feet, the beating summer sun flashing off the helmet that he carried in the crook of his arm. He held this just in case the air was toxic in this century and quite frankly he was not paying attention to the travel safety officer when he and the Cosmonaut signed up for the space cruise, so he didn’t want to take chances. After reading on his decal that the temperature was just plain old hot (not quite *hot hot*, not quite this decade *yet)* he put the helmet in the storage container underneath the seat and replaced his suit with the clothes that the time shuttle assessed as the popular fashion trends of the period and then 3-D printed for him. He quickly got changed and stepped onto the boardwalk wearing a tucked in striped collar shirt that breathed unexpectedly well with brown slacks and shiny shoes. The 3-D printer created a crema that allowed him to slick his hair back, which was already beaded with sweat. The astronaut loved playing the part of the local – it was a part of the appeal for him. He put his hands in the deep pockets of his slacks and walked along the boardwalk as the time shuttle disappeared into the timestream with a purple zap. People looked so different, the astronaut thought, but he also expected a lot more technology too. The boardwalk stretched before him, occupied by beach goers from Manhattan (which, if the Astronaut tilted his head enough, could see the glorious towers of the island in the distance, which is itself a marvel, but the Astronaut was pretty sure there should be more ice cube looking towers). The smells of cotton candy and fresh pretzels mixed with the salt and the sand. Sounds of laughter as carts vaulted up and down on tracks, as carnival barkers offered to take passersby to new heights. The astronaut spotted an advertisement for A Trip to the Moon, which he found intriguing. It was like reading old science-fiction and how the authors perceived the future to be.

Not wanting to experience this wonderland without his companion, the Astronaut clicked onto his fourth dimensional communicator, the Face-TIME™, which was disguised as a pocket watch, and reached out to the Cosmonaut, thinking that their shuttle landed farther down the beach. These excursions always took a little bit of triangulation, which the guide always says to be prepared for, and even to embrace. Not that this needed to be told to the Astronaut, who felt the serendipity of the day always unfolded with the randomness of how it started.

The Astronaut asked the Cosmonaut where they were, and they answered that everyone had gathered in front of Luna Park, where everyone was buying tickets with real, authentic, paper money! Feeling silly and left out, the Astronaut hurried over the sunbeaten planks, moving past families with cameras taking photos in front of the sea, beach goers, signs pointing to ladies’ artillery clubs to help with the war efforts, even though, to the Astronauts recollection, there was no active war going on. He found Luna Park surrounded by a large crowd, and the astronaut stood on his tip toes to see the Cosmonaut or anyone from the *Archimedes Cruise Line*, even though they were cloaked in the vernacular garb just as he was. He tapped on his watch and told the Cosmonaut that he was indeed in front of Luna Park, and where were they?

The Cosmonaut said that they were all there, everyone from the ship. The Cosmonaut suggested the Astronaut check the time dial and ensure that he had landed in the time period previously discussed. After some consideration, the Astronaut discovered that he was in the right place, indeed, but while the others were in 2014 as scheduled, the Astronaut had landed smack dab in the middle of summer 1940. It was then that the Astronaut precisely knew the predicament he had gotten into, a simple temporal miscalculation, and one that could be rectified easily but most certainly, under any circumstances cannot be legally punishable to the host company of Luna Time Travel Tourism, which was signed well and away prior to even the start of the Astronaut and Cosmonauts interstellar, time sampling honeymoon. The Cstronaut felt a little embarrassed and walked into the shade of a stand selling oysters and fried dough. He picked up a real, authentic cola and activated the SkipJump™ feature on the watch and recalibrated to enter 2014 and meet up with the rest of the group.

