

COLD MOON

an original short story by RachelCaine

Outside my window, the moon rides a tide of mist. It is the color of pearl, that moon, full and lustrous, nestled in the gauzy breath of the sea.

That moon knows my name.

Some days I woke to the sound of my mother screaming, but not that day. I stayed very still in my bed and listened to the chirping of birds in the world beyond the window. Dust motes circled, lazy and golden, and I waited for the sound of doors slamming, footsteps creaking, voices murmuring. I wanted to throw off the clinging warmth of the covers, clatter downstairs, bother Cook for a hot pastry fresh from the oven, but there was no smell of food in that quiet, waiting house.

The sun crept slowly over the floor like a cat stalking a mouse.

Don't be a baby, I told myself at length. *They'll all be waiting for you. Mother will be so annoyed.*

It was the thought of Mother that at last drove me from the bed. I dressed carefully, a clean white dress with a wide blue ribbon, short rolled stockings, a pair of shiny black shoes.

The sound of my footsteps on the wood was like a stranger knocking.

The hall remained shadowed, no windows to let in the sun, but as I descended the stairs I saw that the curtains in the drawing room were open. The day spilled like satin over a hunchbacked chair and a long scarlet divan. Father was usually there, but today the door was open and the room deserted. I paused there, breathing in the comforting smell of his tobacco and old leather boots, and then continued down the hall.

Someone had picked fresh roses from the garden; they lay haphazardly on the hall table, one precarious on the edge, another fallen in a burst of red. The smell clung to me as I turned toward the dining room, where breakfast should have been waiting. In all the time I could remember, breakfast had *always* been upon the sideboard in silver trays, the edges fogged with steam.

It was empty and waiting, and smelled of nothing but dust.

In the hall, a grandfather clock ticked away minutes and, as I counted my breaths, chimed eight o'clock. I did not want to push open the swinging door to the kitchen. I wanted to run back up the heavy curving stairs to my room, throw myself beneath the coverlets, cry for someone to come reassure me. Papa would come. Even Mama.

I am too old to be a baby, I told myself. I would go forward and I would push open the kitchen door, walk into silence, and see what was to be seen. I would do that.

And so I did.

That is the last I remember of that morning; the heavy wood cool under my palms, the sigh the door gave

as it opened, the dazzle of light behind.

That is the last I remember.

The moon floats higher and higher; the mist cannot hold it. As it rises, it tangles in the branches of the tree opposite my window. Stars glimmer like tears around it, and I wonder if I should not go outside and shake the tree, shake the moon free so that it can soar again.

Bradford House was a quiet place, and in time I became happy there; I studied hard, and did well on my tests. My teachers found me a studious, serious child, given to moodiness and strange fancies. Aunt Faith came often to visit, offering me packages of nuts and fruits and candies, packages of teas and biscuits.

She came on the day of my sixteenth birthday, bringing me a pretty shawl of oriental silk, a tea set of the finest delicate porcelain, and a letter. She wasn't aware that she had brought me the letter; it fell from the tea set box as I carried it to my room. A plain envelope, with my name in an ornate, careful hand.

The violet-scented card within read, *Happy Birthday, my dearest child.*

The sight made me weak in the knees, and I sat down where I was on the steps, my head ringing, spots dancing before my eyes. As I reached blindly for support, I overset the box next to me; it tumbled down, broke open and spilled fragments of porcelain like teeth out over the polished floor.

There was not one cup unbroken.

It was that night, at long last, that the moon called me with a rush of blood that soaked my gown and the sheets and made the matrons *sk* at the mess.

I did not care. I washed myself and arranged the rags, sat in the window and looked out on the porcelain stillness, and thought, *Now I shall go home.*

They don't like me to watch the moon; it brings on strange fancies, or so Doctor Bannerman says. I think he is even odder than his friend HerrDoktor Freud, the Viennese man who came to talk to me in the garden last month. Doktor Freud seemed to me a grave, kind man, with eyes like the void between stars. Doctor Bannerman was most upset with his friend for speaking with me; I think Freud must have done it against his wishes, possibly even in the face of direct orders. I wonder what a Viennese doctor would smell like, if I put my nose close to him. Cinnamon, I imagine, and tobacco, and perhaps a fine whiskey. I can remember these things, if I try; they come to me like ghosts, drifting through the silence. As I watch the moon, I think of cinnamon and nutmeg and ginger, and I imagine, for a time, that I am home eating pastries and sitting on the cold white steps outside the kitchen, the moon flying like a ghostly ship.

I remember the taste of those pastries so vividly that I cry.

I left the school in the company of a pinch-faced biddy unaptly named Purdy; she had family near London, and would see me safely to Aunt Faith's before she went on her way. Young ladies of sixteen were not allowed to ride alone on the railway, to rub shoulders with tradesmen and low company. My allowance was enough to travel first class, and I graciously allowed Purdy to share the opulence of a sleeping car.

