

New Moon

Mommy had a special black skirt that was shiny like a snake. I knew when she put on that skirt, it would be a bad night. And if Angie in the apartment next door couldn't come over to babysit me, she would have to bring me with her to run errands. Those nights I would sit in the backseat of the car with the windows cracked open while she picked some things up at the Crocodile Lounge. I'd watch the sky go from pink to purple to blue and black. She never came back with any bags.

I hated it when she brought a man with her to the car, and she'd make me wait outside while he helped her with important grown-up stuff. "Bank things...like your math homework but much harder," she'd giggle, opening the door for me to leave. I'd find a spot in the trees near the parking lot, where I could sit and throw pebbles into the street without anyone seeing me. I'd listen to the wind in the branches like they were whispering and try to figure out what they were always saying to each other. Most times I didn't have to wait long, but when I did, I'd start to get scared in the dark. The trees whispers would sound angry then, and I would start to hear sticks breaking like footsteps coming for me. My heart beat so fast I had to remind myself to breathe.

Once I fell asleep in the grass lying there in the moonlight so bright it was almost like day. I curled up under a big tree with my ear pressed to the ground, trying to hear what was happening inside the earth. I closed my eyes too long and woke up to Mommy shouting my name. "Lani!" she cried, "Lani!" I ran to her voice and hugged my arms tight around her waist when I found her. She smelled like smoke and man's cologne, and her shirt was on backwards. The smell made me feel sick. She bent over me and kissed my head a hundred times until my hair was wet with her tears.

I never told anyone this, but at nighttime when I'd ride in the back of the car, I'd look out the window and see the moon following. No matter how fast we went or how many turns we took, she was there above me, like I was her special friend. When I was really little and the trees or a house or cloud would cover her, I thought she had left me for good. I even cried once. I didn't know then that she was always there and that I just had to wait for her to appear again. That I had to trust her.

In school when we had to draw pictures for art hour, I would draw a picture of the moon in the night sky with stars dotted behind her. Sometimes I drew her as a yellow sliver, and sometimes I'd draw her full and white in a black sky. On the day we were supposed to make a family portrait, I did like everyone else and drew my family standing on some grass in front of a house. Since it was only Mommy and me, I thought my picture looked empty, so I colored the white behind us midnight blue and drew the moon big and beautiful above us, almost touching the roof of the house. When my teacher asked me why I drew it at nighttime, I lied and told her that I accidentally used the wrong color of blue. I knew lying was bad, but I couldn't tell her the truth. She wouldn't believe me if I said the moon was part of my family.

Mommy always said she liked showing a little leg even if people thought it was wrong. She said they should mind their own business. She told me, "Lani, if somebody asks you about me, something you don't want to answer, you keep your trap shut. You don't have to say anything you don't feel like." That was because once I told Angie about the men from the Crocodile Lounge. When Mommy found out, she spanked me hard and sent me to bed without dinner. But later she came to my room crying and said, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, sorry, sorry!" She curled up in my bed and fell asleep with her mouth open and her arms wrapped around me. She smelled like

she always did after coming home late. I wiggled free and looked out the window trying to count the fireflies blinking outside until I fell asleep on the floor. In the morning she was gone, was back to normal, smoking at the kitchen table with a bowl of Cheerios waiting for me.

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Some days I couldn't keep my eyes open in school. I'd try so hard to stay awake, to make it until recess when I could sleep under a tree by the playground, but my teacher Mrs. Lazlo got mad at me for not paying attention too many times when she called on me. I had to clean erasers at recess for being a bad listener, and she called home. When no one answered, she asked where my mom was at this time of day. I looked down at my feet and whispered, "I don't know." Mrs. Lazlo didn't like that answer and repeated it, only louder, "You don't know?"

I shook my head. Maybe Mommy was home asleep on the couch still with her shoes and everything on from last night because that's where I'd seen her when I left for school that morning. Mrs. Lazlo said, "I'm waiting for a real answer, missy." So I told her, "Mommy said I don't have to say anything people ask about her if I don't feel like it." I didn't think it would come like that, but I yelled it so loud my face was hot. I looked up to see what Mrs. Lazlo would do, if she would spank me or yell back, but she just looked at me funny. It was like I turned into a frog or something right in front of her eyes. Then, she told me to go see Miss Mona, the guidance counselor.

On my way down the hall I stopped in the bathroom to see if I could see what made Mrs. Lazlo look at me so funny, but I looked the same. I had Mommy's hair: light blonde and fluffy like a golden retriever puppy's fur. Her eyes were brown, but mine were dark blue-gray. "Like the color of the sky right before it storms," she always told me. I had freckles on my nose and my other front tooth was starting to grow in crooked after I lost the baby one a couple weeks before,

but I didn't look any different.

I'd never been inside Miss Mona's room. The walls were painted yellow with pictures hanging everywhere instead of a chalkboard, and it didn't have a big wooden teacher's desk in the corner either. There were beanbag chairs all over the floor, and on the back wall there was a huge pile of toys and games stacked up higher than my head next to a tall bookshelf. I ran my fingers over the smooth book spines until I touched one about outer space. I slid it off the shelf. On the front cover was the most beautiful picture of the moon I had ever seen. It was full, the color of snow with a blue ring shining around it, and the sky looked like the deepest blue of the ocean dotted with silver stars.

