Due to a bad weather forecast, the February 24 launch attempt was canceled before the gas tank was even filled. It was just as well since J.O. was still deathly ill. February 25 looked as if it would be the day. The weather forecast was good for the midnight opening of our launch window. J.O. looked and sounded like a consumptive, but he somehow managed to convince the flight surgeons he was okay. We headed for the suit room. For this flight I was wearing the diaper instead of the condom UCD. I was tired of worrying if the latex had slipped off. Maybe in my next life God would give me a penis more suited for spaceflight but for now I had to make do with what was there. The diaper was a more dependable choice.

We wore thermal underwear as an extra layer of insulation. Now that we had a bailout system, our pressure suits doubled as antiexposure suits and the long johns were intended to increase our survival time if we landed in the ocean. On the topic of surviving in the Arctic Sea during the dead of winter, we all had an Alfred E. Neuman,What, me worry? attitude. As Hoot Gibson had said on STS-27 (borrowing a line fromButch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid ), “Hell, the fall is gonna kill you anyway.”

Coverall-clad technicians awaited us in the suit room. Our bright orange LES pressure suits were draped on five La-Z-Boy–type recliners. Name tags on each recliner indicated which suit belonged to which astronaut, and every name but Pepe’s was misspelled. He had snuck into the suit room earlier and made the bogus name placards in retaliation for our wearing of a prototype mission patch that bore his unusual French-Canadian-rooted name (Thuot) misspelled as Thout. We all laughed. Anything to ease the tension was welcome. I took a seat in the recliner marked “Mollane.”

I removed my wedding band and put it in my glasses case. The ring could snag on something in an emergency escape. I would put it back on when I reached orbit. I had done the same thing for STS-41D and STS-27 and had come back alive. The act was now a ritual as much as a ballplayer’s crossing himself in the batter’s box. I had to survive to put the ring back on. God knew that and would protect me. Or, so I hoped.

The technicians helped me wiggle my feet into the bottom of the rear-entry suit. I then stood and zipped the integrated anti-G bladder around my gut. Next, I lowered my body and simultaneously inserted my arms into the suit’s armholes while pushing my head through its neck “dam.” The last time I had squeezed my head through an opening as tight as the LES had been at birth. The ring was intentionally made small

so the rubber dam would clamp tight around the flesh of the neck and prevent the suit from filling with seawater.

After zipping the back of the suit closed, the technicians continued the dress-out. They laced my boots and buttoned my Snoopy-cap communication carrier on my head. Next came the pressure suit gloves. Finally the helmet was locked onto the neck ring. I was now fully dressed for the two things I never wanted to experience…a cockpit depressurization and/or a bailout from a wounded shuttle.

The techs connected their pressure test equipment and gave me my instructions. “Close your visor, turn on your O2, take a deep breath and hold it.” In the silence of the suit, my nervousness was obvious. I could hear my heart. It was squishing in my ears.

Next came a fully pressurized test. I gritted my teeth for this. As the suit filled with oxygen it stiffened to the consistency of steel. It felt as if a cinch was being run across each shoulder and through my crotch and then tightened until my prostate was in danger of being cleaved in half. Fortunately the test only lasted thirty seconds. I wasn’t worried about dealing with the pain aboard the shuttle. If the suit ever pressurized in flight it would be because we had lost our cockpit atmosphere. In an emergency that dire, any suit pain would be insignificant.

The suit check was nominal and the technicians removed my gloves and helmet. They handed me a tray of items to stow in my pockets. I loaded a gas-pressurized space pen in the left-sleeve pocket and checked that my parachute knife was in my “pecker pocket,” a sleeve on the inside of the left thigh. If I became entangled in my parachute and was being pulled to my death at sea, I could use the knife to hack at the shroud lines and hopefully save myself.

