It was a few days after landing that Rhea Seddon bestowed another handle on Swine Flight. We became “The Grissom Crew.” It was a play on a scene from the movieThe Right Stuff . After Alan Shepard returned from his history-making flight as the first American in space, he and his wife had been hosted at the White House by JFK and Jackie. The movie dramatized how Gus Grissom and his wife had been expecting similar treatment when he returned as the second American in space. But it didn’t happen. Runner-ups never slept at the White House. Rhea’s “Grissom Crew” label of STS-27 was poking fun at the fact there was no White House invitation awaiting us in our in-boxes, whereas President and Nancy Reagan had received the STS-26 crew and their spouses. In a wonderful parody of the movie scene in which Mrs. Grissom laments her lockout, Rhea exaggerated her already severe Tennessee accent and swooned, “You mean, I won’t get to meet Nancy and Ronald?!”

While it appeared we would remain invisible to the civilian world, we did have a “black world” postflight tour around the country. We visited the classified control center for our payload. We showed films of the satellite release and thanked everyone who contributed to the mission. It was all very staid and professional until Hoot presented a Swine Flight autographed photo to the unit commander. It was of the free-flying payload bearing Shep’s inscription,Suck on this, you commie dogs! The group crowded around to see the photo. They couldn’t wait to get it on their wall. Shep had made them feel like the warriors they were.

In a visit to Washington, D.C., we were invited to the Pentagon to brief the Joint Chiefs of Staff on our mission. My heartrate was as high walking into that office as it had been walking across the shuttle cockpit access arm. There was a veritable constellation of stars in the room, including five four-star generals and admirals. When a cute female lieutenant walked in, Hoot delivered a sotto voce “snort” in my ear.Jesus, I thought,does he ever NOT live on the edge? Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral William J. Crowe, Jr., was taking a seat not more than fifteen feet away and Hoot was snorting an aide-de-camp! Depending on your perspective it was either a new low or new high for Swine Flight. I discreetly elbowed him. If I got the giggles from his antics now, that urinal-scrubbing assignment in Thule would be back in play.

In a mark of his leadership style, Hoot asked each member of the crew to say a few words about our mission tasks. I knew there were plenty of other egocentric commanders who would have hogged the stage for themselves. Not Hoot. After we all made our remarks and had taken our seats, Admiral Crowe asked his staff to rise and

said, “I think we owe this crew a round of applause for their outstanding work,” and five flag officers heartily responded. I was numb. The joint chiefs of staff of the United States military, led by their chairman—a total of twenty stars—were standing to applaud Mike Mullane. I could not have been more shocked if Hoot had stood up and announced he and Shep were gay lovers.

The day only got more unusual. We were driven to a classified location for an awards ceremony. As we followed our escort through multiple layers of security, I whispered to Hoot, “Maybe we’ll meet Pussy Galore.” He replied with a snort.

We were finally led into a walk-in vault where we were greeted by a senior government official. He offered his thanks for our work, then pinned the National Intelligence Medal of Achievement on each of our chests. Inwardly I laughed at the title. It sounded like an award for the brainless scarecrow inThe Wizard of Oz. But it was a pride-filled moment for me, even exceeding what I had experienced in Admiral Crowe’s office. I felt directly connected to America’s defense in a way I had never felt in Vietnam or in my NATO forces tour. On STS-27 with the RMS controls in my hand, I had been at the tip of the spear.

The citation accompanying the medal reads

…in recognition of his superior performance of duty of high value to the United States as Mission Specialist, Space ShuttleAtlantis, from 2 December 1988 to 5 December 1988. During this period, Colonel Mullane performed in a superior manner in deploying a critical national satellite to space. Colonel Mullane expertly operated the Remote Maneuvering System (RMS) to lift the satellite out of its cradle and position it for deployment of subsystems. The release of the system was performed so expertly that the spacecraft was left in a remarkably precise and totally stable condition. This allowed the activation sequence to continue expeditiously. Colonel Mullane’s superior operation of the Shuttle Remote Arm, as well as his initiative and devotion to duty, led to the safe unberthing and deployment of a critical new satellite system crucial to our national defense and treaty verification. The singularly superior performance of Colonel Mullane reflects great credit upon himself, the United States Air Force, and the Intelligence Community.

