

The Angle of My Dreams

by Jay Lake

My name is Ronnie Marshall and I was eleven the year the space shuttle blew up. I started flying in my dreams right after those astronauts died.

It's not like being Superman -- you have to find the right kind of hill and run down it like crazy and throw out your arms like you're going off the high dive and close your eyes and *believe*. It's not really learning how to fly. Anybody can do that.

The trick is forgetting how to fall back down again.

I'd dream these flying dreams, the long grass slick on my legs as leaves spun in the air. There were always feathers in my dreams, like God had busted His pillow and goose down was snowing on the world. In dreams my feet pounded down a hill, my teeth clacking with every step, and when it came time to leave this earth, that's what I'd do.

Mama died one night a couple of years ago, sleeping off the chemo she took for her cancer. This last Christmas, just a couple of months gone by, Daddy flew too, until his truck landed in the San Marcos River. Granddaddy says that was punishment for mocking the angels. But I could soar away on God's feathers and still come back safe. At least in my dreams.

That spring in math class, after we'd all kind of got back to normal about the *Challenger* blowing up, we were studying angles. Because I do good in class, Mrs. Doornie gave me a protractor to work with, and I used it to measure the angle of my dreams. That's when I figured exactly how steep a hill needed to be for me to fly in real life.

* * *

I swiped two surveyor's stakes from Granddaddy's truck and used my coffee can money on a hundred feet of clothesline at Laudermilk's Hardware in town. It was old money, from when Daddy had still given me an allowance, but I didn't have nothing else I wanted anymore, except to see if I could really fly.

There was a big old hill on the Chamberlain place that stuck up all smooth and round like a sand pile, except it was pale rock under the dirt and grass. One giant live oak tree grew up at the top, that kept getting hit by lightning but never stopped growing. I'd rode my bike down that hill a hundred times, until I wiped out on a cow pie and broke my wrist when I was eight and Daddy made me stop. Chamberlain's hill looked like it might be the right angle.

So I took my stakes and my clothesline and a mallet and a level from the tool shed and headed over there early one Saturday. I drove one stake into the ground near the top, where the hill kind of rolled over to the angle it had, and another at the bottom, just before the hill flattened out again. My clothesline barely stretched between them, and it was real saggy, but I used some sticks from the live oak to prop it up in the middle. Then I backed off to the fence line, balanced the level on a post with some pebbles until it was straight, and set the protractor flat edge down on the level and stared through it at the hill and the clothesline.

I was right. It was exactly the angle of my dreams. I picked up my tools and went home to plan my first flight.

* * *

"Ronnie."

Granddaddy was at the door of my room. He was a thin man, "spare" I'd heard him called.

I didn't really know what "spare" meant like that, except Granddaddy didn't have much to spare for me or the world. He surveyed land for people and heard a lot of lies and complaints and lawyers talking. Granddaddy had got to where he didn't trust nobody but himself and Jesus. Least that's what he always told me on the way to church Wednesdays and Sundays.

I jumped up from my desk and stood straight, like he'd taught me. "Yes, sir?"

Granddaddy looked me up and down, then shook his head a little tiny bit. "Were you in my truck, Ronnie?"

I stared at my black Keds. He never asked me things he didn't already know the answer to, and I'd learned better than to lie to Granddaddy. "Yes, sir," I muttered.

There was a slithering as Granddaddy slipped his belt off. "Ronnie," he said, his voice sad, "you know the rules. It doesn't matter what you wanted with those stakes. You didn't ask."

My breath caught in my chest, making my whole body shake. "You'd have said no."

"It's my truck, Ronnie." He smacked the belt against his palm. "You can't just do what you want in this world, boy."

I leaned over my desk.

* * *

I ate dinner at the kitchen counter, where I could stand up. That night after Granddaddy was asleep, I sat down at my desk again, real careful of my sore butt. I was going to fly tomorrow, and I had to be ready.

There was a newspaper clipping in my drawer, from the *Austin American-Statesman*. I pulled it out, and copied out the names in my best printing, one at a time onto the back of a picture of Momma and Daddy. Commander Dick Scobee. Michael Smith. Ellison Onizuka. Ronald McNair. Judith Resnik. Gregory Jarvis. Christa McAuliffe.

It was the teacher that broke my heart, that always made me want to cry while I prayed in church. I could see my Mrs. Doornie climbing into that rocket, flying into the sky and never coming home. I guess Mrs. McAuliffe had kids and a husband and maybe her Momma and Daddy who missed her, but I always imagined those kids in her class, waiting at their desks while she never came back until they were covered with chalk dust and pencil shavings and the birds made nests in their hair.

Then I set the list aside with a little space shuttle eraser I'd won in a third grade math contest and went back to bed.