In my right thigh pocket I placed my spare glasses. In addition to my wedding band, I had secreted my mom’s Psalm 91 in the case. Technically, the latter item was contraband, but it would only be discovered if Jim Bagian and Sonny Carter were cutting the suit from my dead body. In that case I wouldn’t care. In the same pocket I also loaded a radiation dosimeter, some aspirin for the zero-G backache that awaited me, and a Ziploc bag for stowing my used diaper once I was in orbit. I also included a barf bag. While I had yet to feel the slightest nausea in space, carrying the bag had become another ritual, as if that act alone prevented space sickness.

In my right ankle pocket I placed a mirror. The immobility of the suit made it impossible to look at the hose connections, so a mirror was needed. I also stowed my right pressure suit glove and tethered my bailout survival radio.

In my left ankle pocket I placed my left glove and more survival equipment: flares, strobe light, and flashlight.Who am I kidding? The fall is gonna kill me anyway.

As I was finishing with my stowage, some NASA photographers entered the room and snapped a few pictures. We all assumed casual, not-a-care-in-the-

world, lying smiles.

I looked at my watch. Unfortunately we were fifteen minutes ahead of schedule. In this business you never wanted time on your hands. Mike Coats, who had been observing the suit-up, pulled out a deck of cards. He had been where we were and knew of the need to have every moment occupied. We gathered at a table for a couple hands of Possum Fargo, a dumb fighter-pilot card game that required no strategy—the worst hand won. As we played, Pepe observed that the flight surgeons seemed to have hung around him more than anybody else. “It was like they were two padres waiting to escort me to the gallows. I wonder if they thought I was going to panic or pass out or something.”

Casper noted, “Pepe, you’re always in a panic. How would they know?” He was right. Pepe was a twenty-four-volt guy in a twelve-volt world. He reminded me of a hummingbird in the way he darted at whatever he was doing, whether he was turning the page of a checklist, punching in a phone number, or flipping cockpit switches.

I added, “If they were watching for panic, they should have been at my seat.” I told them of my pounding heart during the pressure test. Everybody nodded knowingly. We were all the same. Anybody who wasn’t terrified getting ready to fly a space shuttle must have chased a couple Valiums with a fifth of vodka.

At my suggestion, we started playing draw poker. The game required more thought and was therefore a greater distraction. To the astonishment of all, I pulled two straights in just six hands. Incredible luck. As we were called for the bus, I hoped I hadn’t used it all up.

In the elevator I noticed J.O. and Casper had net bags filled with flight surgeon–prescribed Afrin, throat lozenges, antibiotics, and other treatments. Casper held up his medicine bag and suggested a STS-36 motto: “Just saymaybe to drugs.” I wondered if this was a first in the space program…a commander and pilot carrying a small pharmacy as they headed for their machine. I wasn’t worried. The autopilot would be flying us to orbit. If it wasn’t, and J.O. was hand-flying us because of some malfunction, I knew he would do just fine. The threat of death has a way of focusing anybody, even a sick CDR.

It was 9:45P.M . on a Sunday night when we stepped outside and headed for the astro-van. There were only a handful of NASA workers there to greet us, a fact that proved fortuitous for Pepe, as there were fewer people to laugh at his near fall. We had been instructed to stay close together on our exit so the photographers could get

aMagnificent Seven –style group photo. Pepe was closest to the building door, and, as he passed it, his oxygen hose caught on the handle and he nearly walked right out from under his feet. It was great entertainment for the small crowd.

At the LCC the driver stopped to let Mike Coats off. He would get a ride to the Shuttle Landing Facility and serve as the weather pilot in the STA jet. Before stepping down, Mike had us all join our hands in collective prayer. We bowed our heads as he led, “God help you if you screw this up.” It was a prayer that Dan Brandenstein had first composed and made famous among TFNGs. We all laughed, but knew that Mike spoke the truth. God better help us if we screwed up anything because management would shish-kebab our testicles if we did.

