

**My sweetheart's the  
Man in the Moon**

**By MILTON LESSER**

# My sweetheart's the Man in the Moon

*Not everyone will think of the first moon-flight as the first glorious step on the road to space. There will always, for instance, be the fast-buck boys like Lubrano....*

Jeanne turned off the radio and went downstairs slowly, watching how the gold-shot curtains on the landing window caught the sunlight in a multitude of brilliant flecks. She shuddered slightly. Up *there*, the sun would scorch and sear.

When she entered the living room, Aunt Anna looked up from her magazine, and Pop puffed on his calabash pipe, occasionally grunting with satisfaction. Mom looked at Jeanne hopefully, but soon turned away in confusion. She could not tell whether Jeanne wanted her to laugh or cry.

"Well," said Jeanne, instantly hating the flippant way she tried to speak, "he got there." She never quite knew why, but whenever emotions threatened to choke her up she would slip on the mask, the carefree attitude, the what-do-I-care voice she was using now.

"All the way—*there*?" Aunt Anna fluttered her eyebrows, allowing herself a rare display of emotion.

Mom smiled, laughed briefly and nervously. She touched Jeanne's cheek tentatively with a trembling hand, hugged her daughter

quickly and drew back. "I didn't know," she said. "None of us knew. We were afraid to listen. I mean, it's so far."

"Knew he'd make it," said Pop, tamping his pipe full with another load of tobacco from the humidor. "Tom's got good stuff in him. Smokes a pipe, you know."

"Not up there," said Jeanne practically. "It would waste oxygen."

"It says here in this magazine the moon is 240,000 miles away," Aunt Anna told them.

"Did the announcer say how Tom felt?" Mom wanted to know.

"Just imagine how it will be," Aunt Anna said, "when we get Tom back here and he speaks to the Women's League. We'll have to make arrangements—"

"Can't," Pop reminded her. "Government hasn't said anything about when Tom's coming back. Liable to keep him there a long time. Do the boy good. See what he's really made of, I always say. Andrea, your roast is burning."

Mom scurried off toward the kitchen. A moment after she disappeared, the phone rang and Aunt Anna took the receiver off its cradle. "Hello? Yes, this is the Peterson home. Yes, she is. In a moment. Jeanne, it's for you."

"Hmmm," Jeanne chortled. "Some fellow trying to make time because Tom's too far away to protest." She hated herself for saying it, and administered the mental kick in the pants which never helped. She was missing Tom more acutely every minute. The distance was unthinkable, the moon almost too remote to

consider, lost up there in infinite void, surrounded by parcels—parsecs?—of nothing.

Picking up the receiver, Jeanne turned her back to Aunt Anna, who appeared quite eager to listen to at least half of the conversation. "Hello? Yes, this is Jeanne Peterson. The *Times-Democrat*? I could see you today, I suppose. Why, here at home. I'm on vacation. But what—about Tom? Oh, I see. Oh, they told you down at White Sands. Well, all right. 'Bye."

"It was a man," said Aunt Anna.

"Who said my roast was burning?" Mom asked them all indignantly as she returned from the kitchen.

"Who was the young man, Jeanne?" Aunt Anna asked.

Jeanne grinned, brushed back a stray lock of her blonde hair. "Sorry to disappoint an old gossip like you, but—"

"Tom *is* a long way off!"

"That was just Mr. Lubrano, a reporter on the *Times-Democrat*. 'How does it feel to be the fiancée of the first man to reach the moon,' he said. Funny, I hadn't thought of it that way at all. How does it feel? Did he expect me to turn cartwheels? (*But, I am proud of Tom, so why don't I admit it?*) He'll be down to interview me this afternoon."

"After dinner, I hope," said Mom.

Awkwardly, Aunt Anna lit a cigarette—something she did only on rare, important occasions. "It never occurred to me," she said slowly, trying to remove tobacco grains from her tongue as delicately as possible with thumb and forefinger. "Not for a

moment. But Jeanne, in her own right, is also a celebrity. The Women's League has watched her grow up, I know. But suddenly, all at once, Jeanne is different. Andrea, get May King on the phone!"

