

After the Moon Fell Away

Penelope stood just outside the bus stop depot where the early spring sunlight appeared to touch the earth at the most delicious angle. She stood with her eyes closed and her head tilted slightly backward toward the sun and let its warmth cover her shoulders completely like a sprawled cat dozing in the perfect shaft of afternoon light. She could keep her eyes closed and still hear the bus when it arrived, not because of the squeak of its breaks or the explosion of compressed air when it lowered its front end for passengers. She would know the bus approached by the shift in the incessant and agitated chatter of her co-workers. For just a moment or two as they aligned their sights on the approaching bus, they would stop talking about how the moon had broken apart and fallen from the sky just twenty-one days ago, how navy missiles had blown up the bigger chunks before they landed on Earth and how government and religious leaders had provided absolutely no reasonable explanation for any of it.

But Penelope felt oddly different after the moon fell away. Lighter, happier, as if a weight had been lifted from some silent part of her. She began paying closer attention to the sun, which also seemed different, she thought. Its rays, its warmth seemed more... alive. But it was more than that. It was the way she *felt* when she stood in its light. Loved. Protected. How could that be, she wondered.

And so, as the days went on, Penelope found herself more apart from the others. Standing alone in the sunlight with hardly any thought at all about the moon. And it just so happened that every afternoon Penelope was tempted to open her eyes and look around. She wasn't tempted by the sudden shouts of outrage from the bus stop crowd or the sound of someone weeping in despair or desperately begging for answers about the plight of astrological signs.

No.

Every afternoon, the most delicious scent of tobacco wafted past her. It wasn't ordinary tobacco. No, this was a very special blend, most intoxicating! She could not hear the footsteps attached to the scent over the chatter and wailing of her co-workers. She could only breathe it in deeply and imagine the pipe from which it had come - wooden and smooth - and the hand that held the pipe - gently - and the sleeve of his coat - blue, wool with silver buttons. To what face could such a scent belong? Through all of her musings, Penelope refused the temptation to open her eyes. Instead, each day she soaked in the golden sunlight cat on her shoulders, waited for that intoxicating scent to pass by and added shape and color to the canvas of her imagination.

Work days became more chaotic and confusing. Co-workers who had once been so vibrant now looked pasty and grey with dark raccoon-like circles around their eyes. She heard whispers of sleepless nights and a sudden and pervasive fear of the sun. The office was half empty most days now with workers calling out. Some blamed the absence of the moon for the decline in their health. But Penelope had noticed a different

shift in her own vitality. Her cheeks flushed with color and her skin appeared more supple. She smiled easily and her cheery nature contrasted sharply with the growing gloom of the office. But each day, in the pauses between tasks and duties, Penelope tended to her imaginary painting: the man with the wooden pipe and exquisite tobacco.

Forty days after the moon fell, Penelope was overcome with the urge to visit a local tobacco shop. Rather than waiting for the bus on this particular day, she walked the three blocks south to the only tobacco shop she knew. The old wooden door had an unfortunate brass bell attached and Penelope found herself in the middle of a smokey room which just moments before had been full of the baritone din of men in tweed suits but now fell silent in her presence. To her relief, the gentleman behind the counter, a man in his seventies with a long but neatly trimmed beard and handlebar mustache nodded and smiled in her direction.

"Good afternoon," he said and moved in such a way behind the counter to indicate that she had his full attention.

Penelope moved timidly to the counter. "Good afternoon," she said in almost a whisper and waited a moment for the baritone voices to return to their conversations before she continued. "I was hoping you could help me find a particular blend of pipe tobacco."

"For your smoking pleasure or...?"

"No, not for me..."

"Ah! A gift!"

"Yes..yes. A gift."

"Very good, then! Does the blend have a name?"

"I'm sure it does but I don't know it."

"I see, well, I do keep a record of my customers' preferences so if you have *his* name..."

"No, I'm afraid I don't know his name." Penelope felt her cheeks flush.

"Well, that's refreshing!" The man exclaimed. "There is still hope, after all!"

"Hope for ...?" Penelope gazed at the man's face, round and rosy, his eyes, a shade of blue green she had never seen before. He was laughing. His mouth, his eyes, his cheeks...even his eye brows were laughing.

The old man leaned across the counter and spoke in a whisper now. He nodded toward the men sitting in leather sofas, filling the room with fresh smoke and vague exclamations.

"You see those men there?" Penelope tilted her head toward the men and nodded discreetly. "My regulars," he said and continued. "Every day I have to listen to them prattle on about what a disaster the moon fall was. How it's affected the stock market, how this could end all life on Earth and how humans won't even know how to love anymore because somehow the moon controls our damn emotions."

"My co-workers talk like that, too."

The old man nodded and leaned closer.

"Do you miss it?" He asked.

Penelope thought for a moment and shook her head.

"No, I don't suppose I do."

"Have you been to the beach lately?" He asked.

"No."

He lowered his voice again and whispered, "We still have tides!" Then he threw his head back and laughed a good belly laugh. Penelope laughed too, unsure if it was the contagiousness of the old man's laughter or her own shock at the news. *We still have tides!* She thought.

"Do you love him?" He asked after a moment. "This man?"

"I..." Penelope hesitated. Did she? She was drawn to him. His appearance every afternoon had sparked a strange desire in her. She had painted him in her mind's eye. She had imagined the timber of his voice, the shape of his face... "I suppose I do," she said.

"You see?" Exclaimed the man. "There is hope for love in our moonless world! Perhaps it was more of a hinderance than a help, anyway."

Penelope pondered this. She had never thought about such things and yet had never felt so drawn to a man. She had not seen him. She had not heard his voice. She didn't even know his name. She only knew the scent of his tobacco, mingled most likely with the scent of his skin and hair. This had been enough. She nodded in agreement.

