

Moon Rocks and Lighter Fluid

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USC 581 Thesis
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Erin's door creaks open. HOWARD, 10, blond with scrawny arms to match his chicken legs, sticks his head in. The room is an experiment in the unexpected. Stark pale green walls pour into thick blue carpet. A Styrofoam solar system dangles from the ceiling. The space theme is secondary. Huge plastic sheets dominate the room, encapsulating the bed like a zoo exhibit. It's empty, the bubble is zipped up and the room is pristine. He motions back and Billy tip toes in.

Howard slips on a pair of surgical gloves. Howard walks to the edge of the plastic bubble and into a tube that leads to the main section of the bubble. He puts his hand on the zipper. Billy is right behind him.

BILLY

Are we supposed to be in here?

HOWARD

Erin's at Dr. Frake's with mom again. Keep an eye out.

Billy goes to the window. Howard takes a deep breath and holds it. He unzips it and goes in.

Howard runs right to the rock and hustles back holding it. Billy comes to see.

BILLY

Wow.

HOWARD

Yeah.

BILLY

Think there's anything on it? You know, like alien germs?

HOWARD

Or alien dog pee?

Billy laughs.

BILLY

Gross!

HOWARD

Everything has been sanitized.

They hold it up to the light and study it.

2 EXT. YOUNT'S DRIVEWAY - DAY

2

A mini-van pulls onto the Yount's driveway. ERIN, 12, visibly healthy though slightly pale, is in her orange spacesuit, she pulls an oxygen tank on wheels and has a bubble-like mask over her face. Her mother, KATHRYN, mid 30s, is on her cell phone.

KATHRYN
(to the phone)
You're cutting off. I can't hear
you...Will you be okay Erin?

ERIN
I can handle myself mom.

Kathryn steps away from the van to get some privacy. The tube that connects Erin's oxygen tank and her helmet comes off.

KATHRYN
(on the phone)
We talked about this before.

As Kathryn comes around the mini-van. Erin reconnects the tube. She doesn't want her mother to notice.

3 INT. ERIN'S ROOM-DAY

3

SLAM-the sliding shut of a minivan door.

HOWARD
Crap!

He grabs the rock out of Billy's hand and runs into the bubble. Billy goes to the window and sees Erin getting out.

BILLY
They're back!

HOWARD
No crap, Einstein!

Out the window, Erin and her mother walk towards the house.

Howard puts the rock back and takes off out of the bubble.

HOWARD
Go, go, go!

He pushes Billy out the door. He starts to close it and turns around for one last glance. The zipper is still open.

4 INT. FOYER - DAY 4

Erin and Kathryn still on the phone walk into the house.

KATHRYN

I don't want you to feel like I'm suffocating you. Okay, just do your part okay. We'll talk tomorrow....

Kathryn hangs up the phone.

KATHRYN

Howie are you home?

5 INT. ERIN'S ROOM-DAY 5

Howard doesn't want to get caught. Without zipping the chamber, he turns back towards the door and exits.

6 INT. ERIN'S ROOM - NIGHT 6

Howard sits outside of the bubble. Inside Erin is searching through her box of space memorabilia.

ERIN

Howie, everyone on the moon has to wear a space suit to survive.

Howard looks at the zipper of the entrance to Erin's bubble.

Erin catches Howard looking.

ERIN

I've been reading doing my research on the net but I can't build the rocket by myself...Howie, how fun would it be to live on the moon?... Can you help me?

Erin pulls out blueprints to her rocket design. And shows it to Howard through the plastic.

ERIN

Don't let mom know. I don't think she'll understand. Promise me Howard?

She puts her pinkie finger on the plastic. Howard puts his pinkie finger on the plastic, to touch hers...

HOWARD
Pinkie swear.

ERIN
So will you help me?

HOWARD
(with hesitation)
Yes.

Kathryn appears at the door. Erin hides her plans.

KATHRYN
Okay, Howard it's time for your
sister to go to bed now.

7 INT. HOWARD'S ROOM - DAY 7

Howard jolts from his bed. Kathryn is SCREAMING. He runs out of his room.

8 INT. ERIN'S ROOM - DAY 8

Howard bursts in the door. Kathryn is cradling Erin. She lies, unmoving. The bubble is torn down.