"May—the president?" Mom wanted to know, somewhat awed.

"Of course, Andrea. A little imagination, that's what you need."

Mom got up doubtfully, approached the telephone as if it might jump up and attack her.

"Forget it," Jeanne told them. *Use big words. Use words which would have ridiculous double-entendres for them. Frighten them.* "I won't prostitute my emotional relationship with Tom for all the Women's Leagues in the county. Forget it."

"Jeanne!" said Aunt Anna.

"Jeanne," Mom echoed her, more than a little shocked. "What all this has to do with—Jeanne! Oh...."

But Jeanne was on her way upstairs to put on something gay and bright for the arrival of Mr. Lubrano. Now that she thought of it, she liked the almost electric crackle in the reporter's voice over the phone.

"Good afternoon, Miss Peterson. Honest, I feel almost like a cub. In a few hours, you've become quite a figure." Mr. Lubrano was young, good-looking in a dark, dangerous, eager Latin way. He took Jeanne's proffered hand, held it and looked at her long enough to let her know he appreciated what he saw, briefly enough to indicate everything would be strictly business if she wanted it that way.

Jeanne had been firm with Aunt Anna and her folks. Their part in this was to be strictly a vicarious one. She would answer their questions later. As it turned out, Pop almost had to propel Aunt Anna from the room, and this only because Jeanne had insisted beforehand. Mom couldn't fathom the fuss or the secrecy, and contentedly did as she was told.

"You're younger than I expected, Miss Peterson."

"Come now. Tom's only twenty-five. You know that."

"Well, then, prettier."

"Then we're even. After a reporter friend Pop once had, you could be Tyrone Power."

"Lovely dress you're wearing." He fingered the taffeta at her shoulder, let his hand rest more heavily than necessary. When she pulled away and sat as primly as she could on a straight-backed chair he said the one word, "Business?" He made it a question.

"Business."

"Just how long have you known the Man in the Moon?"

"The Man—really!"

"Oh, that's him. That's your Thomas Bentley. He's the Man in the Moon now."

Jeanne suppressed an unfeminine snicker. "About nine years. High school together, dates, going steady, engaged. The usual middle-sized town sort of thing."

"Love him?"

"Of course. Really, Mr. Lubrano."

For the next thirty minutes, Dan Lubrano asked her the sort of questions that might make an adequate Sunday-supplement feature. Nothing startling, nothing very original—except for the fact that Jeanne, as the fiancée of the first man to rocket across interplanetary space and reach the moon, was an unusual subject. Did she plan on marrying Tom upon his return? Naturally, but only the highest echelon of government and military circles knew when that might be. Was she afraid the utter desolation of space would somehow—change him? Lubrano made the pause significant. Might make him more romantic if anything, although Tom never tended toward stodginess. Could she be quoted as saying she looked up at the moon every clear night and called softly, silently, secretly to Tom across the unthinkable distances? Yes, if it were absolutely necessary.

When they finished, Jeanne said: "Don't tell me that's all, Dan?"

"Officially, yes. Unofficially, I haven't started. Look, Miss Peterson—Jeanne—mind if I'm perfectly frank?"

Jeanne said she didn't mind at all.

Lubrano grinned, displaying his piano-key teeth. "Jeanne, all my life I've looked for something like you. Only it's something you almost never find. Either you're lucky or you're not. Me, I'm lucky, I've found the fiancée of the Man in the Moon. To make things even better, you've got your share of good looks—and you're not dumb, either."

"I don't understand."

"Jeanne, we can make a million bucks together. Quick, with hardly any work. Want to?"

"It sounds crazy, Dan. You're not making any sense."