The van continued toward the pad and I sucked in every detail of the journey. The memories would have to last me the rest of my life, be that another few hours or decades. We sat facing one another, our suit-cooling units in the aisleway. In the high-humidity air the units produced a vapor that swirled around our feet. Several of us had one hand at our throat pulling back the rubber dam to allow an escape pathway for the cooling air being blown into the sides of our suits. Others solved the problem by inserting their space pens between flesh and rubber to create a flow path.

I watched the crew. Hilmers was quiet. I knew he was praying and that was more than fine with me. If God protected him, He would be protecting the rest of us Playboy Channel–watching children of Gomorrah. J.O. and Casper, still struggling with the effects of their illness, were subdued. Pepe and I were the motormouths, trying to hide behind our joking.

I observed, “With this swirling vapor at our feet, it’s like being part of the STS-26 crew. Let’s start singing ‘I’m Proud to Be an American.’ Come on, Dave, you know the tune.” Dave Hilmers had been a “Return to Flight” crewmember.

Pepe quipped, “I forgot my badge. We’re going to have to go back.” We had left our NASA badges in our EOM bags—standard prelaunch protocol. With NASA security cars leading and trailing our van, the roadblock guards weren’t about to stop us and ask for badges. It would be like the Vatican Swiss Guard stopping the pope mobile to check the badge of the guy in the funny hat.

Atlantisappeared above the darkened palmetto as an incandescent white obelisk. I couldn’t imagine the gates of heaven appearing more brilliant or more beckoning. Everybody twisted in their seats to look and have their breath taken away. The scene instantly brought to mind Chesley Bonestell’s paintingZero Hour Minus Five from my childhood bookConquest of Space. His winged rocket had been made of stainless steel but otherwise he had nailed the image. He had foreseen the soul-tugging drama of an illuminated spaceship standing ready against a star-filled sky.

As we drew nearer, the finer details of the pad appeared. The flame from the hydrogen gas waste tower streamed away in the wind. The same breeze snatched a vapor of oxygen from the tip of the gas tank. The white spherical supply tanks of liquid hydrogen and oxygen squatted on steel legs on either side of the pad like alien spaceships. The soaring finger of the lightning suppression mast seemed like an artistic touch, added merely to draw the eye skyward. The burnt orange of the ET and the American flag onAtlantis ’s left wing provided the only color in what could have otherwise been an Ansel Adams photograph.

As we stepped from the crew van, the pad sights and sounds closed around me: the screeching hiss of the engine purge, the shadows playing on the vapors, workers marked with yellow light sticks hurrying to the booming call of the countdown, a light fall of snow from the maze of frosted cryogenic propellant lines. I crammed it all into my brain.

I stood at the edge of the gantry awaiting my turn for cockpit entry. I could feel Judy’s presence. At this exact spot she and I had waited for our entry intoDiscovery …four times. My STS-27 flight had launched from Pad 39B, so this return to the 39A gantry was sort of a homecoming for me. I could see Judy’s smile, her wind-whipped hair. I could hear her voice, “See you in space, Tarzan.” I missed her. I missed them all.

Pepe came to my side. “Sure hope it all works.”

I appended his comment. “I sure hope it all workstoday. I’ve got a sorry record for launching on a first attempt. This will be my seventh strap-in for a third ride into space.”

As I walked toward the cockpit access arm I ran into John Casper, who was exiting the toilet. He was pulling his LES crotch zipper closed. I teased him, “We’re going to have to call you Long Dong Casper. Nobody else has a lizard long enough to reach around the UCD, past the long johns, and out of the LES.” He laughed. I was happy to help someone else relax, if only for a moment. I just wished someone would do it for me.

I got my wish in the White Room. One of the Astronaut Support Personnel (ASP) had placed a sign on the wall reading “Cut her loose!” This was the punch line of a particularly offensive joke—circulating among the Planet AD contingent—involving a naked woman bound to a bed. I chuckled. For five seconds I was able to forget what was about to happen.