But wait! The Astronaut’s fingers hovered over the button, his manicured hand shaking. The smell of fried fish and real ketchup and the sounds of the carnival behind the fun shaped façade of Luna Park beckoned him like the smell of a fresh apple pie (which he and the Cosmonaut shared on a farm in Georgia in 1930 just last week). With his striped shirt, his slicked back hair, and a true-blue plastic *straw (wow!)* siphoning cola into his gullet, the Astronaut decided to wait in line, buy a couple of tickets from The Teenager (a teenager, wow again! the imperfections of acne and sullen eyes only meant that this was an organic baby, not incubated. The Astronaut was not sure who was more alien). He loved the Cosmonaut and had become good friends with the others on the time jumping safari, but well, one ride couldn’t hurt, and how often does the SkipJump™ ever make a mistake? The point of these excursions was to be adventurous, and the Astronaut was adventurous dammit and maybe the year of 1940, just for a little bit, could be his own. What did people used to say? When in Rome?

The Astronaut jumped up and down as he waited in line for the tickets. Everything felt so *authentic,* the rummaging through the crowd, the cotton candy that he picked up to wait in line again. He was not quite sure where the ride started and ended. He slid down Helter Skelter and went on the Carousel. The Cosmonaut rang to check up on him and the Astronaut assured his spouse that he was on the way, just after one more ride. He moved through the lunar landscape in between the ventures, himself dwarfed by the long spires and kaleidoscopic dials that moved along the walls. It was like being in a miniature city. After an hour the Astronaut decided to head to 2014 to catch the others for dinner at Nathan’s Hot Dogs, even though he could get dinner at the same location in 1940.

He made his way to walk out of the park and saw a fork in the path, one which led to the Bridge of Laughs, which was a parabola of strange geometries full of potholes and uneven steps, and the other path which was an admittedly boring and even keel way out of the park. The Astronaut, not wanting to indulge further in this year, decided to keep his money in his pocket and miss the bridge, but he heard children laughing as they tumbled and fell, watched parents saunter, and lose their balance on the funny bridge. It was a clear cash-grab for tourists, but the Astronaut reminded himself that he was in a version of Rome (a simulacrum of Pompeii was once featured not too far away from here, all things considered). The Astronaut pivoted, paid the attendant the coins for entry, and stood at the base of the Bridge of Laughs. It was a technical disappointment when compared to the other rides, but it was a more fun way to exit the park. The steps reminded the Astronaut of the scaling cliffs on Mars or Quiltude-VIII.

 The Astronaut started his ascent, moving one shoe over the other, his weight constantly shifting. It felt like trying to hop on stones in a river, where faltering meant only cold shoes, a healthy risk, a game. The Astronaut vaulted up the silly steps, passed several children laughing at the bridge’s zenith and this too made the Astronaut laugh. He threw his head up and closed his eyes feeling the salty wind bask on his face. The astronaut felt limitless…until his foot twisted on an uneven step and he fumbled and grabbed onto the railing that twisted and found another step but it was farther away than he thought it was going to be and the Astronaut tumbled through the air and down the steps, no longer laughing, falling like a stray comet at the bottom of the landing on the other side, landing on his wrist with an ear-shattering *CRACK* and the Astronaut knew that this was not a good sign. Rubbing his head and his knees and allowing the locals to help pick him up, the Astronaut sat on a bench and inspected the broken watch, seeing its face askew and bent, the glass crackled and near smashed to diamond dust. The Obscuro™, which was the aesthetic shifter for the FaceTIME™, started to glitch, and at random intervals the watch would briefly flash into its true form, which was a tiny screen so thin as to be grafted onto his wrist. The Astronaut winced, told himself to calm down, take one breath at a time. This was signed into the contract with the travel agency, and surely this has happened before. Right?

The Astronaut tapped onto the broken face and, to his relief, was able to communicate with the Cosmonaut. He explained the situation and the Cosmonaut, after what appeared to be a bated breath, explained that the temporal anchor of the astronaut’s FaceTIME™ was broken but not destroyed. The Astronaut was just happy to be able to talk with the Cosmonaut, to know that he at least had some temporal tether to the rest of the group. The Cosmonaut’s voice returned and asked a lot of questions about the FaceTIME™ that the Astronaut thought was mundane (what color is it? Is the dial broken? Is the second layer of the screen tilted or smashed?) that made the Astronaut irate, because these troubleshooting questions were coming from someone the Cosmonaut was talking to at the *Archimedes Travel Group* and the Astronaut had no time for these silly questions. After being told to calm down, which was effective in a sobering way, the Astronaut apologized to his new-spouse and, like any versed traveler in a strange land without a map, told himself that all was not lost in this great voyage.