* * *

Sunday morning I was up before the grackles. I grabbed the photograph with the list on the back and the little eraser and put them in my pocket. Mrs. Doornie's protractor gleamed in the moonlight from the window, so I grabbed it, too. Dressed in my blue jeans and my red sweater and my black Keds, I snuck

out for Chamberlain's hill.

Under the live oak on top of the hill, the sky was the color of a burned-down piece of charcoal, all black and blue overhead, and kind of gray and orange in the east. It was cold enough to see my breath, and my throat hurt a little. The cows complained somewhere off in the darkness, and the morning dew made their pies stink something awful.

I left the protractor in my pocket, took the eraser in one hand and the picture with the list on the back in my other hand, and closed my eyes real tight. The hill was the angle of my dreams. All I had to do was run and never stop and I could soar all the way to Heaven and find those astronauts. Momma and Daddy would there with them, everybody laughing at some stupid story Mrs. McAuliffe was telling about the kids in her class.

My Keds smacked into the grass of the hill. My teeth clacked with each step. I knew there was nothing between me and the bottom of the hill except some grass, so I was safe. I stuck my arms out real far, straining fit to pop my elbows. My dreams told me what to do. My legs strained with a red-hot, sour feeling, then there was no more ground.

I had forgotten how to fall back down again.

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I soared through the dawn like a bird set free and nothing in my heart hurt any more for the first time since I could remember. The cold air made my chest ache as I breathed, and my body creaked like the barn in the wind. All I had to do was angle my hips and shoulders to turn, and I could bank and loop like a fighter pilot.

I knew Heaven wasn't straight up, like they said at the Fontevrault Bible Church, because space was up there where NASA kept their satellites. But Heaven had to be somewhere in the sky, because angels have wings, so I kept out circling, looking for the way.

Caldwell County, Texas stretched below me, like a big map except every little piece was real like one of them specially nice train sets. The sun had come up and everything was green and gold and beautiful. I wanted to sing, but I didn't know any good songs for the sky.

"Ronnie!"

It was Granddaddy. I looked down. I had flown over our little farm, and there he was in the front yard of the house, Bible in one hand while he shook his other fist.

"Get down here right now!"

I banked left, slipping over the housetop then back across the front yard the other way. This time Granddaddy was thrusting the Bible up at me. "You're in danger of your mortal soul, boy," he shouted. "Nobody mocks God's angels."

I shook my head, waving my hands as if to push him away. That was enough for me to remember how to fall. Head over heels, I tumbled into the yard at Granddaddy's feet. The last thing I saw was that little photo of Momma and Daddy circling high on the wind, as if it knew the way to the astronauts in Heaven without me.

* * *

My head felt like it was inside a bucket that kept rattling as someone was throwing gravel at it. I tried to

shake it clear, but that only made things hurt worse.

"Sit tight, Ronnie," said Granddaddy. His voice was sadder than I'd heard since Momma died. I opened my eyes. We were in his truck, driving real fast down County Road 61 toward town.

"What happened?" It was a dumb question. I knew what had happened to me, but I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"You fell off the roof."

"No, I--"

His voice was almost a growl. "You were sleepwalking and fell off the roof, Ronnie Marshall." Granddaddy glanced away from the road and met my eye. "There won't be another word said once we're done with the doctor, you hear me boy? Not ever."

The strange thing was, I didn't even get a whipping.

* * *

I stayed out of school three days with a concussion. Mrs. Doornie's protractor was smashed in my pocket, and whenever I could get out of bed and sit up for a while, I tried to glue it back together. The picture was gone, and so was my space shuttle eraser.

By Wednesday I was better, and that night Granddaddy made me come down to dinner instead of bringing me soup in my room. After we said grace over the roasted chicken and buttered green beans, Granddaddy picked up his knife, then put it back down. He stared at me, so I put my knife and fork down, too. I didn't know what I had done wrong.

"Ronnie," Granddaddy said real slow, like he wasn't sure what he was saying. Except Granddaddy was always sure of himself. "Your Momma..." He stopped, staring at the butter-and-pepper skin on his half of the chicken. "She lost her Momma when she was a little girl."

He was quiet for a while, like I was supposed to answer. "My grandmother," I finally said.

Granddaddy almost looked relieved. "Your grandmother. She ran away from us, left me to raise your Momma. And lose your Momma, finally."

He hadn't never cried when Momma was sick or when she died. They had to carry Daddy away from the funeral, but Granddaddy had just stood at the grave with a face like a hatchet. I was real afraid he was about to cry now.

"Your grandmother," he said, "climbed a ladder one day when your mother was a tiny baby, and jumped off the roof." He grabbed my hand with his, like an old leather bird claw wrapped around my pale fingers. "She never hit the ground, Ronnie. You get me?"