"No? Then listen." He turned on the radio, waited for the tubes to warm up, dialed at random for a station. "... at this hour, we know only that the Man in the Moon has landed on Earth's far satellite, that he has signalled the success of his mission with a phosphorous flare, and that he has as yet established no radio contact, although that is expected momentarily. It is anticipated that the government will make an announcement shortly. This much is certain, however. In order to consolidate our position on the moon, we will have to send up another spaceman to join fearless Captain Bentley on our bleak satellite, eventually an entire crew of technicians—"

"Is that all?" Jeanne demanded. "Of course Tom is news. What's the connection?"

"News is right. The biggest since we exploded the A-bomb. Listen." Lubrano dialed for another station. "... dream of all centuries, all generations. A spaceship to the moon. The implications are so tremendous that man hasn't even considered all of them. American know-how, scientific ability and determination has once again brought a new era to mankind. Tonight before you retire, Mr. and Mrs. America, give a silent prayer of thanks to our Maker for giving us the Man in the Moon. This is—"

Lubrano flicked the dial again. "... presented by Crunchy Kernels, the cereal with the truly sprightly crackle. And here he is, ladies and gentlemen, in a direct interview from White Sands, New Mexico. Dr. Amos T. Kedder, assistant supervisor of electronics for the final stages of the spaceship's construction—"



"See what I mean?" Lubrano asked triumphantly, turning off the radio. "Assistant supervisor in charge of electronics. Well, a pat on the backside for him. Nobody yesterday, the feature attraction on the Crunchy Kernel Guest of Honor Show today. Startling, isn't it?"

"What's all this got to do with me?" Jeanne asked.

"Every place you turn," said Lubrano. "Can't avoid it. Honey, who wants to? Don't get me wrong. You won't just be my meal ticket. I'll have to do most of the work, but together, watch our smoke. A million bucks, honey! That's the goal. Want to get on the gravy train?"

"Maybe," said Jeanne. "But I still don't—"

"Look," Lubrano sneered. "I'm a newspaperman, struggling along at fifteen bucks a week over the Guild minimum. But I got ideas, honey. Public relations, that's the field. Public relations. There's millions in it.

"Get the right start and you got it made. We can't have Bentley here on Earth—tough. But we got his gal-friend. A red-hot item, if handled properly. Man! Commercial endorsements as a starter, then maybe a lecture tour, theater appearances, even cheesecake pictures for the magazines. Get it, honey?"

"Why, yes. I'm beginning to under—"

"Of course you get it! Jeanne Peterson reads *Cosmopolite* to while away her lonely hours. Jeanne smokes *Dromedaries*, relaxes in her bathtub with *Luroscant*, dreams of her lover on the moon on a *Softafoam* pillow, writes him letters and saves them for his return by using *Perma-blue* ink, wears a *Furform* coat to keep her warm

while gazing at the crescent moon on chill autumn nights. Get it, honey? Get it?"



Jeanne laughed softly. "Talk about your prostitution," she said, half-aloud.

"Huh? What say?" Effusive with enthusiasm, Lubrano hardly heard her.

"Nothing. Nothing. It's been interesting, Dan." She stood up, led him to the door. "Let me think about it. I've got to think."

"Say, wait a minute." Almost, Lubrano seemed indignant. "You looked all hepped up about it, honey—why the quick freeze? If you think you can do this yourself without help from me, you've got another guess coming. I've got the contacts, you've got the

name we want to sell. You can't do it alone. A fifty-fifty split, straight down the middle."

Mechanically, Jeanne's mind went to work. Also mechanically, she spoke. "Fifty-fifty baloney. You get twenty-five per cent, Mr. Lubrano, and not another penny. You must take me for a yokel."

"Forty."

"I said twenty-five."

"All right. All right. There's still enough in it for me. Twenty-five per cent. Meet me tomorrow morning at my—"

"That's *if* I decide the idea is worthwhile," Jeanne said, pushing him across the door-sill and watching him retreat reluctantly down the walk to the street.

When Mom and the others asked Jeanne later, she was the picture of co-operation. She told them everything about Mr. Lubrano and his pleasant interview. She told them nothing about Dan and his not-so-fantastic plans.

