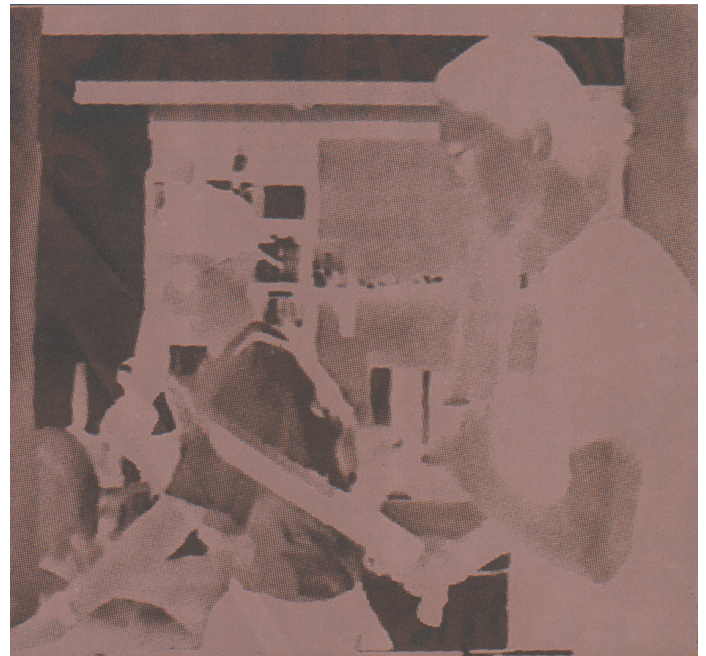


## RISKY SCHOOL SHOOTING CUT SHORT BY SUIT MALFUNCTION

William Gillespie



After the Challenger exploded, the shuttles were grounded, leaving only two astronauts on the Space Station to conserve resources. Two men instead of three. Why did they pick Hawking? Anybody else it would have been cool but Hawking kept pushing and pushing. Wouldn't let it go. The timing for this mission was wrong. They needed three men. Now here he was blind with a ruptured dehumidifier, bulbs burning out, space junk hitting the hull, shuttles burning up over Texas. The neglect was infuriating. A space program was not something to cut corners on.



She wasn't allowed to touch a student. She could get in serious trouble for that. Some litigation-crazed parent would drop the courts on her head. Discipline was out of her hands. If three brickheads decided to pummel a goth rocker in her classroom she could only call security. It would take them ten minutes to get to the room. She could try to scream at them to stop fighting but if they ignored her it would undermine her authority even further. If a child was being hurt she could do nothing. Classes continued to expand and the distance between her and the students increased.

“Helmet.” “Sealed.” “Oxygen.” “Flowing.” “All systems go.” “Roger Crusades. Over.” Moving slowly in the pressurized suit, Hawking opened the airlock. A few silent specks of dust dribbled away. They unzipped the canvas bags and stepped out, drifting over the tables. Some of the kids looked up at them. One was amazed. Another laughed. One threw a carton of milk. Rock discharged his firearm. A wave of consternation swept the room. The recoil from the shotgun made him spin end over end until he came to rest entangled in the light fixture. “Careful of that recoil Rock.” “Roger that. Let’s teach these kids something.” Skinny girl, down. Pretty boy, pop. The whistle of air blowing out of the depressurizing cafeteria. “Crusader this is Mission Control. We have a possible malfunction.” “What the hell?” “What is it Rock?” “Something’s going wrong with my suit.” “I’m coming.” “I’m getting warm. It’s raining in here.” Rock watched trickles of condensation inside the helmet wriggling away from the oxygen blowers, lit by the headlamp. He raised the weapon to the visor and the sights wavered in the liquid sheeting his helmetglass. Jockhead fell forward on the floor, blood pouring from the back of his head. It was awesome, so red. “The collision with the light fixture maybe dislodged the oxygen feed on your suit.” Hawking carefully maneuvered around the tether to check Rock’s suit. Rollercoasters of screams poured under them. It was comical, the way those idiots ran, wide eyed, elbows akimbo, hands to faces. Mr. Smith looked directly into their eyes for the first time in years as he pushed the door to his classroom shut. “Temperature’s alright.” The thump as a heavy table was pushed onto its side to barricade a door. “Am I losing pressure?” “You’re fine. Your thermostat and barometer are malfunctioning. It’s just moisture. Just hold still and try not to overheat. I’ll try to finish the job myself.” Two sharp retorts cast flashes through the rivulets streaking the helmet. The shape of Hawking moved down the hallway. Lightning in a rainstorm. “Die.” Crackle. That scream was unbelievable, a profound wail twisting from below. Had to be a teacher. An expletive and a bang. Red flecks. “How’s it going?” “Under control. Sit tight. We’ll get you back to cafeteria as soon as I’ve deployed the rest of these pipe bombs.” “Ro- Ah! Mission control I’m being attacked. Hah! Wait. Okay it was just a kid tripping over my tether.” Pop. “Copy that. Just try to sit still. Control your breathing. Even keel. Over.” “What’s going on Hawking?” “Well I’m trying to find the biology teacher. I was hoping to shoot his ass in the face. But he doesn’t seem to be in the classroom. I just want to let this last bomb go in the library, maybe burn up some books. Then I’ll get back to the cafeteria.” “How are the sirens? Seen any action out there?” “Nothing but scared little bunnies Houston.” “We’re counting twelve squad cars with plenty of sirens in the air, more on the way. You’d better wrap things up.” “Roger. You wanna fuck with me? You wanna fuck with me? Huh? Scream. Scream. Fuckyeah.” Rock hung somewhere over the long folding tables. Who could still be lurking in the cafeteria. Or who might be creeping up. Running crouching below the window line, taking aim. Who might be behind him. Rock considered cocking the firearm, taking a tough pose. Machismo failed him. In some tiny corner of his head the thought they could get out. Too young for the death penalty. Fuck it. They were already famous. After Mission Control releases the footage. Drop the gun, he could just drop the gun. Nobody was going to shoot an unarmed eight year old in a spacesuit. A broken spacesuit. They might smack him around but he was ready for that. Might enjoy it. Like to see someone try it. “Rock I’m heading back down the corridor. Looks like someone crapped their pants. You should have seen me take out the library man it was totally vote. Can you see me? Over?” “Seeing nothing but water. Wish I could have helped you with the library. Over.” “Fellas this is Mission Control we need you to finish up. On this side of the school we’ve got a SWAT team on the roof. Over.” “Copy that Houston. Roger.” There came a purling through the headset, some interference. Distant music, rock and roll. Rock was on the beach. The sun was high and warm. He lay out on the sand and watched people surf. He saw Hawking out there, riding in on a slow curl. Something moved across the sun. A gloved hand. Hawking was upside down, waving. “Ready?” crackled Hawking, almost inaudible beyond the polyglossia. The flame from the jet winked. He felt a hard tap on the helmet and through the surf could discern a perfect circle, the mouth of a barrel. “Copy that. Over and out.”