

Au Claire Du Lune, Ft. Bragg – 1969

We'd have rather been playing outside, catching fireflies and squishing their goo-glow on our arms or flipping them into glass pickle jars, clamping down the metal top fast as lightning. Tops laced with screwdriver holes. Air holes for the hopeful.

Or freeze tag.

It wasn't yet dark and we could have been riding our bikes over to the abandoned mill, past the pine forest that lured us in, causing parents to deploy groundings and spankings from time to time.

But no.

Our parents had rounded us up like small cattle on the Cartwright family ranch and ordered us to sit on the carpet in front of a tiny TV set not quite as big as a Barbie Dream House and definitely smaller than the cardboard cover of a Monopoly game. Ordered. Mostly parents ordered us, we obeyed. More than 20 or 30 Army brats scattered across a few streets in a modest ranch-brick neighborhood less than four miles from Fort Bragg, N.C. Orders came naturally and boys with crewcuts said 'yes-sir' and girls with ponytails mostly said 'yes ma'am.' At least when parents were within earshot.

Black and white. Theirs wasn't even the largest TV set in the neighborhood. But the Fosters had the most kids and I suppose, looking back, it was easier for them if all seven of their 'my kids,' 'your kids' and 'our kid' started out at their own house at the end of the street, closest to the piney woods. Of the seven, Mary was my friend. She liked to clean my room for me. We had a Huck Finn, Tom Sawyer thing going that was working well for me.

Some of our parents – mainly dads – were either on TDY (tour of duty) in Viet Nam (like mine) or dreading their next assignment. But nearly nobody was thinking about Viet Nam today. The youngest kids took front and middle row seats, squirming around for the best position on the carpeted den floor. Knee to elbow, hip to hip, necks craned over and around each other’s heads to make sure we could still see the screen when the big thing happened.

Behind us a long couch stretched out, oldest kids scooped in because they’d called dibs. Behind them, parents towered, bumping into one another, ice-clinking drinks aloft, cigarettes perched between middle and index fingers, cigarette smoke clouds layering the room like puffy grey gauze.

We were going to see a man land on the moon. On the tiny TV set, men the size of green plastic Army soldiers, would step out onto the surface. We were all supposed to feel proud of being American on this day. A flag would be planted. Only it wouldn’t be red, white and blue, it would be gray. Like everything else on screen.

TV wasn’t scary yet for any of us kids – we mostly watched Saturday morning cartoons – in black and white – while our parents slept in. July was too early for “Scooby Doo,” which would air that September – as well as the “Brady Bunch.” “Woody the Woodpecker” and “Bugs Bunny” most likely ruled that summer.

TV was something to watch if you stayed home sick from school, and maybe the occasional sit-com at night, always before bedtime at 8 or 8:30, even in the summers. Occasionally our parents would tune into a medical show drama with a nurse named Julia. But my favorite was “Family Affair” – the kids had a real-life butler and their dad acted like their best friend. He never pulled out a canvas Army belt to give spankings for being late for dinner.

It would be another few years before former President Richard Nixon's hearings during Watergate would be aired instead of daytime soap operas, creating real-life drama for moms who counted on the shows to get through the tedious ironing chore.

That Sunday afternoon we waited eons for something to happen. The teenagers were probably starting to sweat. Most of us were antsy to go outside. I wanted to go home to my own room or the swimming pool on base, where we'd show the guard our FBOOM (Fort Bragg Officers Open Mess) ID tags to gain entry. Popsicle stand quarters in our swimming bags. Cool blue water, the stanch of chlorine in our noses. Daring each other to jump off the diving board in the deep end.

But no.

We sat on the floor cross-legged and waited. Switched from right leg to left leg and back again.

It wasn't like a baseball game where the crowd would sing the national anthem, some unseen announcer would holler 'play ball' and play would begin at a time certain, either.

Every time one of us kids would ask "Is it time yet?" a slightly altered version of our summer-vacation-road-trip chant 'Are we there yet?' a parent would shush us and say "Sit still and wait."

"This is history. You'll remember this day forever."

"Pay attention."

To what? Nothing was happening. Except drinking and smoking and them talking.

At that age, I was still shy and didn't talk much. I was minding my own business and thinking about something Mary had told me on the way over to her house about one of her brothers. After her big reveal, I couldn't stop staring at him.

He was probably three or four years older, making him around 10 or 11 years old. Serious crew cut, blond hair, fair skin, turned pink in the sun. Probably missed Alaska, where they were last stationed. The blue-eyed husky dogs the Foster family had brought with them to muggy, humid, breezeless Fayetteville had suffered the most. Eventually both of them would die there, their empty dog sleds hanging from the Foster's garage until the next time the Army moved the family.

Then the parents shushed us all again. And – the moon appeared on the screen, blurry, gray, shapeless, looking nothing like it would appear decades later on YouTube, colorized, voices synchronized to the action. The American flag. Planted.

Right about then, I glanced back at Daniel, one or two kids away from me. Far enough for me to spy without being seen. Sure enough, like she'd said he would do, Daniel pulled his bare right foot up toward his lips. He opened his mouth and stuck his big toe in, chawed down on his toenail, shredded a bit of nail away, then nibbled at it again. With his eyes on the screen the entire time. That was a first.

One small step for man.

One toenail for Dan.

Two childhood-memory making events in the same night. Except there's no YouTube video clip of Daniel to refresh my memory on how that dexterous move's done. You never know

what kids will plant in their memory cells during those history-making moments. Probably not what you thought they would.

I found Daniel online. He gave me permission to write about him, but I changed his name to protect myself. As a subject matter expert in hazardous materials and explosives now, he also teaches and he's given a lifetime of service in law enforcement.

Maybe if I work up enough nerve, I'll write him back and ask him what he remembers about the moon. For all I know I might have picked my nose that night like most 7-year-olds will, I can't remember. One thing's for sure, we were the first generation to experience the childhood glories of Tang, exactly like the astronauts.