As the meeting broke up, I was looking forward to telling Donna about the award. It was as much hers as it was mine. She had earned it on that LCC roof. But my anticipation ended at the vault door. We were asked to hand back the medal. “Sorry, but this award is classified. You can’t wear it publicly or talk about it. It won’t appear on your official records. But if you are ever in town and want to come over and wear it in this vault, be our guests.” Amazing, I thought. We had received a medal we could only wear in a vault. James Bond might have been able to tell Dr. Goodhead(snort) about his daring adventures, but we couldn’t tell anybody about ours, not even our wives. (The award was declassified several years after the mission.)

No call ever came from the White House, but Swine Flight did score one gem of a PR trip into the civilian world. Dan Brandenstein decided that the STS-26 crew had overstayed their welcome in the “Return to Flight” spotlight and redlined them from the Super Bowl event. Our crew would make the trip to Miami and represent NASA during the Super Bowl XXIII halftime show.

Accompanied by our wives, we flew to Miami the day before the big game. That evening we were the guests of NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle at a party…along with three thousand of his closest friends. The event was held in a convention facility and around its entryway balcony sat a clutch of harp-playing women dressed as cowgirl saloon hookers. The choreographer of that act had to have been on LSD. Later I noticed the ladies were faking their “plucks.” When they took a break, the harp music continued. And their music wasn’t the only thing being faked. Squadrons of silicone-stretched zeppelin breasts, mounted on Pamela Anderson look-alikes, cruised the room. Every escort service in the state must have sold out and then called Vegas for backup.

Mountains of food, rivers of booze, and live bands in every corner occupied the crowd. Donna and I loaded up our plates and searched for seats. I had the great misfortune to find two at a table with a fat, lavishly bejeweled gasbag of a woman who saw our arrival as an excuse to recount how rich and well-traveled she was. There was nothing on my guest badge to identify me as an astronaut and her glances at my cheap suit and Donna’s middle-class wardrobe must have given her the impression I was some NFL groupie she could lord over. Her husband looked up from his food and communicated a “sucker” look to me. He never said a word, just ate, maintaining a grin on his face the entire time as if to say, “Good, now you’ve got her and I don’t have to listen to that runaway pie hole of hers.” I finally wearied of her nonstop travelogue and interrupted to say, “I’m an astronaut, so I’ve seen a little of the world, too.” With that Donna and I rose from the table and departed, leaving her speechless, no doubt for the first time in her life.

The next day, January 22, 1989, found us in a skybox at Joe Robbie Stadium preparing to watch the San Francisco 49ers battle the Cincinnati Bengals. There was just one significant distraction: Billy Joel, who was to sing the national anthem, brought along his wife, Christie Brinkley, and they were ensconced in an adjoining skybox. Just a glass wall separated us. This arrangement created the greatest dilemma in the history of maledom. In front of me was the sports spectacle of the year. Joe Montana and Boomer Esiason were calling the signals for their teams. Seventy-five thousand fans were screaming. Even the STS-26 crew didn’t create a moment like this. But a few yards to our right was Christie Brinkley, arguably one of the most beautiful women on the planet. What was a man to do?

We did what every man would have done. We watched both. As soon as the ball was

blown dead, we'd all stare at Christie like pound dogs hoping for adoption. Then our heads would snap back for the next play. Our heads oscillated back and forth as if we were watching a tennis match. The rhythm was only interrupted long enough to get a beer. Could it get any better? Yes, it could. Turned out Christie was a fan of the space program. She came to our skybox to meet us. We all rose as if she were royalty, which of course she was. She was royally, freakin' beautiful. Hoot, Shep, and I generated more snorts than a hog farm.

"Are you guys astronauts?" We were all wearing our blue flight suits with patches reading "NASA" and other patches with renditions of space shuttles. Then there were our gold navy and silver air force wings, our Mach 25 patches, and American flag patches. We were either astronauts or Epcot Disney characters. It must have been the blonde in her asking the question.

Under my breath I whispered to Hoot, "I'll be anything she wants me to be." Hoot, no doubt, was thinking the same lecherous things I was thinking, but he played the gentleman and answered, "Yes."

"Have you been to the moon?"

I whispered fiercely to Hoot, "Tell heryes !" But he stuck to the truth, damn him. Maybe she would have taken us home if he had lied.

She began to walk down our ranks, smiling and asking questions. At any moment I expected her to say, "You mean you aren't the famous STS-26 crew? How disappointing." But she didn't. She seemed pleased to meet us runner-ups.