The Cosmonaut’s voice returned after a minute, explaining that while the hotkey to jump to 2014 is damaged, he could still jump through time, and once he makes it to 2014 they can all travel back to the *Archimedes* together. The Cosmonaut did not portray urgency and this calmed the Astronaut to the point where he felt comfortable enough buying another cola for the temporal road. Now, with the sugar rush of authentic, syrupy pop burning at his insides, the astronaut tapped at his FaceTIME™ and, without the seeing the year on the screen because the interface was broken, hoped that he had turned the loose dial enough to advance the mere 64 years between now and later. The capsule appeared in a sudden flash of Forgetto-Gas™, and at once everyone in the park veered their heads, distracted by the wonders of Luna Park. The Astronaut figured that the distractions were not hard to come by in Coney Island.

He walked into the capsule and closed the door behind him. He pressed the button, felt the strange ripping of reality twist and tear outside, and then fought the upset stomach from all the hotdogs and cotton candy and pop and funnel cake he had consumed. With a deft *thunk* the Astronaut stepped out of the machine and onto an unmanicured marsh. Smells of a bog wafted through the gnarled trees; long grass swayed in what felt like an early morning sun. Black shadows of birds traced over the sky. The Astronaut watched a deer (like, a *real* deer!) hop from the woods, munch at some grass, and perk up at the sounds of distant voices. The Astronaut, spurred to action by this sudden wilderness, hid behind a fallen log, muddying his shoes and his slacks. The time machine disappeared in a purple flash just as a group of men carrying weapons and bags met with a group of cloth adorned individuals with feathers in their heads on higher, more dry land. The two groups were more alien to one another than the Astronaut was to this time period, and he watched as the silver men reached into their bags and pulled out a tea kettle, a bundle of blankets, and a piece of paper. They twirled their mustaches and glanced at one another as the chief inspected the paper and, ignorantly, followed the silver men’s orders to take a dipped quill and scribble on the parchment.

The Cosmonaut spoke from the communicator that the Astronaut might be witnessing the 1865 Dutch “purchase” of what would become Coney Island, and that the Astronaut might have stumbled a little far back in the wrong direction, but since he was already there, what was it like? The Astronaut swore to himself and noticed both the silver and the feathered men look in his direction, prompting him to return to hiding behind the fallen log. The Astronaut activated the FaceTIME™ again and summoned the pneumatic capsule before either party could investigate. He hopped in, felt the familiar tear, and hopped out in the purple mist of the Forgetto-Gas™.

His feet fell onto the boardwalk, and the Astronaut found himself relieved to be heading in the right temporal direction. Fireflies drifted over a night; star filled sky. Towers bathed in yellow and blue loomed over Victorian style spires. The Wonder Wheel was a kaleidoscope over the water. The Astronaut watched the pyres floating past him like orange snow and felt a warmth to his side. People were running around him, back towards the main boardwalk, some of them disoriented by the Forgetto-Gas™ that misdirected them as they ran. They were dressed as he was, which was another comfort for him. The Astronaut found the heatwave suddenly unbearable, and he raised a tanned forearm to shield himself from the orange force that he identified to be at the end of the pier. There, lurking atop of the black sea, was a melting beast, almost like a giant octopus. No, the Astronaut squinted, not an octopus, a collection of spires. Long buildings and capsizing roofs, skeletal structure of roller coaster cindering and turning to ash, flaming imps running out of the pier and jumping into the electric void. Amidst the flames the astronaut spotted the sign: *LUNA PARK*.