KATHRYN
Call the ambulance!

Howard stares at his sister.

KATHRYN
Call the damn ambulance!

He's shocked back to action. He exits the room.

9 INT. HOWARD'S ROOM - DAY 9

Howard is at his window. Red light from an unseen ambulance flash over his face. Howard watches in disbelief.

TITLES

10 INT. KITCHEN-NIGHT 10

A pristine gleaming kitchen. Kathryn and Howard sit at the table, not speaking. Howard pushes his food around the plate. He gets no reaction from his mother.

HOWARD

Mom?

He wants to confess to her but he can't find the words.

KATHRYN

Jesus, Howard! What are you trying to tell me?

She starts to clean up. Frantically.

He tries to help, but he's just smearing it. Kathryn rips the plate from him, scrapes it into the trash. She mechanically ties the bag tight, pulls out another bag, double bags it and exits. Howard watches her as she returns without the bags, rinses the plates and puts them in the dishwasher. She leaves the room and there's no evidence of the meal left at all. Howard sits alone in silence.

HOWARD

Sorry.

11 INT. ERIN'S ROOM-NIGHT

11

Howard opens the door to Erin's room. No one has been in there since that day. The plastic still hangs like a half-built construction site.

Howard sits on Erin's swivel desk chair. He swings around to her desk littered with scattered crayons and paper. Howard runs his hands over books about the moon and spaceflight. There's something else under the books. He discovers a crude drawing of Howard's family. They're all smiling... on the moon... in orange spacesuits.

Howard now moves through the room with purpose. He goes to her bed and looks underneath. He pulls out the box covered in stars. He hesitates a moment, then opens it.

In it, he finds all sorts of space memorabilia. The Glow in the Dark stars from Christmas. Cutouts from magazines. Blueprints! Just what he was looking for.

12 EXT. MR. GOODRICH'S BACK YARD-DAY

12

MR. GOODRICH, silver hair, wearing a stars and stripes apron, mans the grill at this 4th of July party; red, white and blue streamers cover the place. Children run around, badminton players shout with delight and the Bangles play on the radio.

The backyard gate SQUEAKS and heads turn to see Kathryn and Howard. Conversation QUIETS. Mr. Goodrich doesn't miss a beat. He sets down the grill tools and strides over to them.

MR. GOODRICH
Kathryn! Howie! Happy early Fourth
of July!

He goes to hug Kathryn. She's so tense it's noticeable, but Mr. Goodrich lets it go.

KATHRYN
Hi John. Thanks for having us.

He sees Howie carrying some tupperware.

MR. GOODRICH
What's a Fourth of July party
without some of your famous
chocolate chip coffee cake!

Howard holds it up proudly.

MR. GOODRICH
Well, thanks Howie. Why don't you
go check out that bocce game over
there. Looks like your buddy could
use some help.

They look to Billy who winds up the bocce ball like a softball pitch. It caroms off the fence with a loud crash.

HOWARD
Sure!

He gives the tupperware to his mom and runs off.

They walk over to the grill. Mr. Goodrich picks up the lighter fluid and starts to soak the charcoals.

MR. GOODRICH
Boys will be boys.
(beat)
How are you? Really. Honest.

She smiles politely. Forced. She holds up her dish.

KATHRYN
Where can I put this down?

13 EXT. PICNIC TABLE - CONTINUOUS 13

People hover around the food, coming to and fro carrying dishes, desserts, etc. Kathryn stands away from the crowd.

She's watching as people pick at the dishes on the table. They come in, snag an appetizer, steal a taste and are on the way. Her muscles are rigid. A CHILD BLOWING BUBBLES stumbles in front of her. She instinctively reaches out and steadies the child by the hand. Kathryn releases them and leaves the party.

14 EXT. MR. GOODRICH'S BACKYARD-CONTINUOUS 14

Howard and Billy are off by themselves, sitting under a tree.

HOWARD

So what do you think?

BILLY

Yeah. You think we can get it off the ground?

Kathryn shoots past Mr. Goodrich who's about to light the grill. Confused, he watches her run through the gate, all the while pouring lighter fluid into the grill. He shakes his head and lights a match. A HUGE FIREBALL erupts. It catches Billy and Howard's attention.