To my amazement I noticed the rest of the crew were shaking her hand! Even Hoot. He must have stroked out when she walked into the room. There's no other way to explain his restraint.What a bunch of weak dicks, I thought. You shake Billy Joel's hand. You shake Commissioner Rozelle's hand. But you don't shake Christie Brinkley's hand.

When she came to me, I embraced her. Her arms came around my back and echoed the hug. Afterward she didn't even signal her bodyguard to stand between us (and no restraining order arrived later in the mail). I might have a medal I couldn't talk about, but I sure as hell was going to tell every male in the astronaut office what it was like to hug Christie Brinkley. The others could tell them what her handshake was like.

She remained to ask more questions while the game raged on behind us. Periodically we would hear waves of screams coming from the audience to signify some spectacular play, but with Christie in our company, who gave a shit? Finally, with a breezy wave and a promise, "See you at halftime," she left the box. Donna smiled at me. "I guess you don't want me to ever wash that flight suit again." I laughed and

kissed her. Billy Joel had a dream of a woman, but so did I.

A short time later, while I was stretching my legs in the corridor behind the skybox, Billy stepped out for a cigarette break. We fell into conversation. I was struck by how nervous he seemed in this one-on-one situation. His eyes never held mine. It was as if I were talking with John Young or George Abbey. I asked him questions about composing music and he asked me questions about flying in space. I'm sure I was his inspiration for "We Didn't Start the Fire," but he had to go and use Sally Ride's name in the lyrics instead of Mike Mullane. I knew I should have written it down for him. I never asked him the one question I was burning to ask: "What's it like to sleep with Christie Brinkley?" I would bet he's been asked before.

As the game approached halftime, our crew was escorted down to the field to await our cue. While idling we met Annette Funicello and Frankie Avalon, who were on deck for their performance, a celebration of the 1950s teenybopper Florida beach movies. I marveled at Annette. At forty-six, the mother of several children, she had a shape a woman twenty years younger would have envied. Later, when she was performing the beach blanket dance routines that made her famous, she moved like she was back in bobby socks. I was impressed.

Christy Brinkley held true to her promise and approached us, this time to pose for photos. If she had known what degenerates Hoot, Shep, and I were she probably would have maced us. All three of us were praying she would experience the first Super Bowl halftime show wardrobe malfunction. But, alas, that didn't happen. I made certain to stand next to her for our group photo. She put her arm around my waist, her hand accidentally slipping across my ass as she did so. I'm certain my hard body and Mel Gibson good looks broke up her marriage to Billy, but somehow the paparazzi never picked up on that.

We were finally signaled to step onto a platform that had been towed onto the field. A narrator briefly traced the history of the space program while various space scenes played on the Diamond Vision. Our part in the program concluded with our introduction as the most recent space shuttle crew. We waved to the audience and we were done. Then, to my amazement, nearby fans leaned over the railing to hand us paper for our autographs and gave us business cards to send photos. Others shook our hands, flashed thumbs-up, and shouted, "Go NASA!" These weren't space geeks asking for autographs. And it wasn't the white collar crowd, either. This was the proletariat cheering us on. It gladdened me to see such enthusiasm among average Joes and Janes. ApparentlyChallenger hadn't diminished the public's support of the space program, as many of us had feared it would.

That evening, the NFL hosted another open-seating buffet supper for its multitude of guests. Having been burned once, I decided to be very selective in finding a tablemate. Luck was with me. I noticed Annette Funicello and her husband were sitting at an

otherwise empty table and steered for their company. I introduced Donna and we sat down for a very pleasant dinner. Annette was delightful. I pried stories out of her about her Mouseketeer days, including how she had been forbidden by Disney to wear a two-piece swimsuit in the movies and how she had received thousands of engagement rings through the mail from “love-struck teenage boys.” I wanted to tell her none of those boys had been love-struck. Like me, they had all beenstruck by the topography of her sweater. But I knew if I offered that opinion I would have been struck by Donna.

Later, as Donna and I walked back to our hotel, she asked me which of the two celebrity women I had met that day, Christie Brinkley or Annette Funicello, was most captivating. Without hesitation I replied, “Annette.”

Donna was surprised. “I thought for sure you would say Christie Brinkley. She’s so much younger and so beautiful.”

“Yeah, that she is. But at dinner tonight I kept thinking of all those times as a teenage boy I had watched Annette on the Mouseketeer TV program while fantasizing what was under the A and the E letters on her chest. And there she was, thirty years later, sitting right across the table from me and I was still fantasizing.”

Donna laughed and offered up the familiar refrain, “Will you ever grow up?”