

moon
trees
and
other
orphans

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Black
Lawrence
Press

For Lee,
my first reader, my research partner,
my cheerleader, my travel buddy, my best friend,
and my love.

You rocks my socks.

Contents

Moon Trees	I
Shallowing	13
Pulpo	24
Deformed	26
Clown	36
Elma	48
The Revival	49
Naturallique	60
Snake Oil	73
Ghosts	86
At the Very End	99
Pinched Magnolias	101
El Feo	112
Everything Shining	128
The Plague	141
Acknowledgements	151

Moon Trees

Stute's heels clipped my toes as he rocked back, half in and half out of the doorway to our apartment. He was ten then. I was eighteen. I had my hand on his back, and I could feel how stiff his small, hard muscles turned, as if he was clinching everything. The word "um" cracked out of him, just a splinter of his little voice. Liminal moment. I should have run. I should have left right then. I should have grabbed my little brother and hauled his skinny ass away, taken a train right out of Louisiana. Sometimes at night I whisper it: I should have. I should have. Making my voice the wheels of a train. I had enough money in tips saved that we probably could have just run.

Maybe we could have, anyway.

I didn't need to know what he saw in there. I didn't need to look past the door frame. I knew "Um." I knew that sound, that squeak. I knew it meant we were about to cross the threshold into crazy.

It was not new to me, the world on the other side of that door.

I have known it my whole life. It has been everything.

When I was small, my mother would sometimes tuck me into her lap and tell me how Stuart Roosa flew an unborn forest round and round the moon in 1971 and then sprinkled the earth with it. Her voice was always earnest, every sentence a sacred truth. I can tell you word for word the story of my mother finding one of those seeds and hiding it in a locket. I can tell you how one day, when she was very lonely, she gobbled that seed

up to make me. When I was a child, I did not fall asleep to Cinderella's broom strokes and ballroom dancing. Instead, my mother told me of how her fish-white belly, iridescent with life, grew heavy and cratered with my weight. I branched out inside of her, and my fetal limbs, long and searching, pierced her brain and left her addled.

That is her myth.

She has paranoid schizophrenia, and when she misses her medication (which helps only a little anyway), she wears an honest to goodness tin foil hat. I do not know when she stopped taking it this time. I hadn't been counting the pills like I should have.

Stute was ever hopeful, even clinched like that in the doorway. "Momma?" he said. He was black hair and black eyes and hope, not a bit of him matching either our mother or me. I knew his father, and I wonder how such a kind man could have left his baby boy with the two of us. How, as he'd fled our mother's madness, he hadn't taken the child, hadn't clutched the baby to his chest, shielded him from what he must have known the future held. But he did leave, taking nothing with him, disappearing before the crib was even put together.

"Momma?" Stute said again.

It's amazing how long you can stand by an open door and not look in. Hours, days, years. Ten-year-old Stute growing old as we stood there, my hand on his shoulder now, his voice tumbling around in that government-funded apartment, rolling around in our mother's silence. But he stepped forward and then my hand wasn't so much holding him as being held by his movement. He was pulling me. We were in. No turning back.

I looked around, and the tendons holding my jaw tightened. I had no idea that Saran Wrap came in colors—pink and blue and minty green, spring pastels. Mother had glued every hue to every wall, and she stood shaking in the center of her kaleidoscope, the covered windows streaming in cathedral colored light.

I didn't realize she was crying right away. Not until Stute was tangled around her, hugging her and whispering the same nothings I'd whispered to him when he was a baby, hungry and scared.

I think I said, “What?” Something useful like that.

She knotted her hands in our boy’s curls; “I can’t reach,” she said. “I just can’t do it.”

My gaze followed hers. The ceiling was empty, normal. Patched and white, it was stained orange in places from water damage, a spider web crack pulling at the edges near the corner. Blessedly normal.

I wondered if finding her a ladder, stealing or borrowing one from the front office, would make our lives better or worse. I wondered how she’d bought so much Saran, so much paste, if she’d paid with the money I kept in a drawer in my room. I shook my head as Stute rubbed her stomach, his small gold hand tracing a moon into her belly.

“Essie. Essie, baby,” she called to me.

But I stopped listening, leaving the two of them in that glimmery Easter egg, and walked to my room.

“Essie,” she kept saying, “Essie, Essie,” the climbing wail that was my name finally getting lost in the crackle of the Violent Femmes. The music beat its way out of the shell of a stereo I’d found on a curb while getting high with a boy who lived in the dorms at LSU. When I turned it up, the speaker got tinny and rattled and the sound never got loud enough for a neighbor to complain, never really satisfied that way, but I turned anyway, clicking the knob all the way around. Eventually, Stute followed me and curled himself up at the foot of my bed. I didn’t bother trying to carry him to his own, even once his soft, baby snores mixed with the music.