The astronaut shied away as the fire department ran over the salty planks like a storm, carrying with them hoses and ladders, axes to smash through the disintegrating architecture. The Astronaut watched as decades of hedonistic manifestation and wholesome fun decimated in a matter of seconds before his eyes. He contacted the Cosmonaut and was informed that he had landed in 1944, and that the Luna Park everyone else was in was a second rendition of the one burning before him. The Astronaut scoffed, surprised at how difficult navigating the temporal rift was without a rudder and a compass, and turned the burning docks to his back, the orange smoke curling over his shoulders, a light mist as the powerful jettisons attempted to fight the dragon’s breath. He summoned the pneumatic machine, stepped in, scrambled his brains, and fought to convince himself that this situation was still containable, that it was not as dire as it appeared. He stepped out of the machine, head jangled, a…

…ase of the Wonder Wheel, its pedestal surrounded by a crowd of people wearing broad shouldered jackets and jewels and hair that appeared to be more fit for battle than anything else. His outfit was printed for him, and he gladly put it on, thinking *wow, real authentic Walkmans!* and the sound of David Bowie in the distance, which the Astronaut only knew because his grandfather had said it was *his* grandfather’s favorite music once, was a good indicator of being in a different time. He stepped out and joined the crowd as a paper was being handed from one suited person to another, claiming the Wonder Wheel as a Historic Monument. This saddened the Astronaut because these poor people with their funnel cakes and the time-resistant Nathan’s wieners and their different colas and their clunky music players have no idea that this architecture they are immortalizing will eventually be destroyed by the Great Flood and th…

…tumbled on the beach, and everyone was taking pictures of themselves with little rectangles in their palms, and the Astronaut knew precisely what decade he was in. All this glorious architecture, all this layered history, and no one even noticed a man on the beach dressed in 80’s garb. He knew he did not need the Forgetto-Gas™ for this but the time machine emitted it anyway and it only served to inform him that the machine was still working. Somewhere in the distance a ruby scaled mermaid offered him a beer and had the Astronaut not been in this situation he might have gone and h…

…ell out of the time machine, now more fatigued, his knees week. At first, he thought he was in Manhattan. Crystal spires had sprouted before his eyes and the piers and beaches were shelved now by what appeared to be private developments, penthouses, businesses with funny names that rode the coattails of gentrification and not trusted its roots. No more Katz. Nathan’s looked a little sadder. Everything looked correct but less so. The rollercoasters were all new and there was more sea but less beach and the Astronaut turned and found Luna Park, the right Luna Park, circa not 1944, and he contacted the Cosmonaut as tears stung at the cornices of his eyes. The Cosmonaut said that he had gone too far, that he had landed closer but not quite, as if that would help him navigate the temporal waters. The Astronaut began to weep openly as he found a place to sit in a courtyard, surrounded by glass buildings and manicured lawns. He looked out to the sea, which was never changing, the only permanent relic to this whole day. It taunted him with its crystalline blue-green sheen, almost beckoning him, whispering to him with some siren song that they are bonded, the two of them. The Astronaut did not have much time to grieve because someone in a suit approached him and called him David Bowie and said to get off the property and the Astronaut was surprised that a courtyard like this could even be private property since it was technically on the boardwalk, occupying one of the piers. He summoned the FaceTime™ in a cloud of purple mist and…

…mped out of the machine, the hull now wheezing like a dying horse. He caught himself on a railing and pulled his body up, feeling particularly nauseous, like the world was a rocking boat. The Astronaut glanced over the railing and found only semblances of the Coney Island that he had spent time in; the sea stared back, now gray and collecting fallen ash that dropped from the sky like dandruff. The piers which had become occupied by tall ice cubes were now deflated and cracked, the windows guarding a black, empty maw behind broken teeth. Vegetation had started to scab over the remains of the rotted boardwalk. Patches of moss crept towards the sea in a territorial conflict with the scaffolding of oysters coming onto land. The rollercoasters and attractions and concession stands were long gone, but the Wonder Wheel, now half sunk into the water, staredlike an idol into the sky with threshes of purple flower dotted blankets of algae hanging off the rafters like curtains. The Thunderbird, one of the only remaining and, to the Astronaut’s surprise, resilient rides, had become reborn as a castle previously submerged, the land under it squishy and the wooden bones of its structure now hosting a self-contained ecosystem that travelled along the rails in a vegetative, wild utopia. No warmth graced Coney Island here. The Astronaut tried to contact the Cosmonaut but the FaceTIME™ was not working. The constant banging in the capsule might have set the final hangnail of a bolt to turn just enough to finally break. The Astronaut was now alone, hearing the distant squawking of large, mutated creatures on the horizon that sounded like gulls but weren’t and sounded like humans but weren’t.

