



Friday 4 July 1969 was the worst Independence Day ever. We were at the kitchen table eating Mom's chocolate cake when she sprang it on us. Out of the blue.

'Danny, Lucy, I've something to tell you,' she began, smiling brightly.

'Yeah?' I said, through a mouthful of crumbs.

'It's a surprise,' said Mom.

'Yippee!' Lucy screeched – and I mean screeched (you do that when you're only four years old).

'What's the surprise?' I asked.

'Danny, try not to speak with your mouth full,' said Mom. She's always trying to teach us 'manners'.

I swallowed the cake and stared at her. 'So, what's the surprise?'

'We're going on vacation.'

'Yippee!' my sister screeched even louder.

'To Cape Kennedy?' I asked, getting really excited too. Apollo 11 was going to blast off for the moon on 16 July. It would be amazing to see the launch. And it was only a few hours' drive away. Maybe she'd let my pal Jimmy come ...

'No,' she replied

I tried a second guess. 'Hawaii?' I loved surfing too and dreamed of trying those massive, curling waves. Well, maybe the smaller ones first ...

Mom shook her head.

'California?' There were good surfing beaches there too.

'No.'

'Where are we going, Mommy?' Lucy's squeaky voice piped up.

Then Mom dropped the bombshell. 'Ireland.'

'What?' I gasped.

'It'll be fun. And you'll finally get to meet your grandparents.'

'Like when?'

'We're flying out Sunday.'

I was stunned. 'This Sunday?'

'Yes.'

'For how long?'

'Three weeks.'

'You're kidding, right?' But I knew she wasn't.

Now don't get me wrong. I have nothing against vacations, Ireland or my grandparents. My mom is Irish. And my dad was too. Her name's Kathleen O'Shea. His was John Joe Sullivan. Can you get more Irish than that? I knew Ireland was a nice place and I wanted to take a vacation there sometime. But not this summer. Not when NASA was about to put a man on the moon. I wanted to stay in Florida, USA, where all the action was going to be. I had to try and stop this somehow.

'Mom, listen,' I said. 'I can't miss Apollo 11. You know I'm doing a school project on it. Everyone in the class is. And you know what the prize is. I want to win. I am going to win.'

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Our teacher, Mr Walker, is another space fanatic. The first day he walked into the classroom last fall he was carrying a six-foot-tall model of a Saturn V rocket. Strangely enough, that wasn't the first thing I noticed. I liked his long hair and cool desert jacket. He looked like one of The Beach Boys. Wow, our new teacher's a hippy, I thought to myself. How did he get a job in this crummy school?

But my attention quickly switched to that rocket. It was a perfect replica.

'What's this and why have I brought it along?' he asked, patting the rocket like it was a horse.

'The Saturn Five,' shouted Bobby Schultz. 'And you've brought it 'cos you'd like a ride to the moon.'

'I sure would,' said Mr Walker. 'Anyone know anything else about it?'

I raised my hand. 'It was designed by Wernher Von Braun and it's the most powerful rocket ever built.'

'That's right,' said Mr Walker. 'Anything else?'

'It's got five F-1 engines, at the bottom there,' said Bobby Schultz, pointing at the model.

'Excellent,' said Mr Walker. 'And what's at the top?'

'The command module, of course – where the astronauts are!' Bobby yelled.

'Correct.'

I raised my hand again. 'The Saturn Five stands as tall as a forty-storey building,' I said.

'Three hundred and sixty-three feet to be precise,' said Bobby.

'You're both correct. And why does it need to be so big?' asked the new teacher, smiling broadly.

Bobby's hand shot into the air. So did mine. Mr Walker nodded to me.

'To hold all that fuel you need to burn to get it into space,' I said.

'Good answer, Danny.'

Hey, this guy already knows our names, I thought to myself.

Bobby's hand was still in the air and he was waving it frantically.

Why does Bobby Schultz have to be such a know-it-all? I groaned inwardly.

Mr Walker nodded at him.

‘The rocket is liquid propelled,’ said Bobby. ‘The fuel is liquid hydrogen and liquid oxygen. There’s four and a half million pounds of it in there.’