She is right about Roosa. I looked him up. He was a smoke jumper and an astronaut and was the man who visited the moon with a pack full of seeds.

My myth:

I am a normal girl. I have a father, somewhere. I have a mother I will not have to commit. I will not have to go to the coroner’s office and sign paperwork. I will not have to apologize when she bites the paramedics. I will not know that shock therapy is the therapy of last resort. I will not learn about the paralytic she will be given to stop her body from

convulsing, from shaking itself apart. I will not know that she will sleep through it, may lose her memory, may become nauseous, may vomit, may hate me, may ache, may not get any better.

I will only know the things other girls know. What is on television tonight. What is at the movies. What dancing at prom feels like. I am normal. I am not a moon tree.

Of course, none of that is really true, either.

One of Roosa's moon trees was planted in New Orleans, right along the River Walk. A Loblolly Pine. Her trunk is rough, and when my friends climb into Cilia's Toyota to leave Baton Rouge behind, I always beg for a space so I can lay my hands against the Loblolly's scratchy surface while the others prowl the Quarter. Sometimes I sit there all night, drinking a forty out of a paper bag and wondering what it'd be like to disappear amongst the New Orleans homeless, the sourness of the Gulf washing over me, imagine myself baptized in the stink of it, holy there.

Once, a couple of years before Stute was born, my mother brought me to the aquarium, and after we watched the fish and had beignets, she took me to see the Loblolly. She never lowered her voice as she explained that we were sisters, me and this tree, that I was as hard inside as her trunk, which was good, I'd need it. I was probably about six at the time.

"It's the bark that will save you," she said, and I imagined that meant something and tried to find the hardness at my center, pressing my fingers into the soft flesh of my belly every night.

It wasn't long after the plastic wrap incident that our mother started breaking completely apart.

"Get out of my head, bitch," she screamed one night after I asked what she wanted for dinner. "Get your god-damned tendrils outta my brain."

Stute just watched her, big black eyes blinking.

I opened a can of ravioli, wondering what it would be like to eat brand name food, Chef Boyardee instead of Wal-Mart's Great Value. I was sick of her screaming, sick of working to feed us all, sick to death of her shit. "So, noodles?" I said.

I'd overheard her singing "Spaghetti is ready, baby, spaghetti is ready" to the mirror earlier that day and had decided to be cruel. Decided to make her think I was in fact reading her thoughts. I'd looked in the cabinet for SpaghettiOs, found only the ravioli. Close enough.

"Bitch!" She started sobbing.

I felt guilty then, but the truth was that it didn't matter what I said; she believed what she believed with or without evidence. I was a ghost to her, incorporeal, not really there at all.

"You like ravioli." I poured the can into a pot. "Stute, grab some bread." He pulled himself up off the floor where he'd been doing homework. The Saran Wrap was now on the carpet too, nailed and tacked and even stapled in spots. It stuck to his thighs as he moved. I watched her watch it shift and pull under him, watched her hands jump around, little nervous doves, as Stute left her floor disheveled, parts of the brown carpet showing through.

"Toast," I said to him, watching her carefully.

"I know what you two are doing," she said.

It was the first time she'd included Stute in her delusions, and I knew that he'd start coming to Pizza Hut with me weekend mornings. He could roll silverware while I waited tables.

"I don't think she wants ravioli," Stute said, the sweet of his voice like nothing I've ever had.

"But we do."

"Yes, we do," he said, grinning at the toaster, our mother's tantrum suddenly a million miles away.

That night, I shook him awake, laid a pair of blue swim trunks across his frame, and rubbed sleep from his cheeks. "The beast is down," was all I said.

Stute rarely asked questions, was the sort of kid that just watched everything. After dinner he'd watched our mother cut her hair in jagged strokes, and I'd watched him growing ever older under her shadow.

"Dress," I said.

He put on the too-large Goodwill trunks without a word, as if dressing for school or shopping, as if, even pulling on swimwear at midnight, we were normal.

"I want to show you something." I hoped he'd ask me what, but he didn't.

Mother was asleep on the couch, the empty bottle that helped her settle down nearby, as good as a teddy bear. She looked small, as if part of her body had lost itself in the scratchy plaid pillows. Stute and I each had our own rooms, and I always hoped her sleeping on the couch was an act of love and not paranoia, hoped she was being generous giving us the only bedrooms and wasn't just afraid of our rooms' small, dark corners.

The bottle of cheap vodka told us there was no need to tiptoe, and, anyway, silence was a lost cause with the stick of plastic popping with each step, so we moved quickly instead of quietly, each of us wearing nothing but used, ill-fitting bathing suits.

