

IN EVENT OF MOON DISASTER

Rich Larson

Rich Larson's first collection *Tomorrow Factory* will be out in May 2018 from Skyhorse, and his debut novel *Annex* will be released in July from Orbit. In the meantime, his startling new tale considers what might occur . . .

IN EVENT OF MOON DISASTER

Sol is so intent on the fizzing comm channel that he doesn't notice Laurie is back until her gloved fist raps against the airlock window, sending shivery vibrations through the whole hopper.

"Sunnuvabitch."

He snaps out of his seat, pulling the headset down around his neck. Laurie is standing in front of the airlock, arms folded. She taps her foot for effect, but in the stiff suit and low gravity it looks more like she's keeping time to a slow-mo banjo. Sol gives her a few exaggerated claps as he dances over to the lever and heaves the exterior door open. Laurie gives him the finger and steps inside.

As soon as the atmosphere reader dings green, she hits the release on her helmet. It levers up off her face with a hiss, revealing her sharp chin, snub nose, dark eyes under knitted brows. She looks unnaturally pale in the airlock light, and her dirty blonde hair is matted with sweat.

Sol opens the interior door. "Well? You all right? I was about to suit up and go after you, Laurie, Christ." He jams his headset against one ear and buzzes Control, but gets silence again. "Still can't raise Control. Something's messing with the radio."

"I only lost transmitting functions," she says, stowing her helmet on the hook. "I could hear you just fine the whole time. What the hell were you chewing on?"

"Peanuts." Sol grabs the package off his seat's armrest and checks the label. "Honey-roasted. They're honey-roasted and pretty damn good. You want some?"

"No. Yeah. Give 'em." She clambers out of the suit and holds out her hand. Sol sees it shake a bit as he pours peanuts into her palm, but pretends not to notice. She scoops them into her mouth.

"So? You going to tell me what was down there, Laurie?"

She points to her full mouth.

"Oh, I get it. Revenge chewing. You're revenge chewing at me. I'm a nervous eater, Laurie, and you were in that crack with no radio contact for twenty-seven whole minutes."

Laurie swallows. "There was nothing," she says. "I took the readings. Big electromagnetic spike, like we saw from orbit, but no physical source that I could detect. No sign of the drone we sent down there. I don't know. It's fucking weird, is what it is." She runs her hands back along her hair. "I'm shot."

Sol makes a gun with two fingers. "Bang."

"As in I'm tired." Laurie pinches the bridge of her nose, then goes to her hanging helmet and pulls out the datastick. "Here, have a look. I start singing, at one point. To drown out the chewing. Ignore the song choice and the high notes."

Sol takes the stick. "All right. Hey, take a nap if you need it. Pickup window's in two-and-a-half hours."

"Thanks," Laurie mutters. She starts to slide past him, toward her chair, then stops. "There was nothing down there, Solly. But it was weird."

"Hey." He pats her on the shoulder. "We're on the fucking Moon."

"That is true," Laurie says, clambering past him into her chair. She unrolls a vacuum-packed blanket and pulls it over her head. Her voice comes muffled. "That is a fact."

Sol watches out of the corner of his eye, making sure she's breathing normally, as he verifies the pickup window and runs another engine diagnostic. Before long she's snoring, which seems like a good sign. He claps the headset on, plugs the datastick in, and reaches for the honey-roasted peanuts.

* * *

Sol has the feed from Laurie's helmet up on his screen, watching through her eyes as she makes her way along the bottom of the crevasse. She's right. There's no sign of whatever unidentified body struck the Moon's eastern hemisphere and plowed a half-kilometer crack through the dust and rock. No sign of the drone they sent to investigate. Just an empty, eerie tunnel.

Eerie, but he can't quite put his finger on why. Something about the juts and whorls of rock seems slightly off to him, something about their angles. He's leaning in for a closer look when someone knocks twice against the airlock window.

Sol bolts upright, heart hammering his ribs. Laurie shifts under her blanket. He claps both hands over his chest and exhales and tries to think of possible explanations. The best he comes up with is debris. Nothing more specific than that, just the word. Debris.