"Well, then," exclaimed the old man. "Let's find that special blend and a nice tin to put it in!"

Penelope moved through her days now with a new lightness. She no longer heard the anxious conversations around her in the office or at the bus stop. She stood peacefully in her favorite spot away from the chattering bus stop, under the afternoon sun, her golden companion stretched lazily across her shoulders. She called her companion Sunny and imagined the sound of the sun purring at her neck. She had kept the tin in her coat pocket since that afternoon at the tobacco shop and now rubbed its smooth surface affectionately as she waited. His scent never failed her. A sweet tobacco with spice and vanilla and a hint of rum. And Penelope never failed to smile in his direction. Not once, though, in all these weeks had she dared open her eyes. Today the scent lingered for a moment longer than usual and when it had dissipated into the crowded bus stop, Penelope felt a small weight on the toe of her right shoe. This time, she opened her eyes.

A tiny yellow kitten slouched on her foot and clung to her laces, its little head darting around at the shuffling feet passing by. Penelope scooped the kitten up and

looked around. No one seemed to be paying any attention. When the bus arrived, she tucked the kitten inside her coat and went home.

At home, the little thing stood in the middle of Penelope's small living room and blinked at her as she hung her coat, then scurried behind when Penelope moved to the kitchen. Penelope found a little cream in the refrigerator and a can of tuna in the cupboard. This would hold until tomorrow. When the kitten had had its full, Penelope picked it up and carried it with her to her reading chair.

"What shall I call you, precious?" Penelope asked. The kitten sat on her lap and blinked sleepily. Penelope's body sank deeply into the chair and she closed her eyes. Who had left the kitten at her feet? *Him*? Certainly him. Penelope decided she would not close her eyes at the bus stop tomorrow. She needed to thank him, and to do that, she needed to see him. Penelope felt a weight moving up her arm. The kitten climbed to her shoulder and lay behind her neck under the cover of Penelope's long hair now loose on her back. She felt the kitten's tiny, cold nose on the back of her neck and smiled.

"I think I will call you Sunshine," she whispered and she and the kitten closed their eyes.

Penelope stood in her favorite sunny spot the next day and nervously watched the passersby. Perhaps she had spent too many days with her eyes closed, she thought, because the movement and noise overwhelmed her senses. She closed her eyes and felt her heart slow again. She tilted her head up as if to sniff the air more closely. She would open her eyes the very moment -

"Hello." The voice was deep but cheery.

Penelope opened her eyes and looked at the man standing in front of her who now stepped backwards, startled, and slipped off the curb.

"Hello," she said as he regained his balance.

"I - I - thought you were..."

"Someone else?" Penelope asked. She studied his face and hands. Handsome, broad shoulders, strong hands, but...no pipe. He was not *him*. Just a stranger saying hello. She looked at him now with skepticism.

"No, and I feel foolish now to say this, but, I thought you were blind." Penelope's sudden laughter startled him again but this time he stepped closer. "But - but you always look so lovely in the sunlight."

She frowned. "Did you leave a little kitten yesterday?"

"Yes...yes... and... I wanted to... I stopped today to tell you- "

"A charitable gift for the blind girl?" Penelope interrupted and felt her cheeks flush. What a fool she had been.

"No, no!" he exclaimed. "Not at all. I...I couldn't get it out of my head... this thought to give you the kitten. I had the kitten for a week and I kept thinking, 'This is crazy!'"

"So, what did you come to tell me, um..."

"Uli."

"What did you come to tell me, Uli?"

"I wanted to apologize if my crazy idea was an imposition. I'd gladly take her back if she's a problem." Uli seemed not to know what to do with his hands, and Penelope gave in to a slight smile as he locked and unlocked his thumbs in his trouser pockets then folded and unfolded his hands. How could he know how perfect little Sunshine was? Or how her tiny, warm body settled across Penelope's shoulders last night, the way the sunlight had settled there in the afternoon?

"No," she said and gave in to a broader smile. "She's perfect."

"Oh! That's - that's great! Have you given her a name?"

"Sunshine."

He nodded. "That's perfect." Then Uli's eyes widened with a sudden realization, "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't ask your name."

"Penelope."

"That's perfect, too." Uli let out a soft laugh and sunk his hands deep in his jacket pockets. His shoulders shivered.

"Are you cold?" Penelope asked.

"No! Not at all...I just...Would you like to get some dinner?"

Penelope thought for a moment. He wasn't *him* but he seemed kind if not a bit nervous. "I don't want to leave her for too long..."

"How about a quick coffee? There's a cafe down the street -"

"Across from the tobacco shop?" She asked, wondering if he would say, *Oh, yes! I go there all the time for my tobacco.* But he didn't.

"Yes! They make a great latte." Uli said and extended his arm, inviting her to place her hand there. Penelope hesitated. What if *he* walked by while she held another man's arm? She smiled and put both hands in her coat pockets. They walked to the end of the block and waited in silence for the light to change, looking in opposite directions.

Just as the walk sign flickered, Uli turned to her and asked, "Do you mind if I smoke?" He had pulled a smooth, wooden pipe from his jacket pocket.

This time Penelope's laughter was so sudden it surprised *her*, first rising from her belly, then curling around her heart and pushing little tears from the corners of her eyes. Uli looked on in a sort of helpless wonder, just as he had every day when she stood in the sunlight, unaware of his gaze, of his adoration, his love. When Penelope finally caught her breath, she tucked her hand around his arm and with the other, squeezed the tin in her pocket. they stepped onto the street together.

"I'll never mind that," she said, and they stepped onto the street together.

