Max knocked lightly on Celia's door. When there was no answer he opened it enough to poke his head in. She was lying on her back in bed, dressed as if she were going to church and not to see a blood moon in the middle of the night, eyes closed and arms crossed over her chest. He crept in and nudged her shoulder.

Celia's eyelids fluttered open. "I'm awake," she said. She swung her legs around and sat up. "What time is it?"

"Time to get going, sweetheart. These things wait for no one."

"Alright, I'm coming, Mr. Max." She put on her glasses and her grey wool coat and slung a voluminous black handbag from the crook of her elbow.

"I'm surprised you're not crippled from the weight of that thing. What have you got in there, anyway?" Max narrowed his eyes. "You didn't kill Tala and stuff her body in there, did you?"

Celia sniffed. "I didn't kill nobody"—she shot Max a look—"yet," she said, smiling, rocking her handbag with doomsday purpose.

"Besides, Tala's a sweetie. Don't many people care about old people like she do." She took off her glasses and began cleaning the fat lenses with a handkerchief.

"You're right, you're right." Max had a soft spot for Tala. A lovely woman, one of the nicest he'd ever met. Tiny, though. So concentrated. Sharp, too. She had to be to run such a big house. It tickled him that she spoke perfect English, with no trace of a Filipino
accent. “But she’s a sweetie we have to be careful not to wake.” Tala was also fiercely protective.

Celia slid her glasses back on and eyed Max. His skinny frame swam in the Herringbone tweed jacket he wore. The rest of his clothes—shirt collar cinched by a bright green bowtie; khakis snuggled tight at the waist by an alligator belt, the remainder lolling to the side; hooligan hat wedged on his head—seemed to be hanging on for dear life. She wondered why she’d taken to the old coot, but taken to him she had. “Oh, I can be quiet, Mr. Max,” she said, winking. “Don’t worry about me.”

Max glanced at his watch. “We’d better get a move on. Chop chop.” He rolled up the blanket on Celia’s bed and threw it over his shoulder.

“I’ll chop chop you in a minute you don’t stop rushing me.”

While Max disarmed the alarm in the entry way, Celia kept watch at the foot of the stairs for any sign of Tala. “How you know that alarm code, Mr. Max?”

“People say all sorts of things within earshot of the old and feeble.”

“Huh. Sound like eavesdropping to me.”

Max shrugged. “However you’d like to slice it.” He punched in the code and the alarm chirped approvingly. His face lit up as if he had just performed a miracle. Celia shook her head.

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The early October air was cool but comfortable, the breeze nothing more than playful. Celia plodded along, second-guessing the coat and the purse. Max stepped lightly, resisting the urge to walk ahead of her. He checked his pockets: cigarettes in one, inhaler in the other.
“Taxi be nice right about now,” Celia said. “Don’t know what I was thinking, walking around the neighborhood in the middle of the night to see a dum moon. What do I care about a moon? If I seen one, I seen a million of ‘em.” She stopped walking for a moment, wiped her brow with a handkerchief. “Sorry. It’s my knees talking. You know you getting old, Mr. Max, when half the time you complaining and the other half you apologizing.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask you. Why the mister, sister? No one else gets that treatment.”

Celia linked her arm in his and they continued walking. “Can’t say. That word just seem to pull your name up out of my throat, like a horse pull a carriage. They just go together.”

“Well, how about we leave the horse in the barn tonight? Or in your purse. I think it’ll fit.”

Celia smiled and concentrated on putting one flattened arch in front of the other.

They passed under rugged cottonwoods and slender aspens, their leaves fluttering like wings, as if they, too, were headed somewhere. There was a barely-contained liveliness to the quiet—the world, having been shushed, waiting for the slightest provocation. The air was sweet with compost and decaying leaves.

They turned down a greenbelt that ran through the neighborhood; the path sloped gently down in an inviting manner and eventually deposited them on an expanse of grass, where the ambient light and the cooler air pooled. They sat on a bench next to a swing-set cushioned in sand. Celia toed off her shoes and massaged her feet. Max puffed on his inhaler and dragged a sleeve across his forehead.
Celia looked up, tried to find the moon. "Where is it?" she said.
Max got up and turned slowly around. "Looks like we've got a little cloud cover."

They spread the blanket out on the grass and situated themselves, waiting quietly, while the clouds slid glacially across the sky, eventually revealing a darkish, molten moon high in the southern sky, its shadowy spots shifting as if in a heat haze.

"It's darker than I expected, but still..."
"Seem like it's about ready to burst."

