

The Shape of Rain

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the moon landings, war in Iraq, a media conspiracy and a coded message in a song that is about to
blow it all apart...

A free sample chapter

prologue

February 1967

Three men dead, killed in the most horrific of circumstances.

Colonel Eugene S. Swann held his head in his hands then removed his glasses and rubbed his tired eyes; he had hardly slept in the week since the accident. Replacing his glasses, he glanced at the six-day-old newspaper on the table in front of him. The details were all there, he could almost recite them verbatim:

“On the 27th January 1967 at 6:31 p.m., during a simulation aboard Apollo-Saturn 204 on the launch pad at Kennedy Space Centre, Florida, after several hours of work, a flash fire broke out in the pure oxygen atmosphere of the capsule and flames engulfed the capsule and the three astronauts aboard. Gus Grissom, Ed White, and Roger Chaffee died of asphyxiation.”

Colonel Swann did not require a newspaper to relive the horror of that moment. As a senior figure in the United States Air Force attached to the space programme, he had been present at Kennedy Space Centre when the accident happened. A man didn't forget such an incident ever in his life.

He glanced at his watch. The others should be here soon.

‘It's only been a minute since you last checked the time.’ The young Englishman spoke quietly, almost sympathetically.

Swann grunted in reply.

The two men sat on opposite sides of a well-worn conference table in a room on the first floor of a nondescript, slightly rundown, hotel clinging to the edge of northern California's Pacific coast and overlooking the rather grandly named Moonstone County Park; in reality a wooded area bordering the ocean with an unremarkable, little-known beach at its southern end just behind the hotel. Somewhere a radio could be heard faintly; the strains of Jefferson Airplane's *“White Rabbit”* echoing through dilapidated corridors. The muffled sound of voices downstairs reached the two men, competing with Grace Slick's soaring vocal. Swann and the Englishman were waiting to be joined by a further six men, travelling from a variety of points around the country to attend this secret rendezvous. The voices could be heard coming closer, accompanied by the sound of footsteps on uncarpeted stairs. The door opened and the guests entered in an unintentional single file. Swann stood and shook the hand of each man before indicating their seat at the table. The new arrivals were amongst the most powerful men in the United States, representing key areas of its social and political fabric. There was a media mogul, a high profile politician with presidential ambitions, the owner of a television network, a Hollywood director, a prominent research scientist and a senior executive from NASA.

Sparse February sunlight filtered through the windows of the first-floor room illuminating the conference table and the haphazard scattering of rickety-looking chairs that surrounded it. The Englishman, who had risen as the men entered the room, was the first to sit followed by everyone else, their collective movement causing fibrous clouds of dust to catch the sunbeams. No artificial light brightened proceedings and no one bothered to hit the light switch.

Eugene Swann spoke:

‘Gentlemen, thank-you all for coming, I know some of you have had to make substantial journeys,’ he paused momentarily, looking round the table as some of the guests inclined their heads in acknowledgement of his words.

‘This meeting perhaps should have taken place a long time ago and it’s sad that recent tragic events have spurred us into action but better late than never, I guess.’

This was greeted by some sage nodding of heads around the table.

‘Before we get down to business, allow me to introduce my friend here as I realise he is not known to any of you.’

Swann indicated the young Englishman sitting to his left. As one, the six men shifted their gaze to the unknown quantity.

‘For obvious reasons we will use no names, but I can tell you he’s a Brit, well-placed in one of his country’s...ah...government agencies and is currently on a posting here in the US. He is, for us, a key asset well-placed in the British administration, and shares our objectives one hundred per cent. He will be able to help us extend our influence across the Atlantic.’

The others appeared to relax very slightly at this, taking the chance to openly appraise the Englishman in their midst. Slight and dapper, in his early twenties, with short well-groomed hair and a faint pencil-thin moustache, he represented their traditional view of what an Englishman should look like. The object of their scrutiny returned their collective gaze evenly with no display of emotion.

‘Before we get down to business we first have to agree something. And that means everyone round this table in full, unequivocal agreement.’

Swann spoke quietly with the air of one who is used to taking command.

‘What we are about to discuss and, I hope, agree here today,’ he continued, ‘is of paramount importance and will have far-reaching implications for our own lives and careers as well as the future of democracy in the free world. I am proposing that everything we hereby discuss is written down and, at the end of the meeting, if and when we have reached agreement, each one of us will sign the document. Clearly, the contents of this document could have disastrous repercussions if it fell into the wrong hands, so its creation and our signatures will indicate our collective trust. If anyone has any doubts that they would be able to commit to this, now would be a good time to leave.’

