

Major Tom Coming Home

By Cory Chandler

The storm stilted in on lightning-bolt legs and beat the night to pieces with huge fists of thunder. The sky shattered. Mended itself. Shattered again.

Eli sat on the roof, letting the first fat slugs of rain crawl down his cheeks to mingle with his tears and deposit salt on his lips. Through the window below him, his mother was sprawled across her bed, passed out or dead – hard to tell. It always was when she drank too much.

The kids from school were on the lawn below, their faces like a cluster of moons peering up at him through the stale twilight gloom.

“Come down,” shouted Sam Winston, who, as of Friday, had been the most popular boy at Goddard Middle School. Now he had blood and drool smeared across his teeth and down his chin.

“Yeah, come down.” A babble of voices rising up to him between the clashes of thunder. The voice of Heather Fischer, a long-ago friend who hadn’t made eye contact with him since second grade, when she figured out how pretty she really was – and her parents found out about Eli’s broke, single, substance-abusing mother.

The voice of Penny Driskill. Jeff Hoover. The cool kids. Rich kids. Yelling up, inviting him down to play.

And the thing was, part of him wanted to join them. A small part. Despite the terror twisting the breath out of his chest, the adrenaline souring his stomach and pulse beats counterpointing the storm’s eruptions, he felt a thrill at the thought of scrambling across the shingles and loping hand-over-hand down a latticework ladder to join them on the grass. Even though he saw the blood on their teeth and fingers.

Even though he knew they wanted to eat him.

Inside the bedroom, beyond his mother’s limp form, the stereo paused and shuffled and spit out a new tune. Drumbeats marched out of the speakers; David Bowie’s spooky croon followed, doing *Space Oddity*. His mother’s favorite.

Ground control to Major Tom ...

Major Tom! *Of course!* Eli grabbed the tin can off the roof beside him and pressed it over his mouth.

“Come in, Major Tom,” he whispered up to space. “Are you there?”

He took the can away from his mouth and pressed it to his ear and listened, straining for a responding whisper. The wind moaned and the sky crackled, and Eli sat, curled up around himself, a small boy feeling years younger and more fragile than his age, pressing a dented and lusterless soup can to his skull where it glistened the weird red stormlight. And, for that moment, at least, the can was not a can at all, but a transmitter connected to a forgotten space station wheeling its eternal orbit beyond the satellites.

Connected to Major Tom.

Eli had been conversing with Tom for years. Since he was five or six, when he'd started climbing up onto the roof to escape his mother's daylong binges or towering rages, wiping his tears on the heels of his hands and sending his voice up through the sky to where Major Tom floated in heaven's eye, like an angel adrift on a puff of heaven.

Poor, blue, Tom. Somewhere along the way he'd lost contact with Ground Control. For 30 years, Tom had drifted up there with only the vast, celestial panorama of galaxies and solar flares to keep him company. And Eli, speaking through the can, updating him on the happenings down on earth, that tiny and insignificant speck spinning its years away through the vacuum without him.

He'd gone a bit crazy up there, Tom had. And Eli couldn't blame him, crammed as he was in his chair with all of eternity sprawled out in front of him and only tinned oxygen to breathe, tinned food to eat. Recycled water and his arms floating out in front of him when he slept.

And, of course, the heroin to inject him even further into heaven, to send him spiraling and orbiting around inside his own head. He'd be out of contact for days when he got into that stuff, Tom spaced out with the junk pumping through his heart and his lips blue as his veins.

Oh, Eli's mother loved to shove that little fact at him.

"Your precious Tom's a junkie," she'd scream out the window at him. She was too heavy to climb out onto the trellis after him, too age-worn to still possess the type of feet and hands that would carry her up onto a rooftop on a tall summer night. But she knew where he went when he escaped her, and when she was in one of her rages, she took his flight onto the shingles and out through the can as treason of the highest degree. Unacceptable defiance. And she'd vent her futile anger out of her throat, spitting words until her face glared red.

"Haven't you ever listened to *Ashes to Ashes*? Huh? You have. I know you have. You've got a junkie up there to talk to. A stupid, worthless junkie on a needle! A trained monkey!"