Jeanne excused herself after dinner, her mind seething with proposal and counter-proposal, and went upstairs to her room, but found sleep impossible. Was it fair to Tom, capitalizing on whatever feelings they had for each other? Was it fair to herself? If Lubrano had his way, a glorified Hollywood love would result. Jeanne and Tom would be adopted by the nation as its favorite lovers. Their faces would grace pop-bottles, sipping cola together in an infinite regress of progressively smaller bottles. Their forms would loll on all the beach billboards, proclaiming in the latest, brightest colors that the Man in the Moon and his girl-friend insisted on *Sunburst* bathing suits. And Jeanne would be waiting

with her *Chlorogate* toothpaste smile for her lover to return from the infinite distances.

When he returned, nothing would be left. Commercial love, exploited love, hounded love, a cheap, impossible, publicized and doomed-to-failure marriage, if Tom ever allowed it to go that far.

"Phooey on you, Jeanne Peterson!" Jeanne said aloud, and sat up in bed, surprised at the loudness of her own voice. She was imagining things. It wouldn't be as bad as all that. Exploitation for a few months—and a small fortune, if not the great wealth that Dan promised. And the physical comforts made possible by whatever she earned would, over a period of time, smother Tom's anger.

Still, the one honest emotional experience which somehow had penetrated deeper than the veneer she exposed to the world had been her relationship with Tom. But she could make money, make herself happy, make Tom happy—if not immediately on his return then eventually. But....

Soon after the milkman pulled his truck to the curb down on the corner, Jeanne fell asleep.

"Hold it! Hold it!" The agency director of photography, a small, round man with a thin voice, waved the photographer off his camera impatiently and scowled at Jeanne. "You're a nice girl, Miss Peterson. That's a nice nightgown, filmy, but not so filmy it won't get by the censors. You got a nice figure and the country will love you. So why don't you be a nice model too?"

"That ain't just a mattress you're on, Miss Peterson. How many times I gotta tell you that's the mattress you're waiting for Tom on? 'I miss Tom so, I'd never sleep, thinking of him so helpless and far

away, the first Man in the Moon. Except for my *Beautysleep* mattress which induces sleep with its special inner-spring construction.' I ain't no copy-writer, Miss Peterson, but it will be something like that. So, cuddle up on that mattress like it will have to do till Tom comes home from the moon. Cuddle nice, Miss Peterson, cuddle nice."

It took Jeanne exactly fifty-five minutes longer before she could cuddle nice. They then took the picture in a matter of seconds, and Jeanne was allowed to change into her street clothes. Hurrying, she was only fifteen minutes late for her luncheon engagement with Lubrano.

"Three months," Lubrano said, after they'd settled themselves over cocktails. "Not bad, honey. Know how much we grossed, including the *Beautysleep* account?"

"Yes," Jeanne told him. "Twenty-eight thousand, three hundred and four dollars."

"Not bad," said Lubrano. "It takes the right kind of press, naturally. That's me, honey, the right kind of press."

"Yes," said Jeanne. "We're a good combination, Dan. You're right, it can't miss."

"Funny, you never sound excited about it."

"Maybe that's the way I am. I don't excite easily. So what?"

"So nothing." Lubrano began cutting his pork tenderloin.

"What's next on the agenda?" Jeanne wanted to know. "Maybe I lasso the moon with smoke rings blown from *Buccaneer* cigarettes?"

"Maybe you do eventually. Not right now. Right now you have to hop a plane for New Mexico and have a chat with the boyfriend."

"What?" Jeanne felt something flip-flop madly in the pit of her stomach. "Dan! Oh, Dan!"

"That's right, honey. Through the courtesy of 'Hands Across the Ocean,' sponsored by Cleopatra Complexion Soap. A radio broadcast across a quarter of a million miles of space to re-unite you and Tommy boy. At least, for three minutes."

"Oh, Dan, Dan—that's wonderful." Jeanne stood up, removed the napkin from her lap. "If I hurry home and pack I can make a night plane and be in New Mexico by—"

"Whoa. Relax, honey, there's no rush. The show is tomorrow night, 11 P.M. our time. I've booked your reservation for the morning."

