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Moon Shot

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MOON SHOT

FOLLOWING A WEEK OF TREATMENTS, the doctors give my brother Marvin a NASA cap to cover the hairless patches. Marvin, at age seven, decides to go to the moon.

He gets wind of the space shuttle they're building and asks to ride along. To humor him, Mamma writes a letter to Cape Canaveral. Marvin takes it on his bike down to our mailbox at the end of the hill. Weeks later, he gets an autographed photo of John Glenn.

It's not enough, of course. Marvin gets weaker but keeps smiling. Mamma wipes his forehead with a cool cloth before bed. Daddy, standing outside the room, says, "If they can put a goddamn man on the moon...."

Marvin goes to the hospital again. When he comes home, Daddy and Mamma close their door to talk. Everyone seems upset except Marvin. At dinner he announces that he's going to the moon, after all. His space suit is ready. No one thinks much about it until bedtime, when he's nowhere to be found.

We hit the front door just soon enough to see him flying down the hill on his bike. He's wearing his NASA cap backwards, Daddy's old catcher's mask, and a red towel that he's tied around his neck like a cape. Mamma screams. Marvin accelerates. At the bottom of the hill he's angled several pine-boards over the curb like a ramp almost towards the dark house on the corner. The full moon hangs low in the sky, just above the trees, and Marvin is heading straight for it.

I hold my breath. Daddy and Mamma have already started running toward the road. Marvin meets the ramp and goes up, reaching with his right hand. When he hits the pinnacle of his flight, I somehow know that this is the way I'll remember him. A small sound escapes my lips, like words I don't yet know how to form, something between applause and prayer.

Then Marvin crashes ass-over-eyeballs. I take off down the stairs. When I get to where he is, Mamma's already cuddling him in her lap. Daddy's shaking his head. "I almost made it," Marvin says bluntly.

The night is orange, and all around the earth is soft. "You sure did, baby," whispers Mamma. "You sure did."