Of course Eli had heard *Ashes to Ashes*. She should know that. She was the one that introduced him to it; over and over as she blew her days gone in a stupor, she'd play that song. And Eli had listened, absorbing the lyrics, sorting them out into his own particular mythology.

Ashes to ashes, funk to funky.

*We know Major Tom's a junkie,
strung out on Heaven's high,
hitting an all-time low.*

Wasn't it bad enough that Bowie left Tom stranded in space through *Space Oddity*? Then he had to go and turn him into a junkie. Cruel bastard. Sometimes, Eli hated David Bowie for that.

Especially nights like tonight, nights when he really needed comfort, advice. Even crazy advice, drug-addled advice ... it was better than nothing. Just a voice on the line would be a big help, someone to let him know he wasn't alone as he hugged the roof with the living corpses of his schoolmates down below. Eli sat and he listened through the transmitter for a word, a signal, a message from space.

I'm happy. Hope you're happy, too.

The wind gusted, carrying a taste of winter on its tongue. The trees quaked their nearly naked branches. The world was shedding its leaves.

Eli listened. Listened. And got nothing.

No bleeps or crackle or whispers from above.

He was alone, and the mob below was waiting to gobble him up.

It had grown, the mob. From maybe ten kids when they first ghosted into view through the lengthening daylight to nearly thirty, now – his entire class. The stared up at him with their black eyes. Smiling. Like jackals. Hyenas. Vampires.

Eli couldn't imagine what had happened to them. Must have been at school Friday afternoon, in class after his mom, loopy on something, had signed him out at lunch and spent the rest of the afternoon chasing him down halls with a kitchen knife.

Something had happened to snap their minds, to raise them out of their beds with a taste for murder or blood. Some virus? Voodoo curse? Eli couldn't imagine. And he wondered if it had happened to anyone else. If it was contagious, or if only his classmates were now prowling the shadows in hunger.

"Come down," Sam shouted again.

"Yeah, come down," Heather said. "Come play. Have fun."

She really was pretty, Heather, with that soft brown hair drifting down the length of her neck, her cheekbones scooping her face out of the way of her lips and teardrop eyes. And she was looking right at him, straight into his eyes. He could tell even at this distance, and his heartbeat almost

fluttered away from him. His stomach rolled over and loosed a swarm of fire-breathing butterflies straight into his chest.

Thunder slapped the world flat and lightning blanched it white. Her face flickered away and then returned, tinged purple, as the clouds unraveled themselves in wet sheets. Rainwater sluiced off the tip of her nose. Her eyes were still intent on his. Willing him to come on down.

Eli felt himself inching forward, twitching toward the edge of the roof. As the rain hammered his hair to his skull and lightning walked among the trees, he stretched a foot out and then dragged his body after it. Stretched his foot out. He thought of his mother and wondered if she'd miss him – if she'd even know he was gone.

He wondered if he'd miss her.

Eli scooted down the roof, pressing the can to his ear, listening, desperate. He was crying again, blowing snot and teardrops into the rain. He needed Tom's voice on the line. He needed help. He didn't want to go, not really. He didn't want to face the pain that was sure to come, the teeth and fingernails ripping into his skin. But at the same time, he looked at his classmates, free in the night and wild as the storm, free of curfews and homework and the tyranny of their parents, and he wondered ... did they really want him to join them, to play with them, to become one of them?

Surely not. Another crack of lightning twisted their smiles around into snarls, and they looked hungry.

"God. Tom. I need you," he whispered, making his final transmission. And he thought he heard, faintly, as a million raindrops cleared their throats at once, a voice thin as tin, distant as heaven, respond through the can.

"... *coming home* ..."

And then, suddenly, inexplicably, a streak of fire shredded the clouds to ribbons, burning the rain away in billowing, hissing roils as it hurtled down from the stars, down out of the huge black void of night, of space, of eternity, a victim of gravity once again, hugged toward the lawn in earth's insistent embrace, a piece of the stars and moon ascending into a mortal coil to obliterate the smiles of the upturned, black-eyed moons on the lawn.