Jeannie Alexander went to work securing me to the seat. Then she quizzed me on the components I would have to find in the event of a ground or bailout emergency. “Ship’s O2connection?” It was on my left thigh. “Parachute disconnect?” My hands reached for my shoulders and I touched them. “Rip cord?” Another touch. “Barometric actuator lollipop?…Life raft actuator?…Overhead ground escape carabineer?” I found

them all. She broke a light stick to activate its glow and Velcroed it to my shoulder. Now the fire-and-rescue people could find my body. She leaned over me and gave me a peck on the lips. “Have a great flight.” She was another person I would remember for the rest of my life. As she left the cockpit she placed another light stick over the side hatch to show the exit in the event of a lights-out emergency. I heard the hatch close and soon my ears were popping as the cockpit pressure test started.

The wait began. My heart was in afterburner. The seat was a torture. My bladder distended toward rupture even as I was mad with thirst from my prelaunch dehydration efforts. And this time I faced a new experience certain to tax my reserves even more—I was launching in the downstairs cockpit. My dislike of the position had not changed since I last sat here on STS-27’s reentry. I hated the tomblike isolation. I hated not having a window to look from or instruments to monitor. And I could never entirely expel from my mind the image of what it must have been like for Christa, Greg, and Ron inChallenger ’s lower cockpit. There are some things best forgotten, but locked in the same box, I couldn’t help but remember them.

God, let us gowas my prayer. The thought of having to do this tomorrow made me nauseous. Maybe the cards had been a sign. Maybe seven would be my lucky number. At least I had Pepe’s rookie complaints to entertain me. They came over the intercom in a nonstop flood: “Oh God, my back is killing me…My bladder is ready to explode…My stomach is being pushed out of my mouth…I got a cramp in my calf…I’m dying of thirst…I’m going to puke before I even get into space.” J.O. jokingly asked how he would throw up in the LES while strapped to his seat. Ever the engineer, Pepe gave the question a moment of serious thought and replied, “I’ll just roll my head around and puke in the back of my helmet.”

Maybe I was just punch-drunk with exhaustion and fear but I found Pepe’s constant dialogue hilarious. I was going to puke from laughing. J.O. warned, “Don’t make me laugh, Pepe. I’ll fall into another coughing fit.” J.O. could barely talk without inducing a phlegmy hack.

After several waves of complaints, Pepe prefaced his next chapter with “Guys, I know I’m not a wimp, but…” and then continued the litany. John Casper picked up on the preamble and began to use it every time he had a complaint. “Guys, I know I’m not a wimp, but…” Soon the entire upstairs cockpit was doing it. Pepe heard my laughing cackle and continued his comedy routine by mimicking it…an explosion of rapid and high-pitchedhee, hee, hee s. That got me giggling even more. If the launch director was listening he probably thought we had all gone insane.

Pepe’s complaints faded and we looked for other ways to occupy our time and take our minds off our misery. We resorted to the old standby—roasting the flight surgeon. He was a captive audience, required to monitor our intercom but forbidden to speak to us directly unless we requested a conversation, and none of us were about to do that.

“I hear the doc’s wife is having an affair with a chiropractor.”

“And his daughter is sleeping with a malpractice lawyer.”

“And his son is studying to be a malpractice lawyer.”

There was a fake “Shhhhh…He might hear us.”

“He’s not listening. He’s going over his stock portfolio.”

“He’s on the phone with his Hong Kong broker getting the fix on gold and the yen.”

“He’s probably phoning for a tee time.”

“Hell, it’s Sunday. He’s not even there. Docs don’t work on Sunday.”

“Well, they don’t worksober on Sundays.”

Then we began to enumerate the perks the flight surgeons enjoyed. “They get hired by NASA as GS Infinities,” a reference to the higher government service pay grade they were given.

“They get reserved parking places.”

“They get preferential tee times.”

“They just have to ask and women take off their clothes for them.”