"Breathe deep, kiddo," I said once we were outside, and he rewarded me with a noisy swoosh of exhale. Car exhaust and jasmine, the smells of Baton Rouge, filled our lungs.

"Once upon a time," I said, pointing to the full, autumn moon. In Stute's story, we were both moon trees. I explained that we'd fallen to earth as something more than seeds, best friends, angels, had become separated in the atmosphere, grown legs instead of roots so we could always find each other.

I talked as we walked, Stute's hand sweating in mine.

He laughed at the idea of it all. "That's silly," he said, the lights of passing cars making his face less serious, more childlike. "If I'd been to the moon, I'd remember. I have an excellent memory, Ms. Becca says so."

"It's just a story," I said, sounding empty. I wondered what we looked like to the people on the road, decided we should cut through the neighborhoods where there'd be fewer cars. Mosquitoes swarmed us,

and I wished I'd thought to spray him. "You sure like school, don't you?" I shook my head, my brother, so alien to me.

"It's good. I'm good at it." He'd skipped fifth grade and was making As in sixth. I, on the other hand, had dropped out about halfway through ninth grade. The notes my teachers sent home always said I wasn't living up to my potential, but nobody read them except me, and it was just easier one day not to go back, not to look at their disappointed faces, to get high in the park instead. Now, I made sure to read all of Stute's notes, to sign our mother's name for him. I wondered if he'd go to LSU one day.

"You can climb a tree, right?" We were almost there.

"I'm not a baby."

"Good." I pulled him into the sort-of woods that lined a nearby apartment complex, the scraggly trees planted in neat rows alongside the buildings making it seem more upscale than our own. "Around this way," I whispered. We hit a wooden fence, scrambled up a tree and then over it.

On the other side was a small swimming pool, the sort that was lit from within. A faded blue sunflower made of cracked tiles decorated the bottom. Stute clapped, and I imagined his toddler self, always laughing. And then his thin body was fracturing the water's surface, and as he rippled beneath it, I thought of crystal balls, the bright scarves of the fortunetellers in the Quarter, imagined I was seeing some future version of him tumbling about in the mist of precognition. A happy kid.

To escape the mosquitoes, I joined him. The water, warm as a bath, was still cooler than the night, and so I watched him swim, my head ducked under, holding my breath and ignoring the sting of chlorine. I wondered what it would take for us to live in a place like this, what it would take for Stute to swim all the time.

There was a tap on my head, and a cop stood looking down at me.

"Essie," he said.

When your mom is a schizophrenic and you're a truant, the local cops are rarely strangers. Stute swam on, oblivious. "Officer," I said back, unable to remember his name, embarrassed that he had mine.

"What are y'all doing here?"

I thought about saying “swimming” but had learned long ago not to be smart, that this cop was okay, sympathetic. He’d seen our mother at her worst, had even pulled her screeching off of the back of the man at the gas station when she decided that he was using the security cameras to watch her bathe, the two miles between the Circle K and the apartment an irrelevant fact.

I just shrugged.

He sat down on a nearby lawn chair, wiped the sweat off his face. “Come on out. Let’s talk.”

I decided to leave Stute flipping under the water. “How’d you know we were here?”

“Well, I didn’t exactly know it was you two, but a guy called, said he saw a couple of kids in bathing suits skulking around nearby. It wasn’t hard to figure where to look.”

“I’m no kid,” I said, wondering if he’d arrest us.

“How old are you, now?”

“Eighteen.”

“Yeah.” He sighed. “Get your brother. Y’all can’t exactly stay here.”

“Are we going to jail?”

He just shook his head. “Get Stuart.” He moved his arm, the motion vague. “Come on, I ain’t got all night.”

He drove us home, sent Stute into the apartment and kept me in the car. “How bad?”

“It’s fine. We’re fine.” I prayed he wouldn’t come inside, wouldn’t see.

He handed me a card. “Call if she gets . . . if you need anything. And remember, you have a record, your brother doesn’t need one too.” He smiled at me. “Stay the fuck out of trouble, okay?”

“Yeah.” I had no pockets for the card, kept it tight in my hand. “Sorry about the seats,” I said, looking at the puddles we’d left.

The thing about the Loblolly Pine on the River Walk is that without the plaque, you’d never know it was special. There really isn’t anything astonishing about the moon trees. As a matter of fact, some of them are

lost. No one bothered to keep track of where they'd been planted, had never even made the plaques. They grew at standard rates, were blown over by winds, were swallowed by forest fires, dropped acorns, held tree houses, got taller, wider, died.

They looked exactly like everything else.

Our mother was beautiful—when she showered, combed her hair.