He goes to the airlock. Cold sweat drips from his armpits down his sides. Someone in a spacesuit is standing in the dust outside, shifting from foot to foot.

"You are not debris," Sol mutters.

The astronaut taps their helmet and signs a radio malfunction, then taps their padded wrist where a watch would be. Someone else is trying to investigate the impact. A rogue state, or some private corp, somehow got here first without anyone knowing. And somehow they are wearing Laurie's suit, with the distinctive smiley decal on the oxygen tank.

Sol suddenly gets chatter on his headset. He pulls it back up, dazed. Laurie's voice.

"Sol, don't fuck around, Sol, I blacked out down there," she says, sounding more panicked than he's ever heard her before. "I lost you on the radio, I blacked out and something happened. Let me in, Sol, goddamn you."

The astronaut thunks their helmet up against the window and he can see Laurie's mouth through the faceplate, lips moving as she curses him out.

Sol yanks his headset off. A convulsion runs up and down his body; for a second he thinks he's going to vomit. Then he strides back to the dash, to the chair where Laurie's snores are fluttering her blanket. He grips the corner with one sweaty hand, braces himself, and pulls.

Laurie's still there, splayed back in the chair. She raises an arm and drapes it over

her face. “Go time?” she mutters.

“Uh.” Sol shakes his head. “Don’t know.” He looks back at the airlock, where Laurie now has both gloved hands splayed against the window. He pulls his headset back up, but hears only hyperventilating, and he realizes Laurie can see herself in the chair.

A crackling sob comes through the radio. “Sol, who is that? Sol? Who’s that in my . . . in the chair?”

In front of him, Laurie swings herself upright, rubbing her eyes. “You go through the footage?” she asks. “I did warn you, right? About the high notes.”

“Oh, you were great,” Sol says faintly. “Operatic, even. But. Laurie.”

“That is not me, Sol,” Laurie begs through the headset. “That is not fucking me! Let me in, Sol, something happened down there, and you have to let me in, please, please, please—”

Laurie in front of him sees the Laurie waiting at the airlock window. Her eyes widen. Sol remembers her taking off her suit in the airlock. How her face looked pale, almost waxy. When she goes to get up from the chair, he pushes her back down. Not hard, but hard enough.

“Who the hell’s that?” she demands.

“Just. Stay seated, okay? Stay there for now. I’m calling Control.” Sol keys his headset. “Control, we have a situation. We have, uh, a third party present.”

“Sol, is that *me*? That sounded like me.”

He waits the ten-second delay, clutching the headset hard to his ear. Still nothing. Nobody on the channel except Laurie, outside, begging to be let in.

“This is so fucked,” Sol says. “I think her oxy’s low. I have to at least let her into the airlock.”

Laurie shakes her head side to side, side to side. Her eyes are glassy with shock. “Yeah,” she finally says. “Yeah, you better.”

“And then, you know, I have to figure out which of you is a shapeshifting alien parasite,” Sol says, trying to wrench his mouth into a smile.

Laurie looks dead at him and flicks her tongue like a lizard.

“Don’t do that, Laurie,” Sol says. “Don’t do stuff just to mess with me, okay? Please?”

* * *

He gives them numbers: Laurie One, who returned to the hopper at 0629 hours, and Laurie Two, who returned to the hopper at 0712 hours.

Laurie Two is significantly calmer now that she’s in the airlock and has her helmet off. Her dirty blonde hair is sweat-starched into spikes, and her eyes have dark circles underneath them. She’s taking deep gulps of the recycled air, pushing it out her nose. But she won’t take her eyes off Laurie One, who is sitting on the other side of the inner airlock door.

“Just don’t let her near the levers,” Laurie Two reiterates, voice coming through tinny. “I don’t want to get vented by my creepy alien doppelganger.”

“Says the creepy alien doppelganger,” Laurie One finishes. “I’m trying to keep an open mind about what’s going on here. You could do the same.”

“It’s probably easier to be open-minded when you’re on that side of the airlock, all wrapped up in my blanket,” Laurie Two says.

“Laurie, maybe give her the blanket,” Sol mutters. “As a peace offering.”

“Sol, she doesn’t want the . . .”