"She flew away," I whispered, tears in my eyes from how much it hurt where he grabbed me.

"I'm never again going to lose someone I love like that," Granddaddy hissed, as my fingers popped and cracked in his grip. "That's Satan's work, a mockery of God."

He was wrong. Flying was being closer to God, not running away from Him. It was everything Brother Hardison said prayer was supposed to be. My heart ached fit to burst for Granddaddy, but he'd never believe me if I tried to explain.

"You're on restriction," Granddaddy said, "from now on. You'll be home when you're not in school or church. And I'll be nailing your window shut so you won't sneak out when I'm asleep."

That night I said the names of the astronauts over and over again like a prayer, seeing that smoke cloud from the shuttle in my mind like God's finger pointing up to His Heaven.

* * *

A couple of weeks later as I came out of school to catch the bus, Granddaddy was standing on the steps.

"Come on, Ronnie."

"Yes, sir."

We got in the pickup. Granddaddy started it up and drove out onto U.S. Highway 183.

I watched the ranches go flickering by. "Where we going, sir?"

"Austin." He didn't explain any further.

An hour later we pulled into the parking lot of a hobby shop. Granddaddy walked in, trusting me to follow. He was right -- I would have given my front teeth to have a place like this close to home. Models, rockets, electric trains, everything I could ever want.

He marched up to the counter. "I want your biggest space shuttle model, and all the supplies we'll need to build it."

It took me a while to close my mouth.

* * *

For the next few weeks, we built the model on the dining room table and ate in the kitchen. The gantry was almost four feet high, the big orange belly tank three feet tall. I'd never even seen Granddaddy so much as glue two toothpicks together before, but he was real good. He let me do a lot of the work, but showed me how on the hard parts.

Sometimes he'd set his hands on mine, and that was almost like being touched by Momma or Daddy again. Granddaddy had never touched me before except to whip me or to drag me along somewhere.

Working on that model together was almost as good as flying. We even laughed a few times. One night he walked into my room and took the nails out of my window. "I'm trusting you, Ronnie," was all he said.

* * *

When we were almost done, it was time to place the decals on the model.

"No," I said. "Not *Challenger*."

Granddaddy raised his eyebrows. "One of the others?"

"*McAuliffe*. After the teacher."

"I know who she was." He looked at the decal sheet. "They didn't include that one."

"I want it." I felt stubborn suddenly, like fighting.

"All right," he said.

I didn't expect that, no hard words for my backtalk or nothing. Instead Granddaddy got a 00 brush out and the gloss black paint. He just barely tipped the brush into the paint, sighed, and stared at the model. After a few moments, Granddaddy reached over and painted a perfect "M" in four quick strokes.

"Wow," I said.

He smiled at me, the first time I'd seen that since before Momma died. "I studied to be an architect. First thing they teach you is lettering."

I thought about that. "But you're a surveyor."

His smile died. "First there was the war, then your grandmother, then your Momma. I never got to finish college."

I hugged him, hugged him so tight I thought his ribs might crack. Then he finished painting the letters.

* * *

Real early the next morning I slipped on my Keds and stuck the glued-together protractor in my pocket. Then I went and knocked on Granddaddy's door. I needed to show him the most important thing I knew.

"Sir," I whispered real loud. "Wake up, sir."

"What is it, Ronnie?" Through the door, his voice sounded like he'd never been asleep.

"Get dressed and come outside. I want to show you something. It's important, sir."

"Ronnie..." he started to say, his voice a warning. Then I could hear him sigh. "All right, boy."

When he came into the living room, I had the *McAuliffe* cradled in my arms, the empty gantry left behind on the dining table. "Come on, sir," I said.

We walked through the pre-dawn gloom, listening the late-hunting nighthawks argue with the morning's first wrens.

* * *

We stood on top of Chamberlain's hill. The east had that glowing coal color again. The cows were quiet that morning.

"Ronnie," Granddaddy began, but I grabbed his hand and shushed him.

"Take one of the *McAuliffe*'s wings," I said, "and stretch your arms out real far."

"This is wrong, Ronnie."

"Just do it," I said. Tears stood in my eyes. "For me. For Momma."

The model was heavy as we each grabbed one wing. *McAuliffe*'s nose kept dipping down, and I had to twist my wrist back to hold her level. "Now close your eyes and run down the hill," I said to Granddaddy. "And when I tell you to, jump into the sky. Just forget how to fall."

He shook his head, but he closed his eyes.

Carrying our regrets between us, my Granddaddy and I scrambled down the dew-soaked grass, running together at the angle of my dreams.

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