"Do you like outer space?" I heard a voice say from behind me. I turned around to see a woman with braids piled on top of her head and a gold cloth wrapped around them. Her long, flowy skirt was blue like the sky on the book cover, and her dark brown cheeks glowed when she smiled with the whitest, straightest teeth I'd ever seen.

"Yes, I like the moon," I said quieter than I meant to. She smiled again, sitting on a beanbag chair and patting a green one across from her. I sat down still holding the book in my hands.

"I have a big telescope at my house where I can look at the moon and the stars very closely at nighttime," she said. Her voice made me think of the cellos I heard at an assembly once. "My name is Miss Mona. What is your name?"

"Lani," I said quiet as a whisper. I thought it was funny for a grown-up to sit on the floor with her legs crossed like a kid, but I didn't say so.

"What a pretty name. It's nice to meet you, Lani. Mrs. Lazlo said you might like to talk about something?"

I kept my mouth shut. I didn't know what Mrs. Lazlo had said, but I was afraid it was about Mommy. I knew I shouldn't say anything about her to other grown-ups. I was afraid I'd say something wrong and get her in trouble, so I just looked down at my feet.

"That's okay, Lani. Tell me, what do you like about the moon?" she asked. I looked at the book cover again and flipped through the pages.

"I think she's beautiful," I told her over the soft whooshing of the pages as each one slipped through my fingers.

"You think the moon is a girl?" Miss Mona asked. I'd never thought about it before. I shook my head yes.

"I guess I think so, too." She asked me some other questions like how old I was, what my favorite subject was, and if I had any brothers or sisters. When we were done, she walked me back to Mrs. Lazlo's room. Before I went inside, she bent down in front of me to be near my face. Except for Mommy and Angie, I couldn't remember ever being so close to any other grown-up. She didn't smell like smoke at all, and her skin looked soft not bumpy like Mommy's. I wanted to touch her cheek, just to feel it, but I kept my hands at my sides.

"Lani, what if we meet every day in my room? I think we have more to talk about. How does that sound?" I smiled and nodded.

While the other kids in my class did silent reading time or recess, I would go to Miss Mona's. At first she would ask about Mommy like if she's nice to me and what her name is and what her job is. I'd hug my arms around myself and stay real quiet until she asked me something new. Now, she doesn't ask. She asks me about what I had for breakfast, what I do after school and on the weekends, and how I get along with the other kids in my classes. And every day she

asks me to point to the face that matches my mood and holds a picture of yellow smileys that look sad and happy and mad and scared. Most days with Miss Mona I feel happy.

One day after a bad night, when I was extra tired, I went to Miss Mona's room in the morning, right when I got to school. Mrs. Lazlo said it was okay that I did, giving me that funny look again with her eyebrows all scrunched and her frowny mouth. She'd been looking at me like that more and more since I went to Miss Mona the first time. That look made me feel like I wanted to cry but shouldn't. Like I was bad on the inside and couldn't hide it from her.

Miss Mona was putting books on the shelf when I went into her room. I didn't say anything, just sat in my green beanbag with my eyes closed, listening while she hummed to herself. I wondered what it would sound like if Mommy ever hummed.

"Oh, good morning, Lani," she said when she saw me. My breaths were slow like I was falling asleep. I thought about the night before. The sky was hiding the moon like it did some nights, so the stars had to keep the dark away by themselves. Before I used to feel scared when that happened, but last night I wasn't. I thought about a story Miss Mona told me about a little bird with a broken wing who lost her family when they flew south for winter. I tried to remember all the words, but when I couldn't, I made up my own. It made the time go faster until Mommy called for me.

Miss Mona kneeled down in front of me. I played with the ripped end of my shoelace.

"Mrs. Lazlo told me you drew a lovely picture for her during art yesterday of a colorful bird. You like drawing, yes?" I nodded and wondered if all grown ups always knew everything that happened.

"Do you want to draw a picture with me today?" I nodded again and smiled, so she stood up and pulled out a pile of drawing paper and a box of crayons and put them on the floor.

I picked out navy blue first and started coloring the sky, leaving a space in the middle for the moon. I mixed violet and black into the sky. Miss Mona drew a picture next to me. It was quiet except for the sound of the crayons pressing on the paper. I tried to move to get a better position to start outlining the moon. It would be full like the cover of the book, but I hit my arm with my knee and drew a crooked black line through the space I'd left for it.

I stared at the line. My chest felt like strings tied around it were being pulled tight, and tears came out. I tried to stop them before Miss Mona would see, but a big teardrop plopped onto the paper and then another and another. Miss Mona stopped drawing and looked at my paper. I blinked and tried to make the tears go away, wiping them with my hand.

“Lani, it’s okay. You can start a new picture. Does that sound good? We can fix it, don’t worry,” she told me as she handed me a tissue. I tried to say okay but instead I cried harder. Miss Mona took my hands and pulled me up to my feet then, and I wrapped my arms around her, pushing my face into her belly. When I felt her hug me back, it made me think of those sunny mornings after a night of rain when the trees shake their leaves dry in the wind and the birds sing and splash in the puddles.

I felt bad for getting her nice dress all wet with my tears, but she didn’t seem to mind.