“I don’t want the fucking blanket, Sol.” Laurie Two sighs. “I want to know what’s going on. I want to know who that is and how she beat me back to the hopper. I was only blacked out for a minute, tops.” She holds up her helmet, then the helmet Laurie One shed earlier, comparing them. Shakes her head.

“She’s been back for forty-five minutes already,” Sol says. “If you blacked out, it

was longer than a minute. Way longer.”

Laurie Two digs the datastick out of her helmet. “See for yourself, Sol.”

Sol goes to trigger the interior door, then pauses. “Just hand it to me, okay? Don’t try to come in.”

Laurie Two’s face falls, and Sol feels it like a gut punch. “Solly, you really think . . . think I’m some kind of . . .” She blinks hard. “Oh, man. Okay. Yeah. I’ll pass it through.”

Laurie One looks away, grimacing.

“You get it, right?” Sol asks.

“I get it,” Laurie Two says. “Wish I didn’t.”

“I’ll wait over here,” Laurie One says, pointing to the corner. “Away from the airlock controls.”

“That’s real considerate, alien Laurie,” Laurie Two says.

Sol cracks the interior door. Laurie Two passes the datastick through, and he pretends not to notice how her hand is trembling. She tries to smile, but gives up halfway, leaving her mouth all stretched. Sol mouths the word *sorry* to her as he relocks the interior door, leaving her in limbo.

He slots the datastick into the dash and pulls up the video, playing it side-by-side with Laurie One’s. The prep, the entry, the descent—all identical, down to the millisecond. Sol tries to concentrate on the footage, tries to ignore Laurie One biting her thumbnail in the corner and Laurie Two squatting in the airlock, head in her hands.

“Hallucination,” Laurie One says. “We’re all thinking that, right? Air filter’s compromised. We’re breathing carbon and talking to my empty spacesuit in the airlock.”

“Or I’m still blacked out in the crevasse,” Laurie Two says. “Contaminant in my oxygen tank.”

“Under other circumstances, you know, I think you two would really hit it off,” Sol says, but he runs a diagnostic on the air filter in a side window. Oxygen levels are green. He fumbles for the last of the peanuts and crunches them between his molars one at a time.

The footage is playing at triple time, a blur of identical motion, identical rock formations. Then, at the thirty-two minute mark, the computer detects divergence and slows it back down. Both helmets’ owners are clambering back out of the crack, but taking slightly different routes. Sol rewinds, plays half-speed. Laurie Two never falters, never freezes. As far as he can tell, there’s no blackout at all, but the timestamp has jumped forward forty minutes.

“You said you were only out for a minute,” Laurie One says. “It jumps forty.”

“Impossible,” Laurie Two says. “That’s impossible. If I was down there an extra forty minutes I’d have run out of oxygen.”

Sol shakes the empty peanut bag, desperately licks the salt and sugar off his palm. If he’s the one hallucinating, maybe Laurie never came back at all. Maybe she’s stuck down there while he argues with figments of his own imagination. He raps his knuckles against his temple and peers closer at the footage as it keeps playing, as both Lauries make their way out of the crevasse.

Then he sees it.

“That crag in the rock,” he blurts. “It repeats. That whole stretch of tunnel, it repeats.”

He restarts the video and claws the playback speed down to half, watching through Laurie’s eyes as she descends. She’s more focused on her footing than on the walls, but there’s enough. The cracks and whorls in the tunnel hit an invisible marker and start to repeat themselves. Shifted, slightly condensed, but the same pattern. As Laurie goes deeper, it happens again.

“Let me see,” Laurie Two says faintly.

Sol drags the footage onto his tablet and goes back to the airlock, Laurie One

drifting along after him. She's chewing her lip the way she does when she's thinking of something unpleasant or complicated or both. The three of them huddle up around the interior door, Laurie Two on one side, Sol and Laurie One on the other, and they watch the video.

"So what are we saying?" Laurie One asks. "Whatever crashed into the rock was some kind of alien copy-print machine?"

A gloved fist raps against the airlock window.