The banter finally ended and the intercom fell silent. Even Pepe got quiet. We all retreated into our own little chaotic worlds of pain and fear and prayer. Around T-45 minutes the range safety officer threw in the first wrench of what had been a smooth countdown. “RSO is no-go for blast.” The blast to which he referred was the space shuttle being blown up. The RSO’s computers had determined atmospheric conditions would amplify the power of the shuttle’s destruction and jeopardize the safety of those around the LCC. His no-go call elicited groans and profanities in the cockpit. We’d reached the point of,I’ll kill anybody who gets in the way of our launch. The RSO must have sensed the universal outrage at his no-go call and quickly reran the calculations to come up with acceptable numbers. “The RSO is go for blast.” We all cheered…and laughed at the irony. We were cheering because a detonating shuttle would now kill only us and that wasgood because it meant the countdown could continue.

At T-5 minutes Casper started the APUs and the flight control system checkout followed. Everything was nominal and I was beginning to actually believe I had carried

my luck from the card table to the cockpit.

“Atlantis…close helmet visors.” Before complying with LCC’s call I heard J.O. and John snort Afrin for a last time. I would be flying with a CDR and PLT on drugs.

I rechecked my harness. Other than look at a wall of lockers, it was all I could do. God, how I wished I was upstairs and had the distraction of the instruments. I had nothing whatsoever to do but dwell on my fear. I was the gas chamber victim waiting for the tablets to fall.

And then…“RSO is no-go for backup computer.”

The intercom was immediately alive with our colorful assessments of the RSO:bastard, asshole, sonofabitch! We were now at the point ofI’ll kill anybody AND THEIR WIFE AND CHILDREN AND MOTHER who gets in the way of our launch.

The launch director ordered the countdown held at T-31 seconds in the hopes the RSO could clear his problem and the count could resume. But we couldn’t hold for long with the APUs burning their fuel. A minute ticked away.Come on…come on…fix your freakin’ computer and give us a go for launch! But as we waited, the liquid oxygen inlets on all of the SSMEs got too cold. The mission was scrubbed. I just melted into a formless blob. The suit technicians would have to look for me in the bottom of the LES.

Upon our return to the crew quarters we were offered the opportunity to go to the beach house and visit the wives. I called Donna and we both agreed we didn’t want another beach good-bye. I could sense her complete exhaustion…mental and physical. I called my mom, the iron woman who had birthed six children and raised them with an invalid husband, and she was similarly incapacitated. The only silver lining to the scrub was that it reinforced my retirement decision. If stress was the killer the docs were saying it was, I was killing Donna, the kids, my mom, and myself with these launch attempts.

When the crew returned from the beach house, they found me in the conference room watching a movie. Pepe tilted his chair onto its back on the floor and lay in it to watch TV. “What the hell are you doing?” I was certain he had lost his mind.

“I’ve got to acclimate myself to lying in the orbiter. I was ready to die out there.”

“Pepe, you’re crazy. That’s like practicing getting kicked in the balls. You’ll never acclimate yourself.”

But Pepe was not dissuaded. He remained in the reclined position throughoutLawrence of Arabia. I don’t know how he did it. Only a gun to my head would have made me practice for tomorrow. I barely had the strength to lift a beer to

my lips.

The next morning we relived it: Olan's Cajun face at my door, faking a smile for the photographers, having my nuts squeezed in the LES pressure test, confronting my fears on the drive to the pad, getting a kiss and a glowing light stick from Jeannie, laughing at Pepe's complaints, worrying about death, praying for life, and finally hearing, "Atlantis,the RTLS weather is no-go. We're going to have to pull you out." I didn't even have the strength to swear. This time the launch director decided to slip the mission by forty-eight hours to give everybody time to rest. Our next try would be on February 28.