He paused to remove his glasses and peer round the table, leaning forward as he did so.

One by one each man nodded his agreement.

The scientist had a question.

‘Who will keep these minutes?’

Swann casually replaced his glasses.

‘Our young British friend has volunteered. I think his objectivity will be particularly valuable in this task. I know he is trained in accurately recording highly confidential statements of powerful men. I am sure no one here will find him in any way wanting in this task.’

After some brief murmured debate it was agreed. The Englishman removed a large writing pad and pen from his briefcase.

‘OK gentlemen,’ Swann intoned, ‘we begin. Everything that is said in this room from now will be on the record,’ he nodded at the Englishman who sat poised to write.

‘Last month, in full view of a watching world, America suffered a tragic setback in our quest to dominate space. This has thrown up some difficult questions and scenarios which we have to address.’

Swann picked up the newspaper on the table in front of him.

‘Naturally, these events were fully reported by the press,’ he threw the newspaper back on the table with more force than was necessary, ‘the story is headline news all over the world, and in Moscow they had a field day using the tragic deaths of three of America’s finest as proof that capitalism does not work.’

Swann stopped to allow his words to sink in. He could tell by the grim expressions around the table that his sentiments had found their mark.

‘As you are all aware, we are planning a manned flight to the moon within the next two to five years. We had been hoping that it would be sooner, but last week has put an end to that possibility. We believe that we are still substantially ahead of the Russians, and we know, after last year’s successful unmanned landing of Surveyor One on the surface of the moon, that we have the technology to succeed. The point is that, as we have now witnessed, unforeseen accidents can occur. When we do shoot for the moon, this cannot be allowed to happen. The world will be watching and we have to be successful and more than that...we have to be seen to be successful. The world must see an American planting the Stars and Stripes on the moon.’

Swann paused to gauge the reaction round the table; an air of expectancy hung heavy in the air.

‘We must be the ones to protect the manifest destiny of this great nation,’ Swann resumed, ‘we need to take the initiative to ensure that, whatever happens, the truth the world sees, hears and reads is our truth. The truth we wish to allow the world to share. Anything less compromises our standing and threatens our security. To achieve this will take steel and determination and, most pertinently, some strategic collusion between us to create a simple framework that can guarantee favourable public perception of events.’

‘You mean fake the moon landing?’ the TV Network owner asked in a virtual whisper.

‘Hopefully that should not be necessary,’ the senior NASA member interjected quickly.

‘Indeed, that is the hope of us all,’ Swann concurred, ‘but now is our chance to prepare should we require a fallback position. Last week’s events showed the necessity of that. Imagine if that had been our moon shot. Our position in the world would have been seriously eroded. The repercussions would undermine our economic, political and military position as the leader of the free world. We cannot take the chance of allowing it to happen. In this room we have the talent,’ Swann glanced at the Hollywood director, ‘and powerbrokers who can implement a Plan B, which will protect us if there were to be an...unfortunate occurrence. Even if there is no catastrophic event such as occurred last week, none of us can be sure how easy it will be to relay images of America’s greatest moment of triumph to the waiting world. We may have to...ah...assist that process anyway.’

Over the next two and a half hours, as Colonel Swann outlined his plans, all present vigorously debated the practicalities of implementation. They discussed the need for security and the robust methods required to maintain it. As they debated how wide their sphere of influence could grow, a quiet excitement gripped them. The room became suffused with a potent mix of cigarette and cigar smoke that seemed to further muffle the already low rumble of their voices.

All the while the Englishman wrote down every word.

Finally, they were all in agreement and had outlined a demanding plan of action for each of them starting with their building a network of contacts. The light outside was fading as Swann went to seek out the hotel owner for something suitable with which to toast their efforts. He returned some minutes later with a bottle of Jack Daniels and a tray of not very clean looking glasses.

‘Gentleman,’ he said as he poured the dark liquid, ‘today we have not just made history, we have given ourselves the opportunity to rewrite it at will. Thanks to our initiative here today we have helped ensure the progress of the free world. Now before we can raise our glasses, each of us must sign the document our friend has so assiduously transcribed. From henceforth these original notes will remain in the possession of the leader of our organisation and will, in future years, be passed from leader to leader. Ownership of the document will be incontrovertible proof of leadership.’

The Englishman finished writing these last few words as the others gathered around ready to add their signatures to the last page.

Once all the men around the table had signed the document, Swann added his own before returning it to the Englishman, who became the last to sign.

‘One more thing,’ Swann added, ‘I propose that our association be known from this moment on to all involved as The Moonstone Initiative.’

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