* * *

Laurie Three has brought company in the form of Laurie Four, whose smashed faceplate is swathed in electrical tape. Her head is lolling inside her helmet, and her eyes are fluttered shut. Laurie Three is alert, if exhausted from having dragged Laurie Four from the crevasse to the hopper. She takes the presence of Laurie One and Laurie Two a little better for having already saved her own life.

"I found her facedown on my way out," Laurie Three says. "I thought I was having some kind of out-of-body experience, or something. You two must know all about that."

Laurie Two snorts. She and Laurie One nod. Everyone is inside the hopper now; the airlock is jammed with shed spacesuits and Sol is reasonably sure there are no shapeshifting alien parasites afoot. Laurie Four needs medical attention. She's lying on the chair now, still unconscious but with more color in her face and a blanket pulled over her. Laurie Three is hovering, feeling residually responsible. Laurie One and Laurie Two are on opposite sides of the cramped cockpit.

Sol is at the screen, checking the timestamps from Three and Four's helmets, or rather, Four and Three's.

"So first we had a forty minute jump, then a one-hour eighteen minute jump—except she slipped on her way out and cracked her faceplate—and then a one-hour forty-four minute jump," he says. "Which means for us, outside the crevasse, the arrivals are coming quicker and quicker."

"The copies," Laurie Two says glumly. "We're copies. You can say it."

"The electromag fluctuation," Laurie actually-Four says. "At the bottom of the crack. It's somehow spitting out clones of me?"

"Of her," Sol says, jabbing his thumb at Laurie One, who looks increasingly uncomfortable. "But yeah. Basically, that's the situation." He can feel panic blocking up his throat. He still can't raise Control, and the pickup window is approaching, and . . .

"Sol, I gotta talk to you for a second," Laurie One says abruptly, coming up off the wall. "Alone. Just for a second."

Sol shakes his head. "There's going to be another Laurie knocking any second. Do we really have time for—"

"Bathroom," Laurie One hisses. "Now."

"Yeah, okay," Sol says. He gives the other Lauries a pained look. "Be right back."

"Original Laurie, asserting her authority," Laurie Two says dryly. "Why the need for privacy? I know you're going to be talking about—"

"Life support," Laurie Four says. "The hopper's not specced for this many people, neither's the ship. Weight restrictions, too, for launch."

Sol lets Laurie One drag him into the bathroom stall and shutter the door. "They're dead-on about the life support," he says. "Fuck."

"Solly, listen," Laurie One says with something rasping in her throat. "I'm not sure I'm the real Laurie."

"Oh, Christ, Laurie, don't say that," Sol groans. "Don't mess with me, remember?"

"I'm not."

Laurie One's breath is stale and hot and Sol desperately wants to get out of the bathroom, even though there's nowhere else to go but back to more Lauries.

"I blacked out, too, when I was down there," Laurie One says. "I didn't tell you about it earlier. Didn't want you stress-eating for the next two-and-a-half hours."

Sol grips his hair with both hands, weaving it through his fingers. "But you were the first one back. So it has to be you." His voice has a whiny edge to it he can't quite erase. "It has to be, Laurie. Come on."

Laurie One shakes her head. "Maybe I'm the first one back because I was the first copy," she says. "Maybe the real Laurie, like, the original Laurie, maybe she's wherever the drone is. And wherever the thing is. The unidentified body that made this trench in the first place."

"Does it matter?" Sol demands. "Jesus, look, you're Laurie to me, okay? You're Laurie to me. You'll be Laurie to everybody back on Earth. The pickup window is less than an hour away, and we can launch the hopper with three people aboard, max."

"But they're all me, too," Laurie One whispers. Her face is blotchy red and Sol can see tears pushed back under her eyes. His stomach rolls over like a dead fish.

"What can we do?" he asks.

"Number Four," Laurie One says. "She's been unconscious. She doesn't know any of this shit. Take her. Leave the rest of us."

"Technically, that's number Three," Sol says. "And are you fucking kidding me? Laurie, she could be brain-damaged. Or, or, barring that, what if she dissolves in twenty-four hours? Into some big puddle of alien goo?"

"I might do that, too."

"Or you might not, because you're the original Laurie, okay?" He grabs her by the shoulders and almost shouts it. "You're the original fucking Laurie!"