Max lit a cigarette and lay back on his elbows. Celia snatched the cigarette from him; he thought she might flick it away, but instead she brought it to her lips and inhaled and then tucked it gently back between his fingers.

"There's something just a little...ominous about this moon," Max said. "Don't you think?"

Celia arched an eyebrow.

"It means—"

"I know what ominous mean, mister smarty pants."

Max sat up. "Of course you do," he said, scapegoating his cigarette for the insensitive remark by flicking it into the grass. "I'm sorry, I'm such an idiot."

Celia got up, her knees popping, and retrieved the nearly lifeless cigarette. She resuscitated it with a few heroic breaths, waving Max's apology and the shroud of smoke away. She tilted her head sideways at the moon. "Can't say it look threatening to me"—she gave Max a so-there look—"but I can feel it pulling on me. Maybe it do bear keeping an eye on."
“You might have something there,” Max said. “It’s as close to the earth now as it ever gets. Hard to resist that kind of draw.”

Celia sat down heavily and  rummaged in her handbag, her arm disappearing up to her elbow and reappearing holding a largish bottle of wine. “Maybe now’d be a good time for this.” She winked at Max again. “Now, don’t get any ideas, honey. This is just for wetting our whistles a little.” A second foray into her bag produced two clear plastic cups.

“Celia, sweetheart,” Max said, shaking his head, “you are a mystery as glorious as that bloody moon.”

Max uncorked the wine with his Swiss army knife and did the honors. They raised their cups to the moon.

“Here’s to the wound,” Max toasted.

Celia cocked her head. “To what?”

“The wound is where the light enters you,” he clarified. Rumi’s words had always been a comfort to him, ever since he’d stumbled upon them in college, but he was just as surprised as Celia to hear himself lift them at the moon in the form of a salutation. Thirteenth century poets should be accorded a more graceful vehicle for their words, and yet he felt they hit their mark—the moon did seem to be bleeding. Its misery warmed Max and brought him hope, as his own suffering often did.

Celia nodded. “It’s a nice thought, Mr. Max.”

Max cleared his throat.

“Okay, then. It’s a nice thought...Max. That better?”

“Much.”

They sipped their wine, looking somewhat askance at the moon. Celia excavated a box of water table crackers from her handbag.
“What, no cheese?” Max quipped.

They smoked quietly, a single ember volleying between them. Celia couldn’t remember the last time she got drunk. Was she drunk? Her face felt funny, as if it might slide off. Her blood sugar was probably through the roof. The hell with it, she thought.