‘Well, I can see we’ve got some space dudes in this class,’ said Mr Walker. ‘That’s what I like to see.’

I might like being in this guy’s class, I thought.

And it turned out I did. Everyone did.

Mr Walker’s Saturn V rocket stood in the corner of the classroom throughout the year.

We followed the Apollo programme all the way, at each step.

In October, Apollo 7 orbited the earth, testing the command module.

In December, Apollo 8 orbited the moon.

In January, NASA chose the two men who would try to land on the moon: Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin.

In March, Apollo 9 orbited the earth to test the lunar module.

And in May, Apollo 10 orbited the moon, again testing the lunar module.

The scene was set for the final countdown to the moon.

‘Apollo 11 has a date with destiny in a few weeks,’ Mr Walker told us near the end of the semester. ‘Sadly, by that time this school will be closed for summer vacation.’ He hung his head, pretending to be sad. ‘Aw-w-w-w ...’

‘Aw-w-w-w ...’ we all chorused.

‘Now, you’ve all done great work on Apollo this year. It would be a shame to stop now.’

He reached into his inside pocket and fished out a white envelope. ‘This here is an invitation.’ He paused and scanned the class. ‘An invitation for four people. Hands up who’s been to the Kennedy Space Center?’

Some of us raised our hands.

‘Well, if you think this is a regular ol’ invitation to a regular visitor tour of Kennedy, you’ll be very mistaken. This here is an access-all-areas-special-VIP-meet-the-astronauts-kind-of-invitation ... to the Kennedy Space Center.’

‘Wow!’ exclaimed Bobby Schultz behind me. I sat up, totally stunned.

‘I’m offering this prize to the student with the best project on Apollo 11. To arrive on my desk first day next semester. This is a voluntary assignment – repeat, voluntary assignment.’

‘Yeah, and I’m going for it,’ I whispered to Gloria Fernandez next to me.

‘I might too,’ she said.

‘And whoever takes the prize,’ Mr Walker went on, ‘can take my Saturn Five there in the corner along with it.’

‘Yes!’ exclaimed Bobby Schultz, like he’d already won it.

We’ll see about that, I said to myself.

‘All right. Who’s in for this assignment?’ the teacher asked.

A forest of hands shot upwards.

‘Good, good,’ said Mr Walker.

My best friend, Jimmy Sunn, raised his hand again. ‘Can two people do the project

together?’ he asked.

Mr Walker thought for a moment. ‘Okay, I’ll allow that. But I’ll be expecting a lot more from them.’

I looked over to Jimmy and we gave each other the thumbs up.

This was one competition I sure wanted to win.

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I had totally lost interest in that chocolate cake. ‘Mom,’ I said. ‘If I get to win the prize, then you, me, Lucy and Jimmy Sunn get to visit the Kennedy Space Center.’

Mom put her spoon down and looked at me.

‘What could be better than that?’ I asked. ‘We’d get to meet the astronauts, maybe even the Apollo 11 guys – the scientists. We’ll see the launch pad, everything.’

‘There’s nothing stopping you from doing the project in Ireland, Danny.’

‘But Ireland’s a million miles from here,’ I shouted.

‘It’s the same distance from the moon as America,’ Mom replied calmly. ‘The whole world will be watching Apollo 11. You can see it on the news in Ireland.’

‘But no one has a TV set over there – you said so yourself.’

Mom laughed. ‘I’m sure we’ll find one. And if not, there’s always the radio. There’s also—’

‘Please, Mom,’ I cut in, ‘just please let me stay here.’

‘Danny, the tickets are bought. We leave Sunday.’

‘Why can’t I stay with Aunt Mary in Sarasota?’ Aunt Mary is my mom’s sister and she’s just a couple of hours’ drive away. And Sarasota’s even closer to Cape Kennedy.

‘No, Danny.’

‘Why not, Mom?’

‘You know why.’

‘Please, just this once,’ I begged. ‘Come on, Mom, be cool.’

But she just looked at me and smiled, a bit tense now.

I knew I was wasting my time.