Back in the crew quarters the techs stripped me out of the LES. After grabbing two beers from the kitchen, I walked to the bathroom, shed my long johns (reeking of sweat and faintly of urine), unfastened my diaper, and stood at the mirror. The craters under my eyes could have hidden a moon buggy. I wondered what a decent night of chemical-free REM sleep would feel like. It had been so long I couldn't imagine the experience. My neck was ringed red from the chafing of the LES neck dam. There were other suit tattoos: ruptured capillaries on the insides of my arms and bruises on my biceps from trying to move while the LES was pressurized. There were still multiple shaved and sandpaper-roughened hickeys on my chest from the EKG attachments applied during a prequarantine medical test. My thighs and calves had similar shaved and roughened patches of skin marking the attachment locations of sensors for a muscle-response test. The end of my penis was cherry red with what I could only hope was temporary diaper rash. Whatever it was, I wasn't about to bring it to the attention of the flight surgeons. If I had a urinary tract infection, it would come along for the ride. I had invested far too much in this mission to be pulled from it now. I entered the shower, stood under the cascading hot water, and drank my beer.

By the time we completed our debriefings the sun had risen and J.O. suggested we meet our wives at the beach house. I called Donna and this time we agreed it would be fun to get together.

The five of us entered the beach house living area to find it strewn with clothing: shirts, shoes, socks, panty hose, bras. There was even a bra swinging from the end of a ceiling fan. It was obvious we had entered a joke in progress. Sure enough, when we walked into the bedroom we found the family escorts, Hoot Gibson and Mario Runco, lying shirtless on the bed. Crowded next to them were all the wives, clothed but for their underthings, pretending to beshocked at our appearance. Everyone laughed, something we all needed as much as a good night's sleep.

Hoot teased us with the obvious point of the joke. "You guys are taking so long to get this mission going, your wives are developing some realneed issues."

I threw it back in his face. "I'm not worried. You and Mario are navy officers. You have

to be heterosexual to know what a woman needs. I'm surprised you guys aren't in a bedroom by yourselves."

Hoot and I had a well-deserved reputation for a disgusting synergy. Our exchanges devolved into more offensive comebacks and counter-comebacks until Donna finally hollered, "Enough! Will you guys ever grow up?" I had now heard that outburst from so many women so many times in my life, I thought it should be in Latin on the official shield of Planet Arrested Development—umquam grow idiotum.

The rest of the visit was relaxing. We had all been cured of the need to deliver a Bergman-Bogey good-bye at the water's edge, so we just sat around, drank beer, and traded stories. Pepe told us of his agony during the wait on the pad. Dave Hilmers shot him a hypothetical question: "Pepe, if NASA needs someone to replace an MS on the next flight, would you volunteer?" Pepe instantly replied, "Absolutely." His eagerness embodied the astronaut conundrum. Even as we waited on the pad, scared shitless and physically tortured, none of us could imagine not taking every offered mission.

When we returned to the crew quarters we were greeted by the local news showing a large, unmanned, French-built Ariane rocket blowing up shortly after liftoff from its South American pad. The story wouldn't have been covered anywhere else in America, but, on Florida's space coast, the competing French space program was news. The stations played the video again and again. There was no way Donna and the rest of the families could possibly miss it and I was certain the images of the flaming rocket falling into the sea would add to their anxiety. And that wasn't the end of it. That evening one of the networks was airing a docudrama on theChallenger disaster. The advertisements for that show were in all the newspapers and magazines, and the network was constantly hyping it. The wives were going to have to be sedated to get them to the LCC roof. With J.O.'s illness, the two scrubs, the Ariane blowing up, and theChallenger movie, it was a good thing I didn't believe in omens.

The evening of February 26 our crew flew to Houston for a refresher simulation. It had been so long since J.O. and John had practiced ascent emergencies, the mission trainers thought it would be a good idea to get them back in the JSC sim. I made the trip even though I had no duties associated with ascent. I just couldn't face the thought of sitting around the crew quarters all night with nothing to do. I had already watched more movies in the past thirteen days of quarantine than I had watched in the past thirteen years. I couldn't watch another. After landing at Ellington Field, I left the crew to their sim, drove home, watered the houseplants, and went running.