HOWARD

Only one way to find out.

15 INT. ERIN'S ROOM-DAY 15

Kathryn closely examines the damage to Erin's suit. She is sitting on Erin's bed, with the space suit cradled in her arms. She's crying. Through the open window, LAUGHTER and MUSIC from the party can be heard. In the distance, Howard sneaks a peak down the hallway. Howard is now more determined to make the rocket.

16 EXT. CLEARING-DAY 16

A dusty clearing rises over the tops of suburban homes. Howard smoothens out the blueprint laid out in the clearing. Billy has a note pad.

HOWARD

This would never give her the thrust she needed.

Billy jots down, "MORE THRUST" on the notepad.

HOWARD

We're gonna have to change that. What we need is oxygen and hydrogen to create enough gas to help propel us to the next stage.

BILLY

Where are we going to get that stuff?

HOWARD

I can get the oxygen. But hydrogen?...Need something combustible to fire it up.

BILLY

Like lighter fluid?

HOWARD

Lighter fluid!

Billy writes: "Lighter fluid."

17

EXT. CLEARING-DAY

17

The two boys are hunched over a MODEL ROCKET. Howard jiggles a fin on the rocket. He puts his hand out.

HOWARD

Glue.

Billy wears a MAROON and GOLD football helmet. He jams his hand into a neon green fanny pack and produces some glue.

Howard delicately removes the fin and coats it with glue. He aligns it on the body of the rocket. Billy watches cautiously.

Eyeing it like a golfer lining up a putt, Howard smiles, stands up and dusts himself off.

HOWARD (CONT'D)

She's good to go.

Billy stands far from the rocket.

BILLY

Ready?

Howard eyes it.

HOWARD

Count it off!

BILLY

3...

Howard strikes a match.

BILLY (CONT'D)

2...

Billy pulls down on his helmet. Howard lights the fuse.

BILLY (CONT'D)

1!

With a loud POP and a WHIZ like a firecracker the rocket explodes in it's place. Disappointment.

HOWARD

We're gonna need a lot of
firepower.

18

INT. BILLY'S BACKYARD SHED - DAY

18

Howard opens the shed. Billy and Howard pull out a bunch dilapidated boxes. And final a box filled with action figures and a pink bunny. He eyes Billy.

BILLY

It's from Grandma Agnes.

Howard raises an eyebrow.

BILLY

Really.

Howard removes a panel at the bottom of the chest and reveals a bunch of fireworks.

HOWARD

Jackpot.

BILLY

I don't know.

HOWARD

What?

BILLY

I walked Mrs. Treaster's mutt for 4 months to get that money. It bit me.

Howard starts taking the fireworks out to categorize them.

BILLY

I had to pay Jesse Sanchez's older brother a transport tax.

Howard smiles as he counts the M80s.

BILLY

And when the police sent Jesse Sanchez's brother away for the summer I had to lie to my mom and say I didn't have any fireworks.

HOWARD

Well look at it this way...

He tosses a roman candle to Billy.

HOWARD

When we're done, you *won't* have any fireworks.

19

EXT. STREETS OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD-DAY

19

SERIES OF SHOTS:

Howard tugging Billy behind his bike in a red wagon.

Howard tugging the wagon with a different trash can in it while Billy runs alongside to keep up.

Howard snagging a piece of green garden hose.

The boys sneak past a PAINTER'S VAN. They steal a half empty can of white paint.

The boys pick through some oversized trash. In it, there's a dented METAL BOOKSHELF. It's badly damaged.

The boys with a variety of material in the wagon heading home. The wagon is overloaded. The shelves drag on the ground. Billy carries cardboard.

20 EXT. MR. GOODRICH'S BACKYARD-DUSK 20

Billy approaches the gate. He's got shoe polish on his face. He starts to open the gate. Howard grabs him by the shirt and shakes his head no. He goes over the gate. Billy follows.

They plod across the soft grass towards the massive grill. It's got a cover over it. Howard lifts the sheet and gestures to Billy. He pokes his head underneath while Howard keeps a lookout. He grabs the lighter fluid.

21 INT. BILLY'S GARAGE-DAY 21

The rocket is taking shape. With the painted white rusty trash can as the body, the rest of the work is in the details. The dented bookshelf acts as the apparatus to hold the rocket in place. Billy works on cutting out cardboard fins. Howard applies some floor tiles with super glue. He uses the blueprint as a guide.