She forgot to eat, or thought meals were poisoned, or just refused, and so stayed fashionably thin, looked lovely in a sundress, good light, made a good impression. People like pretty. Unless she was in a full-blown break, outsiders rarely saw the depth of her disease. At worst they thought she was odd, quirky, antisocial.

Sometimes, when the meds were just right, the rare Goldilocks cocktail leaving her not too hot, not too cold, she was the most fun you could imagine, making forts out of sheets and pillows. Covering the whole house with those forts, just for you. Letting you be the princess with a sword, a dragon killer, and then squealing right along with you as you chased her from fort to fort.

I think maybe it was like that sometimes. Mostly it wasn't.

So she screams a lot, strangers seemed to say, looking at us with slit eyes, but, hey, she wasn't so much a bad mother as one you wouldn't want, right? In all of our years of crazy, no one ever checked on us, and if they had, I would have told them everything was all right.

We were fine, normal, had no need for a plaque.

So I put the cop card away. Didn't even bother to read his name.

After ravioli night, she decided everything was rotten, or poisoned, or filled with mind control bugs. So I bought her Slim Fast shakes. The way they were sealed tight, the strangely thick walls of the cans, seemed to comfort her. The girls at my school had practically lived off them, so I figured she'd be fine, get her nutrients.

"Don't touch," she screamed as I unloaded a bag of groceries. We didn't have a car and lugging Slim Fast and peanut butter and canned soup in the heat had left me with a headache. I needed to escape.

“You unload the fucking bags then,” I said, and she was crying again. Her blonde hair, so dirty it had begun to look brown, was matted in places. I imagined gathering her up and running a bath, telling her to close her eyes so I could soap her hair. I knew it would soothe her, the running water, the smell of Ivory soap, but instead I walked out of the apartment. Found a guy I knew, stayed away until dusk.

When I finally did go home, I could hear Stute crying as I opened the door, and the taste of bile suddenly mixed with the sweet spice of the cloves the boy’d smoked while we fucked. “Baby?”

Stute wasn’t in the living room, but she was—just sort of wandering in the dark, the space too small for her to do more than pace a figure eight, and I suddenly thought of the rabid dog in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

“Stute?”

I found him under my bed, hysterical and hiccupping, shaking so hard I wondered if it hurt. I checked his golden skin for marks, turning his arms, his legs, lifting his shirt, pulling and tugging so I could see every bit, as if that would absolve me.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” I said, too afraid to ask, and seeing blood on his foot, I began to shake too, finding his frequency, matching it. But there was no cut, and soon I was pulling myself free of him, running to the living room, flipping on lights.

The scissors were still in her hand, and I wondered how I could have missed them on the way in. They glinted so. “Mother?”

“Why do you all hate me?” she said, and when she turned I could see her face was bleeding, her arms, her hands, all bloody.

“No.”

“I can’t get you out, Essie.” she said, shrugging. “I mean, I tried.” She sounded so tired. “But, I can still feel you growing in me.”

The wounds seemed small, as if she had been nipped and nipped by a rat, and I understood suddenly that I was a thing to be cut out, excised. That Stute had had to watch her with those scissors, had had to put his hands up to try and stop her.

"I'm sorry," I said moving toward her carefully, but the scissors were limp in her hand. She had given up.

I looked at Stute in the doorway. He was small for ten, had never grown right in our shadows.

I told him everything would be all right, told him to go borrow a neighbor's phone.

Later the cop helped with her paperwork.

When I was little, I would imagine that Roosa was my father, that my mother's story had some truth to it. I searched pictures of him for similarities, wondered if my hair was maybe a little red, if the size of my ears matched his.

There was no hidden message, though, no mysterious truths. No father there.

But I had that, that dream, that escape, that idea. I had Roosa. Stute just had me. And Momma.

When he was born, the doctors made sure she had antipsychotics pumping through her veins constantly, and she loved Stute so very much that she complied. She took the pills and held the baby. But she still wasn't good with being all there, and so I learned quickly to cradle his neck so his heavy head would not bounce, to test the heat of the formula on my wrist.

And he revolved around her, his little hands touching her always, opening and closing, so that I imagined he could catch her that way, that his grasping could keep her fluttering mind still, sane for both of us.

And when she would retreat, the copper flecks in his dark eyes would fall on me, and his little hands seemed to grow around mine, rooting me there with him.

The cop says that if she does not get better, if she does not *respond to the treatment*, it is unlikely the state will give me custody of Stute.

And I wonder if that would be better.

There are hundreds of moon trees.

Hundreds.

But the thing is, even though we lost some, once upon a time everybody wanted one.

Even the emperor of Japan adopted a moon tree.

They were that loved.