

THREE MOONS

By Stephanie Hoops

Wearing black, the mourners shuffled in. Sixteen-year-old Mark and his fourteen-year-old brother, Kevin, leaned against the wall watching, angry, wanting a do over. It wasn't fair. They weren't ready to move on. Their dad, Pete, paced in the lobby. He wasn't ready either.

The clock struck one. The parson entered visibly sweating. He stood before the gathering and put his reading glasses on. The flock fell silent. Mark scanned the chapel in despair. It was edged in the fragrance of perfume and flowers. Flowers, the universal harbinger of the end or the beginning. Alas, in this instance, it was the end.

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Four days earlier, Edie, the boys' mom, suggested the family go to Blockbuster and rent a video. "Come on, you sad sacks," she'd said. "We'll rent *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. That ought to cheer us up."

They were a miserable group if ever there was one.

Pete was out of work and using the family savings to pay for butter, cable, gasoline, Snapple and stamps. Their bank account was getting so low he worried about paying the mortgage.

Mark and his girlfriend, Janet, were on the outs and weren't speaking. He'd picked a fight after seeing her in the school hallway flirting with a varsity baseball pitcher.

Kevin was brooding about the Sega Genesis his parents couldn't afford.

And Edie wasn't having an easy time of it either. Two months earlier she'd had a hysterectomy that threw her into early menopause. She was discombobulated, irritated at the slightest infractions. An open refrigerator door. Clothing dropped on the floor. An inconsiderate furnace adjustment. Pete grumbled that she was becoming a "shrew." She battled her mood swings knowing she was in uncharted territory. Menopause wasn't a lesson taught in American schools, but she was managing to hide her blues beneath ersatz serenity. As the family machine, she had to hold them together with whatever it took, be it artificial joy, forehead kisses, bleached rags, homemade cookies or Blockbuster videos.

Just before twilight, they got in their wood-paneled Oldsmobile station wagon bound for the Blockbuster store. Pete was behind the wheel as they drove through the biting winds blowing across the two-lane Alloy Highway.

There wasn't a lot to see in their Rust Belt town. There was JR's Restaurant, which sold a decent steak. There was the Mighty Man Sporting Goods Store, which was good for browsing. That was it.

Pete tuned the radio to a station playing Eric Clapton and the boys ruminated in the backseat. Not five minutes into the drive, a hot flash took hold of Edie, detonating in her head, rocketing through her bosom and reaching down to her pudgy thighs. She opened the window and stuck her head out, the frigid air eclipsing the perspiration before it could escape her pores.

Kevin wrinkled his nose. "Mom, what are you doing? You're freezing us back here."

"I told you before. I get hot flashes," Edie said.

“She’s like a spayed dog, boys,” Pete said. Everyone laughed, even Edie. Her jolliness was like armor. Though once the laughing subsided, she pulled her knees together and sank into the passenger seat.

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Mark watched her and glared. He saw through her charade. She’d said she was happy to have lost her periods, which made about as much sense to him as a boxer losing his gloves. Nothing she did had ever made sense to him. She was too quick to cry. She was always planning stupid little surprises. She played dumb but knew everything about everyone in town. She cared about dates and sales, and loved arts and crafts. She focused on stupid things. He wished she were more like Pete. Pete focused on important things, like rotating the tires and chopping wood. And when Pete hurt himself, he suffered in silence. When Edie got her monthly cramps, she’d always cried.

“What is wrong with her?” Kevin once asked Mark.

“She’s a girl. Girls are weak by nature,” he replied.

Pete taught him that.

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Pete had his own grievances with Edie. After her surgery, she told him she couldn’t have sex until she felt better. So Pete started seeing Jennifer, a cocktail waitress he met at JR’s Restaurant. She was younger and still had all her parts. Jennifer was a mirror to his boyhood face. Edie was a mirror to his father’s.

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Her hot flash relieved, Edie rolled the window up just as Pete cried out, “hold on!”

He'd hit black ice. The car skid, slammed through a snow bank and came to rest on the edge of a ridge, where they rocked, hovering in suspended time, waiting to drop. It took no more than a heartbeat before they launched, feeling the bittersweet weightlessness that comes before gravity takes hold. They held on to what they could as the Oldsmobile free fell to a deafening punch followed by a jolting thud and the eerie sound of broken glass and bending metal.

And it was over.

The engine was still running and Eric Clapton was still playing. Pete wasn't moving. Edie was sore but otherwise intact. She cracked the door to illuminate the interior. She took inventory of the boys first. Both were moaning. Kevin had a bloody lip and Mark was holding his arm, but they were alive. Pete, however, wasn't moving. She got out of the car and went around to check him. She got close. He was breathing. She unbuckled his seatbelt and gently pushed him across the bench to the passenger seat.