HOWARD

That's not right, Billy.

He points to the diagram.

HOWARD

If you cut the fins like that, it's going to give the rocket too much drag. We need to be aerodynamic.

BILLY

But these look cooler.

HOWARD

Yeah. They'll look real cool on your coffin, too. Make the fins the right way.

Billy throws the fin on the ground. Howard picks it up and stands in front of him with it.

HOWARD

Look, I did better than 99% of kids my age on the statewide math test. Trust me.

Billy begrudgingly takes it.

HOWARD

But you're right. They are cooler.

Billy smiles.

BILLY

So when are we launching? Tonight?

Howard hesitates, they both look up at the beautiful, clear sky.

22 INT. HOWARD'S ROOM-NIGHT 22

He writes a note to his mom. It's short and sweet: SORRY MOM. I don't want to trouble you anymore. I hope you understand. I'm going to keep my promise with Erin.

23 INT. ERIN'S ROOM-NIGHT 23

Howard carries himself as though he were in a church. He grabs the moon rock off Erin's desk and stuffs it in a pillowcase. He also quietly detaches the oxygen tank. The gentle HISS is the only sound.

24 INT. KITCHEN-NIGHT 24

Howard leaves the note on the kitchen table. He pulls the oxygen tank behind him as he closes the door. He turns around one last time to record the image in his mind and finally disappears in the darkness.

25 EXT. CLEARING-NIGHT 25

Howard walk alone up a wooded hillside dragging the tank and the make-shift rocket.

26 INT. KITCHEN-NIGHT 26

Kathryn comes home and finds the letter.

27 EXT. MR. GOODRICH HOUSE-NIGHT 27

Kathryn BANGS on the door. Mr. Goodrich answers the door with Billy at his side.

KATHRYN

Is Howard here?

28 EXT. CLEARING-NIGHT 28

Howard looks up to the stars. He's got Erin's spacesuit on. He attaches the tube of the oxygen tank and opens the valve. Howard ignores the flammable warning sticker on the oxygen tank. Howard starts up the launch process, fusing all the fireworks together with a long piece of rope and drenching the whole thing in lighter fluid. The rocket resembles the Space Shuttle, with the oxygen tank in the middle and the two make shift rockets strapped to the sides.

29 EXT. WOODS-NIGHT 29

Flashlights in hand, Billy leads the way as Kathryn runs through the woods followed by Mr. Goodrich.

30 EXT. CLEARING-NIGHT 30

Howard is having trouble lighting the long fuse. As he struggles, he knocks the hose loose from the oxygen tank, but doesn't realize it.

He starts to get dizzy from the lack of oxygen. Every time he lights the match, it goes out. Finally, as he starts to lose consciousness, he gets it to spark up. He collapses back into the rocket as the fuse lights.

For a moment, he's lying there as the flames approach him and the fireworks.

Kathryn BURSTS through the brush.

KATHRYN

Howard!

She runs to him and drags him out of the rocket before the fuse ignites it.

Kathryn shows up and sees him passed out. She drags him out of the rocket before the fuse ignites it and the rocket goes up in flames. She rips the space helmet off. Howard gasps back to life.

KATHRYN

What are you doing?

Howard's dazed.

HOWARD

What Erin wanted to do.

KATHRYN

What?

HOWARD

Go to the moon. It's my fault she didn't get to go.

KATHRYN

What?

HOWARD

It's my fault.

Kathryn is near sobbing.

KATHRYN

What's your fault?

HOWARD

It's my fault she died. I...I went into her bubble. I wanted to see the moon rock...

Kathryn doesn't know how to process this information.

KATHRYN

It wasn't your fault. It wasn't her fault.

(beat)

She was sick. She's been sick for a long time now. We couldn't stop that. She couldn't live in her bubble forever...I'm sorry Howard. ...I need you.

Howard hugs his mother.

HOWARD

Think she'd like this rocket?

Just as he asks, the fireworks begin to take off. They shoot into the air and explode, joining a plethora of professional displays throughout LA celebrating the 4th.

KATHRYN

She wouldn't've changed a thing.

FADE OUT.