"I'm too excited to eat, Dan. Really. But thanks for everything." Jeanne bent down as Lubrano prepared to attack his tenderloin again. She kissed his forehead playfully, turned to leave.

Someone snickered, "That's the moon girl, I think. I thought her boyfriend was way up there. Another cheap publicity stunt."

"Careful," Dan frowned. "So you're happy. Don't go around ruining everything."

Still smiling, Jeanne left.

"Sit down, Miss Peterson." The general waved Jeanne to a chair, half rose as she seated herself. "Frankly, these publicity things always make me nervous."

"*You're* nervous! Look who's talking!" Jeanne waited while the general lit a cigarette. "Only three minutes! I can hardly think what to say."

"Is that bothering you, Miss? Don't worry. They showed me a copy of the script."

"Script?"

"Script, yes. For tonight's program. Your part is all there, word for word."

"But I thought—"

"That it would be extemporaneous? I guess we're both new at this, Miss Peterson. I would have thought the same thing. But not with an audience of twenty million. That's what Mr. Pate said. Pate, he's the director of the show."

"But—but they can't do that. I want to talk to Tom. I want to tell him—things. I won't recite any prepared speech." How ridiculous could the whole situation become? Jeanne thought. She'd made a farce of their love these months. Now she wanted to forget that, make up for it at least in part by speaking to Tom, by pouring her heart out to him (as if she could even start to do that, in three minutes). If that fell through too.

"You'd better send for Mr. Pate."

"You don't understand. Mr. Pate's in charge, not me."

"Then—then I won't speak at all. Let him tell their audience that."

"What? Why, Miss, you can't do that. They expect you on the show and—"

"Send for Mr. Pate." Suddenly, she was glad Lubrano hadn't come out here with her. He naturally would have agreed with Mr. Pate.

The general picked up a phone on his desk, dialed. "Afternoon, Captain. Have you seen Pate? What? Splendid. Of course I'll wait." He cupped a well-manicured hand over the receiver. "They're looking for him, Miss ... Eh? Hello? Mr. Pate? I'm sorry to bother you, but—yes, important. I wish you could come to my office, whenever you ... Splendid. Splendid." The general hung up. "Be right here."

Ten minutes later, Pate arrived. He was young, florid of face, and looked like he'd soon have a bad case of high blood pressure if he didn't already have it. He waved a hand carelessly at the general. Too carelessly. Like he was a recently discharged enlisted man who felt he didn't have to bow and scrape any more.

"You're Jeanne. Recognize you anywhere. Like to tell your Tom he has good taste."

"Fine," said Jeanne. "Tell him anything you want. I'm not speaking."

"Ha, ha. Good joke."

"It's no joke, Mr. Pate. I won't recite any prepared speech. I absolutely refuse."

"Say that again. No, don't bother." Pate's brick-red face assumed the color of good claret wine. "Not ordinary, this. You probably thought we wouldn't reimburse you. Five thousand dollars all right?"



"Please, Mr. Pate. I came here to talk with Tom. I want to talk, not recite. Tear up your speech and I'll do it for nothing."

"Can't."

"Don't, then. Good-bye."

"Wait! General, can't you do something?"

"She's not under my jurisdiction. I told her you know your business and she was being—shall we say—something less than sensible."

"General! You never said anything like that. Don't you think I have a right to speak to my fiance?"

"There's something to what you both say." Now the general sounded like *he* was talking from a prepared speech. *If it's a matter of publicity, never hurt anyone's feelings. Straddle that fence. Walk that tight-rope.*

"Well, I'll be damned," said Pate. "Show's got to go on. Is that final, Miss Peterson?"

"You can bet your bottom dollar on it, as the expression goes." Jeanne almost felt like smiling, despite the situation.

"Don't say anything unprintable, then. Tear up your speech. We've got to. See you in two hours." Muttering a brief word or two, Pate left, not bothering to say good-bye to the general.

The general grinned professionally at Jeanne. "Any time I can be of further assistance...."

"Is this seat taken?"

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