The Moon Looker

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The yellow-green light snaked its way through the damp cypresses, a light that would die soon when the sun disappeared at the foggy edge of the Great Swamp. Somewhere in the stink a bird cried out and died in the jaws of a 'gator. Life quieted down for a moment in a sort of requiem, then rose again, a noisy mass of life—eating, fighting, dying, as they had done unchanged for an eon—as they would for another eon.

A 'coon poked its head out of a bank of Razor grass, sniffing the air, ears moving back and forth. Satisfied, it edged out into the open and moved toward high ground, a half dead fish in its jaws. It stopped at the base of a large tree, attracted by a curious smell. Its attention was broken by a voice, coming nearby. The 'coon spun around and fled to the grass again, fish flopping crazy-like in its jaws.

The drooping branches of a nearby willow parted and a boy walked through, followed by a large red dog. The boy was a tall one, with a mud brown head of hair that hadn’t felt the scissors for a long, long time. He seemed to move in every direction at once, long legs and arms churning. Elbows stuck out of a faded wool hunting shirt. Patches made up most of the material in the overalls he wore. A pair of ancient work shoes covered his feet, tied with small woven grasses and vines in place of the long-rotted shoe strings.

He stopped at the base of the big tree and reached for a rope harness that hung suspended from somewhere high in the limbs above. “Come on here, Jamie. Time for dinner.” The dog trotted up to him and obediently stood still while the boy trussed him up in the rope. “Now you just hol’ on,
boy, and I'll have you right up." He gave the dog an affectionate scratch behind the ears and then started up the slats nailed to the tree. The slats ended when he reached the first limb, and he swung himself awkwardly onto it. He quickly pulled himself up from limb to limb until he reached the tree house wedged into the main crotch of the tree.

Bracing himself on the platform, one foot against a limb, he reached for the rope and began to haul up Jamie. With long movements the dog moved upward through the shaft cleared for it long ago by the boy. The dog appeared unconcerned. He'd made the trip many times. The boy eased the dog onto the platform and loosened the harness from him. Jamie stepped out of it, and shook himself quickly. "There you are, fella. Home again."

The folks in the swamp town called him the Moon Looker. His real name was Jeremiah, a good Christian name his mother had given him. His mother was dead now. He never knew his father. Some said no one new for sure just who his father was. But that was no concern to Jeremiah. He used to live in the swamp town with his mother, but when she died he didn't take to the way people made fun of him, how he looked and acted. He especially didn't like the way they made fun of his moon.

Jeremiah had gone to a prayer meeting one evening at the edge of the Great Swamp. A preacher from way out in the world had told the people gathered around the fire about the magic of the moon. "You watch that ol' moon," he had sworn, "and you can do glorious things. But you've got to believe." Some had laughed at the old man but Jeremiah believed him. The man had sworn it on the Good Book and that made it true. His mother had told him that. Jeremiah had stayed over after the sermon and talked a long time to the old man, who told him wonderful stories of how he had seen the world and been to other worlds, too, all by believing.

Jeremiah believed. The moon had become his friend, too. Every night when it was out, he would climb to the highest part of the great tree and watch the glowing body
make its way slowly across the heavens. This wasn't something that was rock, thousands of miles away. It was alive. Jeremiah talked to it, told it his hopes, his fears. And one night it talked back to him. He told the people in the swamp town about his talks, but they laughed at him. They called him the Moon Looker. "Here comes the crazy Moon Looker," the children would yell, when Jeremiah came into town once a week to trade his skins.

But the Moon Looker didn't pay them any heed. He knew.

"Come on, Jamie," he would say to the red dog. "Let's get back home before it's dark. I've got a lot to tell our friend tonight." Their talks had been longer and longer each time. The white sphere had told him how wonderful it was to be so high in the heavens. You could see the whole big world, it told him. "I wish I could see what you can," Jeremiah had sighed. You can, it had answered, if you believe in me. "But I do," the Moon Looker had protested. "I believe with all my soul." Then come up to me, said the smiling white ball. Jeremiah had tried. He'd close his eyes and wish and wish. The sweat would cover his body and his clothes would soak through. But he never moved.