She glares at him and he glares back, neither of them moving. The bathroom light buzzes and flickers between their heads. Laurie One's breath smells even worse now, and Sol's about to say it, just to be a dick, but then she might take it as evidence of her mouth dissolving so he says nothing at all. Not until a gentle knock on the airlock window makes the wall tremble.

"I wonder who that could be," he says.

Laurie One does something between a laugh and a sob.

* * *

Laurie Five has her radio working; Sol listens to her voice pitching upward as she demands to be let in, demands to know why there are footprints all around the hopper, demands to know whose spacesuits are piled in the airlock. Finally he switches off his headset, and it becomes a silent film. Laurie Five pounding her gloved fists against the airlock window in slow motion, catching sight of a warped reflection behind her, turning to see Laurie Six struggling up from the crevasse.

"Don't watch," Laurie actually-Four says, from where she's checking on Laurie actually-Three's vitals. "That makes it worse for them. And us."

Sol drags his eyes away from the scene. Puts his back to the airlock and sits down. Laurie One and Laurie Two are already sitting cross-legged on the floor; Laurie Four is still tending to an unconscious Laurie Three.

"If we cleared the suits out, we could fit one more person in the airlock," Laurie One says miserably. "At least for a while."

Sol takes a deep breath. "No point," he says. "Max of three people to launch. So, we have to make a decision. Have to decide. On who, if anybody, comes with me and Laurie . . . One. Laurie One."

"Wait," Laurie Two interjects. "Why is she a sure thing? She doesn't even know if she's the real Laurie."

"We could hear you in the bathroom," Laurie Four says. "Sol gets loud when he's agitated."

Sol gives an irritable shrug.

"You really do, Solly," Laurie Two says.

"She's the most likely to be the original, okay?" he says. "If she doesn't come, and I take one of you guys instead, what if you dissolve into . . ."

"Why do you have this fucking fixation with alien goo?" Laurie Two sighs.

"And then no Laurie comes back at all," Sol finishes. "Her family has nobody at all, and Laurie's stuck asphyxiating on the surface of the goddamn Moon."

"If we don't dissolve, we'll be doing the same thing," Laurie Four says quietly.

Sol runs his hands through his hair again. "Can we agree that Laurie Three is out?" he asks. "She'll never know. She's unconscious."

Lauries One, Two, and Four all flinch.

"Goddamn it, Sol," Laurie Four snaps. "That's even worse, dumping someone out the airlock while they're asleep."

"How about we dump you, and take an all-Laurie crew back to the ship?" Laurie Two says, jutting out her chin.

Sol blinks. More than the words, the expression on her face punches a hole right through him. Then he remembers how panicked she was, begging him to let her into the cockpit, and how she deflated all at once when he told her to pass the datastick through the door. Guilt churns his stomach.

"Laurie, you don't mean that," Laurie One says. "He's the only one we know isn't a copy. He wasn't in the crevasse. He goes."

Laurie Four nods. Laurie Two gives a sour shrug.

"Look," Sol says shakily. "I know it sounds fucked up, but this whole situation, in case you haven't noticed, this whole situation is supremely fucked up."

Vibrations sing through the cockpit again, as if to punctuate his words. More fists banging on the airlock. Sol forces himself not to look.

"We'll put it to a vote," Laurie One says. "And if there's a tie, we rock-paper-scissors." She rubs hard at her face, kneading the skin. "Okay?"

Sol holds his breath. The other Lauries slowly nod.

"Good," he says hoarsely. "Who goes first?"

"You don't vote," Laurie One says. "And you don't watch, either."

Sol swallows. "But . . . Laurie."

"We're all Laurie," she says. "You don't get to know who stays."

Sol searches her face, trying to find some fleck of food, some distinct clump of hair that will let him differentiate her from the others. But she looks exactly like Laurie Two and exactly like Laurie Four, and maybe she's right. Maybe there is no original Laurie here, because they all are.

"Okay," he says.

* * *

Sol sits in the airlock while the Lauries decide. Outside, there's a crowd of new Lauries bounding around in their puffy white suits, crackling to each other on the radio or putting their helmets together to speak that way, gesticulating at the hopper, at the crevasse. He wonders what conclusions they're coming to. More and more of them are emerging from the crack, hauling themselves up the rock, and bouncing to their booted feet. Sol wipes the tears off his cheeks when he hears the interior door scrape open.