It was when the blood started to drain from the moon, revealing a pale fingernail, and the night was infused with just the right amount of wine, that the words started to flow from Celia. “I was married to a good man once,” she said. “Long, long time ago. Quiet man name of Thomas, hardly spoke a word. Worked for my uncle in the hauling business. Used to be my daddy’s until the cancer done him in. Mama started hitting the bottle hard after that and my uncle, he had to take care of us. Mama said be a good girl and mind him, so... I did.” Celia looked up and spoke to the moon. “It wasn’t so bad, and he was nice to me after. Time kinda lost its grip on me after that, went on without me sometimes. Then it come back and yank me along herky-jerky like. Don’t know how many years gone by until my uncle hired Thomas to help out, and then my uncle and him, they come calling on Sundays after church. After dinner, they took up the chess board and I’d watch. Mostly I’d watch Thomas because he was pretty to look at. Thomas’d look over at me between moves and smile. Oh, how he could smile. But me, I didn’t look away. I sent him a message with my eyes. Beat him. Beat that man sitting across from you with the dirt under his fingernails and the stink of cigars on his breath. He must of never got the message because he always lost. Probably the smart thing, seeing how my uncle was his boss. But I held it against him anyway, a teeny grudge, hocked up and sitting at the back of my throat until the
next time he smiled, and then I'd swallow it. Seem like I swallowed
everything back then, most of it bitter, but you be surprised what you
can get down you mix it with enough of mama's pumpkin cheesecake.
I become popular with the boys about that time. They had certain…
questions. And it seem like I was the only one willing to answer.
There weren't no words for the questions I had. Thing about it was,
my body knew how to ask even if I didn't. Never did get no answers,
but it didn't stop me from asking. Mama was horrified. When she was
sober. She never come right out and called me a whore, but it was
her eyes that done most of the talking. Like when Thomas asked me
to marry him, they said, Finally, maybe he'll make an honest woman
out of her. She never stopped to ask why I wasn't one in the first
place. I almost told Thomas no just to spite her. Don't know what
he saw in me, but I said yes. And then it was just me and Thomas,
keeping house, making out like we knew what we were doing. We
didn't have much, but Thomas, he was generous with everything he
had, even if he was downright stingy with his words. And we learned
from each other. He taught me how to be quiet, and me, I taught him
there was more than one way to have a conversation. Sometimes we
conversated late into the night. Lord, he had lots to say then. No, we
got along good. Problem was, nothing changed. I was still me. Still that
little girl my daddy left behind, bubbling mad underneath it all. Still
wanting to understand something I couldn't put words on and coming
to resent Thomas for not saving me from myself. So I stepped out on
him. With men I barely knew. Tell you what, I was smooth-spoken
in that language. Words took shape and firmed up in my hands. Long
sentences run down the arch of my back. My legs sweet-talked like
nobody's business. And sometimes I see something in their eyes, just when they worked up to the point of no return, like they helpless in the face of what got a hold a them. I think I recognize that look and then it's gone. It give me hope, so I kept at it. I didn't hide my affairs from Thomas, neither, but he always took me back. Never beat me, never yelled, just loved me. And I loved him back the best I could. For a while. Then I'd be mad, like who do he think he is anyway, the Second Coming? He think he better'n me? And off I go again." Celia shook her head. "There come a day when he had all he could take. His patience was wore out. He's standing by the door, bags all packed, and he say, 'Tell me you need me, Cil, and I'll stay.' Practically a speech, coming from him. Well, his kindness, it feel like a slap. So I just turn the other cheek, and I don't see him when he walks out of my life. I can still hear him closing that door, soft and slow, just like he done everything, like he mean it." Her eyes cut away from the moon and lit on Max; he did not look away. She lifted her eyes to the moon again. "Lord, I needed him. And knowing it just become another way for me to kick my own fat behind. Kicked it through a couple more marriages, too. Took me a long time to realize that my foolishness with men was just a way to go back over my steps, see if I could find what I lost after my daddy died and my uncle...stepped in. Every time I lay down with one of them I was asking, 'Where is it? Can I have it back now?' Maybe you say to me, 'Celia, it look to me like it was stole from you, not lost,' and you might be right, but then I think, stole or lost, it's still gone, so what's the difference? Enough guilt to go around for everybody, me included. No, I finally come to understand that it's gone. Gone, gone, gone, and that's that. I breathe it in and out every day. It give me a
measure of peace, a small place where it's quiet inside. I find Thomas in there sometimes.” Celia took her glasses off and cleaned them before looking up at the moon again. “And that's enough.”

In the distance, a car alarm went off, inciting a chorus of barking in a few backyards. After a few moments, both sounds were extinguished, as if by the same hand. Celia cried while Max rubbed her back. He poured himself more wine, wondering how there could be any left, but still it flowed, one cup begetting another.