"Now you know why I make you wear seatbelts," Edie said to the boys. For once, they didn't give her any sass.

She got behind the wheel and floored the gas pedal. The wheels spun but didn't move.

"I smell rubber," Mark said.

"Is Dad dead?" Kevin asked.

"No, honey, he's just passed out," Edie said.

Pete whimpered, confirming he wasn't dead. "What happened?" he mumbled.

Eddie tried the gas pedal again but it had had enough. The wheels spun, the car engine took one last breath, creaked and the headlights went out. She turned the key in the ignition but got no response.

“We have to flag someone down on the highway,” Pete said.

They stepped out of the car into a bellowing gale that seemed likely to topple them. Kevin made a foolhardy attempt at climbing the embankment but there was nothing to grab onto that wasn't covered in downy flakes. A broken piece of the Oldsmobile's wood paneling blew by and disappeared into the darkness. Lights coming from a dairy farm were at least a hundred yards away.

“I think it best we stay put. We'll freeze to death,” Eddie said.

They got back inside the car.

Fifteen minutes went by and the heat dispersed.

“My feet are cold,” Kevin said.

“So are mine,” Mark said.

“I'll go to that farm and get help,” Pete said, looking in its direction.

“No, sweetheart, you're in sneakers. I'll go. I have boots,” Eddie said.

No one argued.

“Boys, come up front with your dad so you can share each other's body heat,” Eddie said.

That was the last time they saw her.

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The parson's downcast words reverberated across the church. “This is a tragedy unlike any we've suffered as a community. Death can be a cruel thief, snuffing out life

before old age. It makes no sense. And yet here we are. Edie did her best to save her family. God smiles upon her. Let us honor the dead and comfort the remaining family and friends, helping them mourn and continue walking the path with Jesus Christ toward eternal life after death.”

Kevin whispered in Mark’s ear. “Why her and not us?”

Mark scowled. “How should I know?” Mark was preoccupied with Janet. She was sitting with the other kids from school who’d gathered in the back pews to pay their respects.

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Edie moved slowly toward the lights of the farm. The snow was deep and crunchy and clung to her legs like a needy child. She grew so hot from the effort she could have melted iron ore. Still, for the first time in a long time, she treasured her body’s internal furnace. It was keeping her as warm as soup in a pan on what felt like a Siberian trek.

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Back at the car, the boys shivered. Pete pulled them close and they fell asleep beneath the Alloy Highway.

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The lights coming from the farmhouse windows gleamed ever brighter as Edie grew close and she could see people inside. In her feverish haste, she tried to run but the snow remained stubborn as molasses and yanked her off balance. She twisted her ankle and screamed as she tumbled into the snow. She made several unproductive attempts to stand before trying to crawl, but pain shot from her drooping foot. Something was broken. She called out, “help! Help! Help me! Somebody please!” She waited. She

listened. Another flash of heat exploded inside her and she relaxed. At least she would die warm.

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As the parson said his last words, Pete came in from the lobby and scanned the crowd. He spotted Jennifer but avoided her. He was done cheating. He joined his sons as the parson stepped down and the mourners began lining up to see Edie. “Come on, boys, our time is almost up here. Let’s hear what they have to say and go.” With Pete rocking on his toes, they stood beside Edie, three forlorn spectators beneath the dais.

Jennifer got in line wearing a silver necklace with a heart-shaped locket. Pete had given it to her and it swung between her breasts like a macabre pendulum clock. Pete worried she’d make a scene when she reached the front. But she didn’t. “I’m so sorry for your loss,” was all she said. She looked Pete dead in the eyes but acted as if she couldn’t see him.

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Inside the farmhouse, a white-haired woman and her brawny daughter heard Edie scream when she fell. They went outside, found her in the snow and carried her into the house as she pleaded with them to find her boys. “We were in a car accident. We went off the highway and the car won’t start.”

The daughter called the police and took off in her pickup truck to search for them herself, a difficult task through snowflakes as big as goose feathers. Her mother stayed behind with Edie, ushering her toward the fire and helping her to sit. She gently untied Edie’s boot to inspect her ankle and asked, “how did you last out there in the cold?” Before Edie could answer, her inner flames ignited again. She tore off her jacket,

unbuttoned her blouse and fanned her neck and face. The white-haired lady watched, her eyes glinting with recognition. When Edie finally opened her mouth to answer the question the lady held up her hand as if to say, *no need*. She gave Edie a kind pat on the leg. "I know. Every older woman knows."

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One by one, the mourners paid their respects until the line grew thin and the church bells tolled the end. A crow cried out from an Eastern Hemlock as Edie left the church on crutches, her parents by her side.

The three brass-handled coffin lids were closed and the shadows of Pete, Mark and Kevin ambled heavenward, like disoriented moons searching for their sun.