Two Lauries silently walk in and start suiting up. Sol looks between them, trying to guess, but there's no way of knowing. He looks back and sees Laurie Three, still unconscious in her chair, and the last Laurie sitting on the floor with her head in her hands.

"Just couldn't do it," one of the airlock Lauries says, stepping into her suit and working the zipper. "That dumbass caring instinct, I guess. Same reason we're

always looking out for you, Solly.”

“I’m sorry,” Sol says. It’s the only thing he can think to say.

“Yeah, yeah,” the other Laurie says. “I know. It’s. Uh. It’s fucking tough.” She blinks hard and reaches for her helmet. “We’ll clear everyone away, if we can. So you have space to launch without frying a bunch of coworkers.”

The other-other Laurie has a stuck zipper. Her chest is pumping sharp shallow breaths. “Fuck,” she says. “This isn’t right. It’s not logical. She could be brain-damaged, you know?” She licks her dry lips. “And her, she went a little early with the scissors. I think. I think I want a rematch.”

“Shut up, Laurie,” Laurie says. “Come on. Let’s just do this. You’re brave. You better be, because if you’re not, then I’m not.” She reaches in and yanks the zipper free. “So. Am I?”

Laurie shakes herself, looks right at Sol, and for a second Sol’s sure she’s Laurie One, but then the feeling twists away. “We’re brave,” she says. “Sure. Or unlucky. Or both. Whatever.”

“Have a safe trip home,” Laurie says. “Bye, Solly.”

They put their helmets on and seal them. Sol can see his grimacing reflection in their faceplates. He tries to smile; doesn’t manage it. Salutes instead, and squeezes past them, back into the cockpit. Just how he did a lifetime ago at 0600 hours, he vents the airlock, waits for the thumbs up, and opens the outer door.

Laurie and Laurie step out into the gray dust, sending a ripple through the crowd of spacesuits, helmeted heads turning.

Sol staggers back to his chair. “Let’s get prepped, Laurie,” he says, not looking at her. “Yeah,” she says, not looking at him. “Go time.”

* * *

They secure Laurie Three between their chairs with insulation and electrical tape, making sure her head’s as cushioned as possible. Then they strap in for launch. The hopper rumbles through its ignition sequence, testing each engine in turn. On the screen, Sol sees the pickup window flash green. The ship is directly above them, ready to retrieve them and their inconclusive data from the crevasse. He tries to raise Control one last time but gets nothing. So long as they’re in position, the radio interference shouldn’t matter.

Neither of them speaks as the countdown ticks away, and then the roar of the engines is too loud to speak anyway. It shakes them like pennies in a jar, and Sol reaches out an arm to brace Laurie Three. He sees Laurie’s arm reaching from her end, too. Then the hopper shudders up into the sky, shedding gravity all at once. Not all of the Lauries cleared the area, and Sol tries not to imagine them bursting into flame.

They pull away from the Moon’s surface, and on the screen Sol can see the crevasse blooming like a snow-white flower as more and more spacesuited Lauries pour out of it, spilling in all directions across the gray rock. If it doesn’t stop, the entire face of the Moon will be covered in asphyxiating astronauts.

Sol switches the screen to show the waiting ship, hanging in orbit. Are they observing the surface? Are they seeing the bloom? They must be. The thought of trying to explain what’s happened makes Sol want to laugh and die at the same time. He checks their trajectory and sees it’s a little off, but nothing serious.

“You’re not going to tell me which one you are?” he finally asks.

“We figured that would be better for you,” Laurie says dryly. “You don’t have to know who you left behind.”

“I left everyone behind,” Sol says. “Christ, Laurie. I don’t even know who I am now.”

“Join the club.” She leans forward in her seat. “Sol? What’s that?”

Sol zooms the screen and his mouth goes dry. They’re still on course for the ship, but so is someone else. He and Laurie watch speechlessly as a hopper, identical to

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their own, maneuvers into the dock on a gentle burn, cuts its engines, and slots perfectly into place.