

# VILLAGE VIEW

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If it hadn't been for a phone call from a friend over on Florida's west coast, I might never have thought of it. My mind-set is still New England rather than Florida. She called the night before the first scheduled launch of the space shuttle Columbia, the one that was aborted 31 seconds before take-off.

"You're going to watch it, aren't you? If it's clear, you'll be able to see it." Even then, I didn't quite understand what she was talking about, but suddenly it hit me. Here, about a hundred miles south of the launch site, maybe I **COULD** actually see the space shuttle's take-off with my own two eyes.

That first morning there were some clouds, and fog hung around the marina and over the Indian River. The televised pictures were sharp as the activities at Cape Canaveral moved from hold to countdown. Although not exactly poised to rush outside and search the northern sky, when the clock stopped at 31 I was ready, had the craft actually begun its ascent, to do just that. The countdown was interrupted, and I knew, even before the announcement of the scrub came through, the shuttle wouldn't go that day. If they called a halt so close to blast-off, something serious was blocking procedures.

Everyone watching, that first morning, must have felt the same sensation of letdown. It was both more and less than disappointment. There was relief, and mixed with relief was empathy for what the two men inside, Joe Engel and Dick Truly, must be feeling after spending five hours waiting for those last few seconds to pass.

Whatever miracle of engineering goes into a space shuttle, the part that stirs my emotions is the humanity that goes into orbit along with the intricate machinery and all its technical complexity. I keep thinking about the thousands, maybe millions, of little things that might go wrong: a tired wire, a single punctuation mark omitted in the computer program, or any one of possibly hundreds of miscalculations that could mean disaster. This ship has gone out there before, been through the stresses of blasting off before, survived re-entry before. Something might not work as programmed or something might not be perfectly synchronized that even the computers wouldn't pick up.

Several years ago when it first came out, I read the book **The Right Stuff**. I'm aware computers do the flying, except for the landing upon returning from outer space. And the computers could handle that task, as well, if necessary. I know from what I learned from the book that a man aboard the shuttle does little more than ride it, like a kid astride a wooden horse on a merry-go-round, as far as maneuvering the ship is concerned.

But this trip is different from Columbia's first launch. Columbia is like a used car. You don't know what its weaknesses are; you know only that she's already got a lot of miles on her.

A second attempt at putting Columbia into orbit was scheduled for Thursday, November 12. I was pulling weeds a few minutes before ten o'clock in the morning. Spending three or four hours in preliminaries isn't my choice; instead, I go about my own affairs until the last crucial minutes. Ten minutes of delay, linger, and wait are about my limit. More than that gives me the fidgets.

The countdown began again. The capping arm retracted and smoke poured from the space shuttle's base as a few last seconds ticked away. Columbia began rising from its pad.

As soon as it actually started to move, I went out to the back yard. There was an absolutely clear blue sky this time, not a cloud to be seen; unusual for a Florida morning. Perfect weather.

The view to the north was obscured by a towering mango tree. Moving to the front of the house (which faces west), a better view of the northern sky was afforded by the width of the street in front.

This is a quiet neighborhood; the people who live on the north both work, those to the south are a retired couple, and the property owner across the street was away. Just as I had about concluded there would be nothing to see, the space shuttle hove into view.

What a magnificent sight! At first it looked about a foot long, all shining and gleaming in the sun, with a plume of smoke trailing its blazing tail. It appeared to grow smaller, very fast, and in moments seemed about the size of a cigar; a blink later it was no more than a pinpoint. Just then, while I could still see it clearly, the boosters let go, and there was an especially bright fiery instant when that happened; next, it just faded into the blue and was gone.

I found my eyes full of tears; I'm not sure why. Partially it was the idea that mankind can actually achieve such a feat, but more particularly it was the fact that there were two people on that piece of machinery who are humans, just like all the rest of us, and who must have been having certain feelings and thoughts that we can only imagine. But we **CAN** imagine what some of them must have been.

Watching the space shuttle as it rose into the atmosphere, and seeing it, witnessing its departure from this planet, was quite a different experience from viewing a televised ascent. The three-dimensional effect cannot be duplicated even on live television. Columbia was right there, in the sky. And I was right there, seeing it happen. The sequence is etched on my memory.

Returning to the house, I saw the whole thing replayed on TV, exactly as I had viewed it, but the impact wasn't the same.

And on Saturday afternoon I watched the shuttle's return when it came in for its landing at Edwards Air Force Base in California. I thrilled to that perfect landing just as all of us who watched it must have done. Someone there, as Columbia rolled to a stop, voiced my own reaction that the personal experience is far more impressive than the televised one. Just the same, watching it happen on television is better than not seeing it at all.

Welcome home, boys.