On the flight back to Florida I was stabbed with regret at my decision to leave NASA. The pain and fear that, yesterday, had provided validation for my retirement plans had been temporarily forgotten. Cocooned in the warm cockpit with the stars as a blanket, I wondered if I would ever find fulfillment outside of this business. There was an unknown scarier than space and I was fast approaching it…my post-MECO future.

This time I asked Jeannie to put light sticks over the single cue card Velcroed on the locker in front of me. The downstairs lighting was poor and I wanted the extra illumination to read the card. It outlined the procedures for a launchpad escape, for bailing out, and for a crash landing escape. I had every step committed to memory and didn't need the card but it gave me something to read during the wait. I also asked her to put a light stick next to the altimeter in front of me. In a bailout scenario, after pulling the emergency cockpit depressurization handle, I would watch the altimeter until it indicated we were below fifty thousand feet. Then, I would blow the side hatch and deploy the bailout slide boom. I would be the first out…into the ink black of a North Atlantic winter night and all the perils that it embodied.

Jeannie's face was beaded in sweat as she crawled over me to make my connections. Kevin Chilton, one of the ASPs, was the last to leave the cockpit. He pulled the pin that locked a safety cover over the cockpit depressurization and hatch jettison handles. Assuming we made orbit, I would reinsert the pin. He handed it to me. "Good luck, Mike."

"Thanks, Chilly. See you at Edwards."

I heard the hatch close, the mechanicalthunking noise carrying a note of finality. A few minutes later J.O. watched from his port-side window as the last pad workers hurried across the access arm and entered the elevator. "The close-out crew just left. We're alone." J.O.'s observation reminded us that we sat at ground zero. Everybody else was racing to get away from the shuttle kill zone.

For the ninth time in my life I waited for launch. I was certain there would be a tenth time, tomorrow. The KSC weather was bad. I could feel the vehicle shaking in the wind and J.O. and John reported heavy rains lashing their windows from passing squalls. And it wasn't just the Florida weather that was a problem. Our two transatlantic abort sights—Zaragoza, Spain, and Morón, Spain (pronounced MORE-OWN)—also had weather issues. At T-9 the launch director held the count. God might have been punishing us for ignoring Dave's request to turn off the Playboy Channel.

Pepe's practice countdown in the briefing room chair had been useless in preparing him for another pad wait. It didn't take more than thirty minutes before he was once again entertaining us with his complaints. He ended one session with "My organs are shoving my diaphragm into my throat."

I replied, "You're wearing a diaphragm?" Everyone laughed so hard the engineers in MCC probably sawAtlantis 's vibrations in their accelerometer data. J.O. fell into a gagging wet cough. He was still not well, a fact that had made theHouston Chronicle. An unnamed source was quoted in that newspaper suggesting that J.O. was actually suffering from viral influenza. It wouldn't have surprised me if that was the case, but I

was glad he was soldiering on. The longer our delay, the greater the chances I would become infected. (I would fall ill a day after landing.) I seriously doubted NASA HQ would hold the launch for my recovery, or the recovery of any infected MS, for that matter. As CDR and PLT, J.O. and John Casper were relatively irreplaceable. But with three MSes trained on the payload, any one of us was expendable. Given HQ's attention to the flight rate, I suspected management had already instructed JSC to have some MS substitutes standing by just in case. I prayed for a weather miracle.

Pepe outlasted me as the cockpit clown. He joked and complained without pause. Now he was reviewing all the movies we had watched during the past two weeks: "Lawrence of Arabia, The Great Escape, How the West Was Won, The Terminator, Predator, Alien, Top Gun…" We had seen more blood and guts than a meat packer. I resolved that the next movie I watched would beHeidi.

The T-9 minute hold dragged on…thirty minutes…an hour. Pepe gave us another item to consider. "I was just calculating…Since we started this never-go mission we've logged more than thirteen hours of on-the-back time. J.O. has even more time because he's first in and last out. In fact, J.O., you've been on your back for five hours just on this countdown."

