

TRYING TO BEAT THE MOON
(WC 2,242)

The big rig pulled into the BP gas station. The driver stopped to fill up and wipe the dead bugs off the small, round headlights. “It’s hard ‘nuff to see the road without these damn bugs cloggin’ up all the light,” he said aloud to no one in particular.

He pushed his wire-rimmed glasses up his sweaty nose; gassed up and took off down the wide strip of highway. A billboard advertised an adult bookstore. He was tempted but the thought of a bookstore in the middle of nowhere- even an adult bookstore- was too weird.

He hadn’t left a town so much as he had left things. A dead marriage, a pregnant soon-to-be-ex wife. Courts and lawyers. He wanted to forget all that and live in a place where he could hide. If he got far enough away, he could belong to this world of truck stops and porn shops. His mind coated the truth with these sugared reasons, good reasons, yes. But not the truth. He knew the real reason. It was the anger. He had to get in before dark. That’s when it would find him. Anger had sprouted in his father, and once the father died, it pollinated in the son. His father used to beat him and his brother into the ground like tent stakes. His brother had killed himself at sixteen.

He passed a Denny’s. His stomach turned. Black clouds covered the denim blue sky. An SUV pulled behind him. A white Jimmy, on his ass. He looked in the side mirror. The anger was coming to get him. He looked again in the mirror, expecting to catch his own reflection. But the hard face of his father was all he saw.

“Motherfuckin’ drivers!”

His anger caught him and latched on. He slammed the brakes and let the Jimmy hit him. First came the skidding of the Jimmy's tires, discovering too late what was going to happen. Then came the crushing, which sounded like a beer can when you smash it but a million times louder, the aftertaste the bitter sound of nails on a chalkboard. It flattened like an accordion. It happened so fast, one minute the Jimmy was there, bright as newly bleached laundry, the next all that was left is the bed of the truck, no driver, no front, just the bed and nowhere left to go, but to careen into the reservoir ditch next to the highway. He kept driving - a Mack truck would beat a Jimmy any day.

He drove miles and miles, sirens wailed in the distance but he'd be off the road soon. He passed Exit 73 and got off. Drove a short mile down to the old farmhouse he rented and pulled into the drive, the smashed Jimmy an afterthought.

The farmhouse stood on a four-acre lot. A bright motion detector light glared down at him as he walked through the backyard to the door. A canopy was set up in back like it was displaying goods at a carnival. But the only thing underneath it was a worn white plastic table and forest green lawn chairs. Next to that was a beat up trailer. Living out here, instead of building an addition onto a house, folks erected a pop-up trailer in the backyard and it was called done. "Go Heat!" was written on the side of the barn, with a lightning bolt drawn in egg yolk yellow. The farm hadn't been operational in years.

The sky was onyx. Clouds hid the full moon. The only piece of it visible was a sliver, like a clipped toenail. It stretched open like someone scratched the end of the earth until a tiny crease wrinkled the world and let in light from the other side. He started to itch, felt his skin burning with anger. The Jimmy had relieved some it, but there was a whole night full to let loose. He needed to get inside.

He walked up the porch, grazing his hand along the chipped paint railing. In the kitchen he opened the old refrigerator and grabbed a beer. He sat at the table and smoked, using his bottle cap as an ashtray. The farmhouse was silent. A ringing echoed in his ears and he downed the beer, hoping it would quench his anger like a wet towel. It didn't, so he grabbed another.

Hours later he woke up, his fleshy arm a pillow against the table. The setting sun streaked in through the slanted windows, and he had to shut his eyes tight against it. He wondered if possessing anger was like being a vampire. That perhaps when his father hit him, it was like a vampire bite – contagious. He shook his head, shaking off the thought. That was crazy. He got out of the chair, took a quick shower and decided he was hungry. It was already early evening. He stepped outside. The air was hot, even when the wind blew against him.

The sky was like a mismatched quilt, the velvet indigo mixing in with the robin egg blue, like a strip of water taffy on the bottom, a white strip above that, smooth and seamless. A shadow of approaching clouds loomed like an arrowhead. A storm was headed his way.

It was Sunday, his day off. He got into the small pickup that he used on his off days and drove down to the local diner. He approached slowly, felt like he was sleepwalking. He stood outside, reading the specials - his shirt buttons were undone, his jeans loose from not being washed in weeks. He squinted at the menu, shook his head, and walked into the diner. A bell chimed as he opened the door.

A young waitress approached him. "Hey, there. I'm Rae, your server. Pick a seat, any seat; they are all empty, as you can see. Everyone wants to see that eclipse, so they herded out of here like cattle. I'm actually about to close up for the day."

"Eclipse?"

“That’s what they say. Looks more like a storm to me.” She set a menu in front of him. An old coffee stain marked the cover. She was pretty, not in the usual way. Her nose was a bit too wide, but her hazel eyes offset that. She had long, wavy brown hair that was clipped back loosely.

“I haven’t seen you in here before.” He said, more of a statement than a question.