Then one night, the friend urged him extra hard, and Jeremiah closed his eyes and wished and sweat, until his muscles ached. And he moved. He knew he did. He felt himself rise off the limb. It must have been at least a foot before his will broke and he settled back down on the limb. He slept little that night. In the morning, he rushed into the swamp town to tell all the unbelievers what his friend did for him.

But they laughed at him again, and the people pointed to their heads and twirled their fingers around. Jeremiah traded his skins for some groceries and left the town. He would show them.

He thought about it now, as he affectionately rubbed behind the ears of the big dog. "I'll show them, Jamie," he promised the dog. He went into the small one-room tree hut and fixed something to eat for the two of them. The sun was completely gone beyond the Great Swamp now, and
the night shadows were creeping over all things. The sounds changed as the night creatures took up their watches.

A beam of pale white light crept upon the platform of the hut. "He's coming, Jamie, he's coming," the boy eagerly whispered. The red dog thumped his tail on the boards. Jeremiah finished cleaning up the hollowed saucers of cedar, and stepped out onto the platform. He slipped a rope around the dog's neck and made him lie down. "Now you be a good dog, Jamie, and don't make any noise. Him and me have got a real important talk tonight." The dog looked up at the boy's eager face and softly moved his big tail in understanding.

Jeremiah stepped off the platform onto one of the huge limbs and began his way to the top, reaching far up towards his friend. At the top, he settled into his usual position. "Hello," he said to the smiling face above. They talked at great length about the towns people and how they had laughed at both of them. The friend told him to pay no mind to them. It was his belief that was important. He assured the Moon Looker that there were people just like himself all over the world who were believers. Jeremiah smiled and wished with all his heart to go to his friend. I know what you're thinking, the smiling light told him. I know you believe. Tonight, you come to me. Jeremiah almost lost his balance on the limb when he heard this. At his friend's urging he closed his eyes as before and wished as he had never done before. Nothing happened at first and then he saw, even with his eyes closed, a soft and beautiful arm of stars and sparkling dust come from the heavens and gently wrap about him. He slowly rose from the big tree and drifted gently upwards. Soon he was far above the swamp. He could see the town at the edge, lights flickering like weak imitation stars. They were nothing like the real ones, he thought to himself, looking up into the heavens.

Higher and higher he drifted. His friend smiled at him as the arm of twinkling dust pulled him closer. He was far above the earth now. The Moon Looker stared below him into the darkness and felt a sharp pain of fear in his chest. Believe in me, the friend told him, believe in me and you
can do anything. Jeremiah began to shiver in fear. “I do believe in you, I think.” You must, you must, was the answer. A cold terror crept over and conquered his will. Reason fought with desire. “No, you ain’t real. I can’t do anything I want. I’m scared.” Jeremiah’s voice rose in fear and he clutched for something to hold onto. I’m sorry you don’t believe in me any more, sighed the glowing orb, I’m really sorry. Goodbye. The shimmering arm slowly unwound itself and disappeared into the void once again.

It was four days before a trapper heard the lonely cry of a dog and followed it into the Great Swamp to the base of the huge tree. High above, a cold and hungry dog huddled in a corner of a tree house and cried. Not far from the tree was the Moon Looker. People weren’t rightly sure what had happened to him. The doctor from the swamp town came out and looked him over for a few minutes. It seemed he had fallen from some high place, maybe the big tree. They buried him there at its base and forgot him.

At night, the moonlight falls upon the simple grave. A dog cries softly, and life in the swamp pauses in a silent requiem.


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The Seven Point Mazzogollo

In the uppermost part of the world where all directions are south and the only colors are white and blue, there once lived a polar bear named Mutsanac. He was not a native of this region — indeed, nothing resided this far north — but was, instead, a bear with a mission; a mission to which he had devoted his life thus far and had resolved to continue until success or death came to him.

This quest began far back in his cubhood. From his earliest memories he had felt that he alone was the chosen one — the bear selected by the deity he sought to change the lives of the animals of the Arctic — to relieve, by his discovery, all of their suffering and make their lives and souls