I killed her in the night with a hatpin through her ear. I raised a terrible hue and cry when I discovered

her in the morning, her mouth agape, her eyes rolled back to look forever into darkness. I found rescued from distress by a gentleman named Ballard, a young man of kind and sunny disposition with the most remarkable dimples. He was, he said, traveling to London on his father's business, but he would be most happy to see me home. I felt nothing for him. He could never know that feeling of *belonging* to the vast silent sea of women, sharing tides and phases. He was as alien to me as insects grubbing in the dirt.

Dear Ballard gave me kisses sweet as summer, sun to my moon, heat to my chill. I suppose I should have killed him. He slipped into my tides, and should drown as unlucky sailors do, at the mercy of moon and sea. I went to the window and looked, looked and looked and looked, but the pearl of night was hidden behind clouds, its whisper muted, its brilliance dimmed.

I bled that night, long threads of darkness down my thighs.

I left the train before Mr Ballard woke to claim me for the sun. I slipped away into fog and phantoms, moon and mist. I left him the sweetest of all gifts, the sheets stained with blood as dark as the heart of a rose.

The moon shakes free of its captor, rises like a frozen fire. The stars pale in her wake. I have always wondered that so many say they see a man's face; to me there is clearly a woman, her head turned a little to regard me, a deathless smile on her lips. She consumes stars, summons us to her side with a pull stronger than flesh.

The tide of blood flows strong toward her, rising like the lusting sea.

I reach out my hand, past bars of chilly steel, and touch the face of eternity.

The manor was empty, the windows blinded by shattered glass. Rats made residence in Father's study, amid the gnawed ruin of books. Thieves had carried away the furniture, the paintings, elegant vases and silver trays. No grandfather clock ticked away minutes; the house had ceased to count time. Like poor Miss Purdy, it had turned eyes into its own darkness.

Upstairs I found that my room had not been spared. Rats squirmed in the dry ribs of the mattress, living busy rat lives that had nothing to do with me. I let them be and descended the dusty, hollow stairs, into the heart of the house.

The table was gone, the floor scarred by careless thieves. I spied the tailing of a candle in the corner, next to a long-dried clump of human droppings. Tramps had enjoyed my hospitality. I wondered if they had slept here, and if they did, if they heard tides echoing in their heartbeats, felt phantom aches in their dark centers. I remembered Mother, her breath warm on my ear, saying, *I have always loved that color on you.*

The kitchen door remained as it had been, closed like a stubborn mouth. I set my hands to it and heard the hinges sigh a long, anguished protest.

The kitchen.

No rats came here, no tramps. The stove remained, a black squat idol in its sacrificial niche.

Blood lay in a rich black stain. The heart of it was thickly red, the edges turning dark like a

winter-burned rose. I sank to my knees beside it and pressed my hands deep into its sticky, cool center.

I lifted my bloodied fingers to my lips and sucked at them as I would a wound, to take away the sting.

Mama—

In the doorway, a little girl with long blonde hair who might have been me, and might not, her mouth open in a silent scream, shaped the word.

Mama—

We shall be women together Mama had told me, brushing my hair, brushing and brushing until it shone like sunlight.

Mama, don't—

"Only daughters." The voice came from behind me, and the sunlight through the windows turned to ice. I tasted cold copper.

Hands as chill as shadow rested on my shoulders. She pressed herself to my back. I saw her reflection in the blood, and she was pale and beautiful, the queen of night.

The liquid rippled. In that reflection something lay stillborn, something pallid and quiet, and I remembered the sigh of the kitchen door opening, eyes staring, so many eyes, Cook's, Father's, Mama with her bloodstained lips and hands and the small thing in her hands—

I have only daughters, she had said.

Father had named him Andrew.

"Only daughters," Mama said soothingly, and stroked my face with wetness.

I put my back to the stone wall and hugged my knees to my chest, and for a while we were a family again, a small, quiet family of ghosts and shadows.

That was how they found me, the next day. In the kitchen, rocking, in the room where we had all died.

HerrDoktor Freud cannot take me back to that place. I have stepped over the threshold into the dark mysteries of women, and moons, and blood. He tries to ask questions, but the words are noise, sea-tides rising and falling.

Sometimes he tells me stories, of Medea and her children, of Maenads running like a pack of wolves. He tells me that a man caught so would be destroyed.

From time to time, I think about Father.

I askDoktor Freud if I might go to the garden and sit in the moonlight, but he never allows it. He is careful, you see, even now.

But mere doctors can't cage the moon, and its secrets are written in my flesh.

I clasp my hands over my swollen stomach.

Only daughters, Mama says. *You will have only daughters.*

The moon will see to it.

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