“I’m not from here. This is my second day on the job. I’m on my way out. I like to move from town to town, pick a place that fits.” She put her right hand on her hip and looked around, fanning herself with the extra menu in her hand. “This is a transitional place, more like a bus depot or train station.”

“This is a temporary place for me, too. Where do you want to live?”

“Oh, everywhere!” she laughed and walked to the kitchen. “Want some coffee?”

“Sure.”

She brought back the pot and lifted his cup to turn it over. Her arm brushed his, making his arm hair stick up like bristles in a toothbrush. He shivered despite the heat. Outside, the sky darkened and a bolt of lightning illuminated the diner. “Mother Nature is a miracle, that’s for sure.” She walked away, setting the coffee pot back on the burner.

The diner served breakfast all day, so he ordered eggs sunny side up with a side of crispy bacon. He ate quickly, washing it down with black coffee. She set the bill face down on the table and started clearing away his dishes, getting ready to close. He looked at the bill and saw that she had scrawled her number at the bottom. He thought of dirty bathrooms with numbers written in permanent ink. “For a good time, call...”

He left a ten-dollar bill next to his plate and opened the door to leave, but glanced back. She was watching him as she wiped down the table, bent over, her cleavage glistening with

sweat. "Want to watch the eclipse at my place?" The offer was out of his mouth before he could take it back.

"That would be different. Let me get my things."

They walked out together. It started to rain. He got into his truck; she followed in her beat-up Volkswagen Rabbit. They drove the few miles to the nearest grocery store to get some beer. At the house, he put the beer in the freezer. "Let's go outside," he said as she put her arm around his waist casually, as if she did it every night.

She followed him into the dark. They walked around the pond and sat on the deck underneath the awning and listened to the sky. "Have you ever counted how far away a storm is?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You count like this." She took his hand. "When lightning strikes, you count how many seconds until you hear thunder. One mile per second. So if you count to five, the storm is five miles away."

They counted to two.

"When you hear the boom of thunder after the lightning strikes, then it's right on you." She still held his hand. He leaned over and kissed her. Her lips were dry and her mouth hot. She broke their embrace and murmured, "Wake me up when it's time to dance." The words didn't make sense. They came out slowly, like a train coming to a stop. He leaned back and looked at the sky.

The lightning continued to strike, one, two, three times, like the flicker of a TV screen. The clouds looked like waves on a dark ocean. One cloud looked like an alligator approaching them, its jaws open, showing teeth.

It was amazing how quickly the pond cleared when the lightning came. He kissed her again, harder and pulled her hair. She broke away. “That hurts!”

The fear in her eyes only fueled his fire. He knew he wouldn’t be able to stop. The darkness was here.

He pulled her to him, breathing in a last scent. She smelled of vanilla and cinnamon with something musky beneath. He threw her over the railing of the deck. She fell into the mud, her twisted skirt exposing everything. He watched this like he watched the TV. She writhed on the ground and quietly sobbed. He jumped down next to her and started hitting. He hit her and thought of his father. He hit her and thought of his wife, his unborn child. He beat her until his mind cleared, and the anger had left his fists.

She put her right arm across her face, a useless attempt to protect herself. Something glinted and blinded him for a second. It was on her wrist. He looked closer. It was a silver ID bracelet with a pink ribbon etched into it. He turned it over. There was a quote: “Never, never, never quit.” Churchill. Then underneath that one word – survivor.

She was still moving. There was still a chance she was alive. Barely breathing, but alive. The anger slowly let loose like a black balloon. He released her. She deserved to live.

He went into the house and dialed 911. Then he walked into the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet. He saw bottles upon bottles of medicine that his doctor had prescribed to keep the darkness at bay - Strattera, Wellbutrin. How ironic that he would be finally taking his doctor’s advice now, when it was too late. He opened each bottle, emptying its contents into his open palms. When his hands were full of the reds and whites of medicine, he threw them into his mouth like popcorn and drank beer to wash them down. When he finished, the medicine cabinet was an empty shell.

He went outside. The storm had ended. The clouds looked the way blankets do when they cover you at night. Not just any covers, but covers that your mom threw over you, creating a parachute, billowing once, twice, then the third time, cleanly covering you, making you safe.

If the sky was flesh and the sun its heart, what was the ground but to put holes in - holes that people dig when they leave this earth. The ground was a graveyard, only good for putting down the past. He started digging with his hands. The mud made it easy; his pale white hands became black with it. He knew the darkness would hurt everything in its path, and it would hunt him down. The world would always be dark and black, eclipse or not. He lay down in the shallow hole and grabbed wet handfuls of dirt and tried to cover himself with it, bury the darkness, end the cycle once and for all.

A transparent charcoal gray cloud covered the sun, which was a fissure, tearing open the night sky and cracking it wide open. Blood covered the moon. The eclipse had come.

The ringing in his ears was gone. He saw the sirens before he heard them. The red and white lights flashed across him and the wounded body beside him like a strobe light. The eclipse ended and the moon came out. It exposed all round corners shining across the sky, a prism of clear light interrupted only by the flashing red, then white, then red, then white, white, white.