"Thanks for cheering me up, Pepe."

I didn't have a body part that wasn't complaining. To ease the pain in my back, I loosened my harness and arched my hips upward. The restored circulation was heaven-sent but I couldn't hold the position for more than a moment. As my butt collapsed into the seat, a tide of cold urine squeezed from the diaper, climbed up my ass crack, and washed over my testicles. This was particularly disgusting knowing that, if we ever launched, I wouldn't see a shower for five days. If I did this tomorrow, which seemed certain, I was going to take my chances with the condom UCD.

As the groans and moans ricocheted among us, Dave Hilmers broke into song, "When the dog bites, when the bee stings, when I'm feeling sad, I simply remember my favorite things, and then I don't feel so bad." That threw me into the punch-drunk giggles again.

Pepe suggested a new song for Max-q (the astronaut band): "Holding at Nine and Hurting." It would have been a hit. At one time or another most astronauts have been there.

Rain continued to fall at KSC and the TAL weather looked grim, but observers at both places predicted a brief moment of acceptable launch conditions. The chances those moments would coincide were slim, but, with our launch window nearing a close, the launch director decided to give it a shot. He released the clock and we counted to T-5 minutes and held there. The wives were on the LCC roof. No doubt the rain made it

even more miserable for them.

The wait extended. Even Pepe couldn't find anything more to say. The only sounds were the steady breath ofAtlantis 's cooling system and the irritating high-pitched whine of our pressure suit fans. The latter gave me a headache on top of my other pains. I refused to look at my watch, certain the digits were changing in quarter time. If there had been a glimmer of hope we would actually launch, the wait wouldn't have been so interminable. But we were all certain our investment in pain and adrenaline was going to be for naught. We would hold for the weather until the close of the launch window and then scrub. We would have to do it all again tomorrow.

I listened to the urgent voices of the launch controllers. Like us, they were exhausted and wanted to put the flight behind them and escape the inhuman sleep-work cycle. We were all gripped with a dangerous "launch fever," a headlong rush to getAtlantis flying. The sane one among us was our launch director, Bob Sieck. Nobody was going to stampede him into a wrongheaded decision. As he did a final poll of his LCC team he was calm, deliberate. Mr. Rogers singing "It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood" sounded manic compared with Bob's measured voice. Everybody listening wanted to jump in and finish his sentences. He was the perfect man for one of the most stressful jobs within NASA…and another person I would remember forever.

He polled the STA weather pilot and we heard Mike Coats reply, "Go." Next he polled the TAL weather pilot in Zaragoza, Spain, and got another go. There had been a blessed nexus of satisfactory weather conditions on both sides of the Atlantic. We were cleared to fly.

"Atlantis,we'll be coming out of the count in a few moments. It's been a real pleasure working with you guys. Good luck and godspeed."

I was shocked. For hours I had been convinced we would scrub. Now Casper was going through the APU start procedures. The clock was running. God had smiled on us. It had to have been Dave Hilmers's work. The rest of us reprobates didn't warrant any breaks from the Almighty.

I cinched my harness. My fear, which had ebbed with my certain belief the launch would be canceled, now roared over me like an avalanche. My mouth was metallic with it. My heart ran away with it. My hands shook with it. The palsy was a first for me. It had to be the combined effects of being downstairs and suffering from last-mission syndrome. Now, I was glad to be out of sight. Everybody knew everybody else was terrified, but nobody wanted tosee their neighbor's fear, and trembling hands were a sure sign of it.

At T-2 minutes I closed my visor and turned on my oxygen. Again, I could hear J.O. and Casper snorting Afrin before they dropped their faceplates.

J.O. gave me a count. “One minute, Mike.”

I squeaked out a “Roger.”

“Thirty seconds, go for auto-sequence start.”

“Fifteen seconds.”

“Ten seconds…go for main engine start.”

There was a heavy rumble followed by a 2-G slap. We were off. The rest of my life was just 510 seconds away.