“Hello there,” a voice spoke, and it did not make the Astronaut uncomfortable, which made the Astronaut uncomfortable.

He turned and kept to the railing, gripping the slippery moss riddled bars, facing the vacant buildings that have now littered the boardwalk for what, centuries? The man wore an outfit like the Astronaut, except that it had significantly more splotches of green and black and sometimes red.

 The man approached and the Astronaut shuddered. There was something off about this man. He tried activated the Forgetto-Gas™ but the time machine sputtered and only emitted a wisping purple fart. The man blinked crusted eyes, looked at the Astronaut with wonder. There was something decidedly foreign about this man, and the Astronaut determined that he was not native to this timeline.

 The man raised his hands to show caution. He sat on a bench that had become scabbed with algae. Lichen squirmed like little fingers and mushrooms twinged as the introduction of his wait. He offered a sheepish smile and said, “We’ve been waiting for you.”

 The Astronaut straightened himself. He looked at the time machine, saw an extra bottle of water. He picked it and saw the dashboard telling him, to his dismay, that the time machine was out of energy. Not letting himself plunder into depression, the Astronaut instead focused on the native, handing him the bottle of water. The man took it, said thanks, and lapped at the bottle with pebbles of water dripping down the caverns of his bearded chin. He caught eyes with the Astronaut, gingerly reached into his coat, and pulled out a cracked plastic jar filled with faintly glowing liquid.

 Movement from beyond the trees that had grown large enough to burst through the foundation of algae scabbed high rises put the Astronaut on edge. He had nothing to defend himself with, as he had not expected to need anything for this time travel excursion. Instinctively he grabbed a fallen branch and started to twist his body in every direction, his eyes alight with stimulus. Other men started to appear from the black voids of the buildings, others that were huddled in little caravans on the remains of the moldy boardwalk, others eating funnel cakes and hotdogs that had been frozen and forgotten about, some with balls of cotton candy. They all wore the same outfit as the Astronaut but all in various degrees of disarray. With them they carried open cans, little saucers, plastic Nathan’s branded soda pop cups, all glowing faintly purple. The Astronaut felt a sudden psychic shift, an uncanny comfortability, and for reasons he could not explain, started to cry.

 “I’m so tired,” the Astronaut said, “I want to go home.”

 The old man nodded, looked sad as well, lines of age turning his face into a parody of the Astronaut’s own. He said, “We want you to go home too.”

 Someone dragged a gasoline canister in front of the Astronaut’s time machine. They started to pour what little ounces they had in their cans, pooling the faint purple liquid together.

 The old man said, “We’ve all ended up here, each with as much mana left in the tank. We were waiting for you.”

 The Astronaut watched as someone who looked exactly like him, perhaps was exactly him, days, weeks, months into the future, lifted the filled tank and started to transport the purple liquid into a nozzle. The mana glugged and slurped and the time machine seemed to become revived.

The Astronaut said, “How long have you been here?”

“Various points,” the old man said, nodding. A crumpled Nathan’s wrapper crawled by like a tumbleweed, brought forth by an algae and funnel cake infused breeze. “But it won’t matter, because once you get back to 2014, this will all seem like a fever dream for us. It will mean we made it.”

The astronaut looked at the FaceTIME™ and took a breath. “My FaceTIME™ is broken. I can’t triangulate.”

“But you can try,” the old man said.

The Astronaut looked at each of the others. Some had eyes that he had only seen in his nightmares, had only thought would manifest in those moments between waking and dream. Some had missing teeth. Others missing limbs. Some still had the same energetic glow that he now possessed, the one which is still fueled by the hope of seeing the Cosmonaut again.

Without another word, the Astronaut stepped into the time machine, closed the door

and began to drift not through space,

 but through time.