Max leaned forward, his forearms on his knees. As he had listened to Celia talk, he had the sensation that her words were flowing around him, pulling him along on a tide surging out to sea. Maybe it was the wine, but he felt a little disoriented. He unknotted his bow tie. He wanted a smoke and he needed to pee, but more than that, he needed to talk. “My life…” he began, shaking his head. “Will it shock you, sweetheart, if I tell you I never had much interest in living it?” He lit a cigarette and blew smoke at the moon. “Not that there was anything awful about my childhood. Growing up, I had parents who loved me. We weren’t rich, but I didn’t want for anything. I was a good boy who got decent grades and went to temple on high holy days. Nothing was particularly difficult and nothing bad happened to me. Or to anyone I knew, for that matter.” He shrugged, peaking at the moon with one eye closed. There was more blood yet to be wrung from it. He sighed and continued. “So why couldn’t I find the joy in being and doing like all the other kids? I couldn’t figure out what the big deal was. About life. I just couldn’t feel it, you know? But it was easy enough to do what the other kids were doing, to go with the flow, to do what was expected. So that’s what I did. When other kids cried, I cried. When they got
excited, I did, too. I came to believe I actually felt the way they did. And so it went throughout my childhood. As for opinions, I didn't care enough one way or another, so my take on any issue was informed by the person I happened to be talking to. People thought I was a great listener because I nodded my head and told them they were absolutely right to feel the way they did. They said, go to college, Max, study psychology, you could help people. They were so passionate about it. So, I wore their passion like a cloak, and soon enough I was college bound. Even though I didn't have the slightest passion for anything. It was a bit of a shock being around all those vibrant students, with huge emotions that could knock you around like a big lab wagging its tail in a room full of knick-knacks. They talked about what they wanted to do with their lives as if it would make a difference. I didn't relate to any of it, but I pretended I did. It was exhausting, doing that on such a big scale, and I was afraid someone would be able to see inside me, see how hollow I was. And then I met a girl from my Abnormal Psych class who did just that. She didn't come to class very often and one day out of the blue she asked me if she could copy my notes. I affected what I thought was just the right amount of indignation. But she just rolled her eyes, and said, 'Oh, please, like you really care,' and then she grabbed my hand as if she'd known me for years, dragged me to the cafeteria where she sat across from me and slurped coffee while she copied my notes. I stared at her the whole time. Her hair was long and black and parted down the middle like a lot of kids were starting to do. She had fair skin and a colony of cinnamon freckles on her nose. At the time, these were just facts and meant nothing, but I can tell you now she was lovely. We got to know each other that
semester, Irene and I, and one of the first things she told me was that we were kindred spirits. 'Our fates are linked,' she said. I thought it was pure melodrama, but out of habit, I told her she couldn't be more right and she told me I was full of shit. 'But you'll see I'm right,' she said. Anyway, I started spending more time with her. I can't say I felt anything for her, but I was a little intrigued. What a pair we were, two unfeeling, unmotivated, uninterested students doing our best to fool everyone. One night, after a frat party where we both had too much to drink, she told me her theory. 'There are people,' she said, 'who haven't yet arrived in the world, despite having been born. They've never really pushed through and are living with a caul around them. What they need is a good shock to their system, a proper slap on their asses so they can draw their first real breaths.' I told her it was a cockamamie theory, but her faith in what she said was contagious, so I said what the hell, let's give it a try. First, they were socially shocking things, like showing up for meals naked. Maybe it was the times, but no one was particularly shocked, including Irene and me, which was supposed to be the point of it, after all. That's when we moved into the realm of the physical. We'd just read about the ice baths used in the asylums in the early 1900's, so we immersed ourselves in freezing cold water, like Tony Curtis in *Houdini*. When that didn't work we tried anything we could think of. We slapped and pummeled ourselves and each other, but the bruises kept us out of classes too long. Then we cut ourselves where no one could see the wounds. We agreed that the pain was...interesting, but, in the long run, not a sustainable way to live. The last thing we tried was sex. It was new for both of us, and the sheer novelty of it kept us at it for a while. But it got to be routine
and disappointing just like everything else. In the end, we used sex to debase and humiliate each other, the nastier and crueler we could be, the better. Again, nothing. Not one thing we tried worked. By then end of the semester we were the same lumps of clay we'd always been, only now we were lumps who were failing most of our classes and drifting apart from each other. I went home at the Christmas break and never saw her again. When I got back there was a note tacked to my dorm room door. It said, ‘For we are born in others pain, and perish in our own.’ I recognized her handwriting, but not the words. I did some digging at the library. Found out it was a quote from an English poet named Francis Thompson, and it turned out to be Irene’s version of a suicide note. It’s strange, neither one of us saw much value in life, yet we never once talked about suicide. Maybe because it was so unoriginal that its prospect bored us. In any case...her death shocked the hell out of me. It tore something open. I cried real tears for the first time in my life. Wailed like a baby. It took me a long time to learn how to deal with my feelings, all that anger and sadness. It hasn’t been easy. I think about her a lot, and the sacrifice she made. What it means to be alive and to be in pain. Maybe that’s what pain is for, to keep us pushing through, keep us faithful. And maybe death isn’t the final sacrifice, just a particularly tough push. If this is true, and I like to think it is, then I can catch up with her someday, even though she’s got a head start.

In the meantime, I come by my suffering honestly, like a real person. I owe her that much.” Max’s cigarette had burned down to the filter. He tossed it away. Celia threw her arms around him and squeezed. “Christ, I can’t breathe,” he said.

Celia shook the blanket free of crumbs and rolled it up. Max
discarded the wine bottle and the cups and the empty cracker box in a nearby garbage can, taking the opportunity to relieve his bladder behind a blue spruce.

Before they headed back, they took one last look at the moon—no longer a blood moon now, but simply a full moon. It shone just as brightly and nakedly as if it were the first full moon, with no memory to darken its surface, its passion yet to be endured.

“A clean slate?” Max said.

“For now, anyway.” Celia winked at Max for the third and final time that night. “We ain’t dead yet.”