

## Me and the Moon

I remember setting my spoon down so carefully that last afternoon. It's funny the things you remember. I can still picture the pattern of tiny blue flowers on the tiles of the table, hear the infinitesimal tap and click of metal against ceramic, see the crumbs of burnt blue sugar clinging to the sides of the ramekin. Crème brûlée is my favorite and somehow it tasted better on the moon. Things always tasted better on the moon. I'm not sure why. Maybe I just like that everything up there is blue. It sounds so mundane when I say it like that, but it makes me feel like I'm in some kind of fairy land. It's like there's a little bit of magic mixed in with everything, even sugar, cream and eggs. Or maybe it's the stars. The artificial atmosphere is so thin up there that you can always see them, even in the middle of what passes for day, and the architects really capitalize on that. Just about everything is made of mirrored glass. I've heard other Earth natives call it disconcerting, or downright frightening, like they could float right out to space eating their breakfast, or get lost in the infinite trying to walk through their front door, but I always loved it.

That was three years ago, that last day up there. I loved a moon girl, you see, in one of those ill-advised holiday flings that gets out of hand. I met her on Earth, in a light-rail station of all places. She helped me with my luggage and we got talking and one thing lead to another and then there we were, in that little tea shop on the moon two years later and she was telling me it would be best if we moved on with our lives without each other.

On good days I like to pretend that our breakup was mutual, or at least that I would have come to the same conclusion eventually. Who knows, maybe I would have

been the one to end it, given enough time. After all, inter-planetary travel is so expensive that we only saw each other a couple times a year, and even communication between Earth and the moon isn't cheap. Video calls lag horribly and letters are slow and unreliable. Immigration to the moon is practically impossible and who wants to relocate to Earth? She wanted to settle down and have a family and all that. It made sense and of course I understood, so I tried to make things easy on both of us. We shed a few tears, made a few promises to stay in touch that neither of us kept, shared one last kiss and that was it. You can bet that I looked back though, as I was leaving. I looked back the whole damned way. The truth is that I would have spent the rest of my life scraping by on Earth to visit her a couple times a year. It's funny how quickly lives change.

On bad days, really honest days, I can admit to myself that I loved the moon more than I loved her. If she had wanted to immigrate to Earth I don't know how things would have turned out. Don't get me wrong, I loved her for herself, for her smile, for her kindness, for her sense of humor, but the moon was a big part of it too. I loved the way she blushed purple, little lilac patches chasing each other across the cornflower of her cheeks when I kissed her in just the right way. I loved the stories about her childhood, exploring crystal caves and picking moon lilies for lunch from her back garden. The way the dust swirled languidly up from our feet that time we went to Crater National Park, glittering and shaping itself around her calves. It's one thing to know the gravity's a little different there, but it's different seeing it in action. And I loved feeling safe and the innocence of a place without so much hardship and so many mistakes. It's been a long time, but you can still tell that the original moon colonists were artists and idealists. It's like the Earth was some kind of messed up trial run and they learned from our bad history

and made things the way that they're supposed to be. I don't know. Maybe it's different when you live there. Maybe I was in love because the moon was wonderful, or maybe the moon was wonderful because I was in love. Either way my moon girl was beautiful and so is the moon and somehow the two became kind of intertwined in my head, like the way our curls would end up mixed together on our pillows, hers the color of the sea at midnight and mine like a wheat field at sunrise. Sometimes it's hard to tell if I wanted to be with her, or if I just wanted to be her. The truth isn't always pretty and it doesn't make me feel very good to say it, but there it is.

When I got back to Earth I decided almost immediately to head under water. It's easy to get jobs under the oceans because no one wants them. They're important and well paid, but god it's awful down here. Mechanics are always in especially big demand on the under water power stations, so I had no problem finding a position. I thought it would be easier here, not having to see the moon in the sky every night, but I think it's worse.

On the bad days every porthole reminds me of the moon. The algae form patterns that look like craters, and the light that filters in from their illuminated exteriors looks like some sickly mockery of moonlight. The Man in the Moon shoots accusing glares at me from around every corner, reminding me how far away I am. The portholes are supposed to make us feel less claustrophobic, but the folks in bioengineering can't figure out how to make the little scrubber fish that clean them reproduce fast enough to keep up with demand, so they're always pretty dingy.

For a while there were some merfolk who did the cleaning. Those people are so mysterious. I tried to do some research on them after they showed up and as far as I could work out we, the general land-dwelling public, hardly know anything about them. As far

as I know we're still trying to figure out how to effectively communicate with them, so I have no idea how they came to be outside our station, or why they decided to stay for as long as they did. Maybe they decided to scrub our windows as some kind of social experiment to see how we'd react, or maybe they only scrubbed them so they could take a better look at us. Maybe they went home and made notes and submitted them for grant applications studying the behaviors of land dwelling humanoids. Or maybe they just thought watching us was a funny way to pass some time. I really have no idea.

They came every day for months and I got pretty friendly with the merman on the other side of my window. Not that we ever knew each other's names or carried on a conversation, but we got to know a lot of other personal details. Physical details. If you catch my drift. What can I say? I was bored and lonely and apparently I have a thing for people I can't have a real, lasting relationship with. It started as an accident. I was getting changed one day and turned around and there he was, scrubbing the grime and watching me. I don't what it says about human-merfolk relations, but he seemed to like the show. I know that for sure because, other than the tail and webbed feet and hands, they're pretty much shaped like other humans, and they don't much bother with clothes. Not to mention that he kept coming back. My window has never been as clean as it was for those few months. Then one day they all just stopped showing up. I asked around but no one knows what happened.

Of course I've had other relationships, actual relationships with people I could talk to and touch, in these past three years since I left the moon for the last time. We all get bored and lonely down here and there's not much else to do between shifts, which are long and sometimes pretty grueling. It's hard work keeping these stations running so the

folks up on land can keep their lights on, not to mention their climate controlled rooms and infotainment walls powered up. We all need a little distraction and there's always a lot of drama about who's sleeping with who, but I've always hated that kind of thing. For a while I was with this girl from bioengineering. I called her my Sea Witch, because the things they do over there seem like magic, and that made her laugh, but eventually she left me for a girl in hydroponics. She said I always seemed distracted, like I was never really there with her, which is fair. I don't belong under the water and my thoughts are always rising up through the fish and waves and foam and out to the sky.

Even after all this time I miss the moon. Sometimes my heart feels so heavy that I think I could drop right through the shell of the station, crack the earth's crust and carry right on through to that hot, molten center. Then I'd be incinerated and stop missing it, right? That's just another bad day talking though.

In another couple of years my contract will be up and I'll have saved enough for a nice long holiday up there, no moon girls involved this time. I'll eat breakfast under the stars and make my own memories in crystal caves. I'll pick my own moon lilies and eat more blue crème brûlée. Then what? I don't know yet. Just let me get back to the moon and I'll figure it out from there. It gives me something to look forward to, a time when it'll be just me and the moon.