

The Very Error of the Moon

Chapter 1

Mom always said I needed to be more patient. If I was just patient, then the things I said I wanted would come rolling towards me. A cosmic “IOU” for all the shit that had gone wrong in my life so far. My acne would go away...if I was only patient. I would fall in love...if I was only patient. I’d find out what my true calling in life was...if I was only patient. Patience. Patience. Fucking patience. She started saying it to shut me up when I was little and didn’t want to wait through the whole book to find out how *Charlotte’s Web* ended.

Maybe I could have waited on that one.

She turned it into a lifelong lesson as all parents seem to do when they think they’ve discovered a nugget of solid gold in the mumblings they use to silence their unruly children.

Patience didn’t get rid of my acne, in fact, it lingered for years after everyone else’s. I also hadn’t fallen in love in the way all of my friends had, at least once, and I didn’t know what I wanted to be in my, hopefully, long, long life. But, patience did get me to that point. On the second day of our cross-country move to Southern California, on a highway that was all but deserted, with a name I wouldn’t remember, my mother said these words to me: “To be honest with you, I just want this thing out of me. I just can’t wait anymore. I mean, it’s getting ridiculous.”

It took all of the restraint I had carefully crafted in my 17 years to not screech our old Honda Pilot to a stop in the middle of that highway, just to deliver my next line with an extra flare.

“Patience, Mom. Patience.” A swift wave of air delivered a hard smack against my right arm.

“Don’t use my words against me, Orion. You try carrying around a low hanging, oversized watermelon for 9 months.”

I looked at her. It was easy to forget everything my mother had gone through in her almost, but not quite yet, 40 years when she smiled. Like the slow movement of the sun over the horizon, her wrinkles faded when she smiled, the lightness of her eyes taking over. I shook my head at her. I didn’t comment when she shifted in her seat for the 14th time. When she made us stop for gas more

times than we needed just so she could waddle into the convenience store for some kind of snack that would stink up the entire car the second she tore the plastic. Eventually, once she had the chair pushed all the way back, with one foot up on the dash, she was finally comfortable. She had insisted on being my car companion. Even though my stepdad followed in the U-Haul just behind us, always in the rearview, usually very stern looking, an audiobook undoubtedly playing through the speakers. That U-Haul which had at least three feet more legroom than our van, but it was a non-negotiable point. So, I didn't negotiate.

"He's got his stories, and you've got me!" That's what Mom promised me when she climbed into shotgun and promptly snored for the first eight hours of our trip. Then, with the end of our tour de force almost in sight, she was wide awake, fueled by an assortment of all the pickle flavored snacks the last gas station had, marveling with me at how the Pacific Ocean lapped against the golden coast of California, where our new home would be.

"Oh, oh! I love this song, turn it up." I did as she popped a gherkin into her mouth. We sang along, Joni Mitchell and her cartoon coaster taking us down to the golden coast.

Perched on the slightly mildewy doorstep of our new house, I kept a careful eye on the movers. Mom and Philip had already been down twice to see the house, once when they placed the bid, and the second time when they finalized the paperwork. I hadn't been invited on either of these trips. But, it was fine. Really. I felt no bitterness. I turned around and found Mom and Philip's silhouettes hugging inside; the first home that was truly there's. They always spun a bit while they embraced, a kind of top that didn't go all the way around, swaying to the gentle hum of their love.

Mom was sure I'd love California. Love the sand and the sun, the way the ocean regulated the temperature so it was never too hot or too cold (or so she said based off of her super intellectual Wikipedia research). I wasn't so sure. Yes, I did like the heat, but with a mess of hair that pillowed on top of itself in a frizz that couldn't even ever dream of being curls? Humidity was never going to be my friend. And healing salt water? Try acne's worst enemy. And sand? Don't *even* get me started on sand. Easier to contract and harder to shake than herpes. If I ever stopped stepping in it, it'd be a miracle.

The movers walked across the carefully manicured front lawn, bringing in box after box. Their shoes kicked up sand, because somehow it already inhabited the green blades, greeting us, even though the ocean sat over three miles away from our doorstep. Philip eyed me a couple times, the big browns seemingly asking me to help, but the two very, very dark circles under my eyes,

which hadn't made an appearance since the previous year's AP U.S. History test, convinced him to let me stay where I was.

I closed my eyes and tilted my head up to the cloudless sky. It was deep in the afternoon, the amber hour where the sun hits your face just so, and the whole world seems to be afire in an unbelievably uplifting kind of way. I kind of loved that. Not just the sun and the way you could tell about what time of day it was by the degree of its goldenness, but that it always seemed unbelievable, when arguably, the sun and its many colors and shades was the most believable thing in the world. The inevitability of the sunset and sunrise is just about as good as it gets where science is concerned.

The sound of cardboard boxes ripping open and packaging tape tearing interrupted my thoughts and filled my ears like an arsenal of change. The movers brought in the last few boxes of ammunition to where my mother was sitting on a fold out chair, organizing as far as her long arms could reach. I craved a different sound. Craved the cry of the birds and the sounds of the forest I had left behind in the only house I had ever known to be home. I yearned for the ease of the mountain air and the complexity of the birch trees, much grander than the simplicity of the palm. Instead of a forest at my feet, I had a three by five-foot patch of infected grass and salty ocean air percolating in my lungs.

It'd be alright though. It'd be alright. I kept reminding myself, repeating it in my head like a steady drum to back up a familiar song.

Patience.

This new house would become a home, it was only a matter of time.

There was an air of silence. I hadn't moved from the porch, finding the slight chill in the air soothing, Mom and Philip's soft voices as they poured over which delivery option to christen our new lives with when there was an air of silence behind me. Then nothing. No birds cawed. No distant rumblings of waves masked the traffic's incessant honking. Just nothing. Until.

"Hey, you gonna use those?"

I opened my eyes, the golden sun flooding in. There was shuffling. Hands moved cardboard boxes. A flurry of blonde hair. Then, green eyes locked onto mine, a face of freckles and dimples and sand stared into my own.

"What?"

"These, are you going to use these? Or those?" An impossibly beautiful girl moved away from me, picking up broken down cardboard boxes, moving towards the open door of our house.

“M & E? That’s not from around here. And, you can trust me, I *know* cardboard boxes as far as Barstow. So, where’d you come from?” I opened my mouth, about to point out that I could ask her the same question, but the girl turned around and held up her index finger, the other hand busy clutching boxes. “Wait! No, don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.”

Then, she just stared at me. Eyes on eyes, boxes on boxes, lit by the California sun.

“I’m Ruth.” She stuck out her hand.

“Orion.”

“Orion, are you planning on moving any time again?”

“No, I don’t think…” She cut me off, her brain thinking faster than my heart could beat.

“So, you wouldn’t mind if I took a couple of these boxes?”

“Um. No, probably not, but let me ask my mom just to be safe.”

“Cool, thanks! I’ll wait here.”

And, she did. She leaned against the pillar of our porch and waited.

Mom was surrounded by plates and bowls and shredded cardboard and the brown wrapping paper Ikea puts around their glasses as if it would save them from any kind of blunt force trauma. She had one hand in the box labeled “Kitchen” and the other deep into a bag of ketchup flavored chips.

“Hey, Mom, there’s a girl outside asking if she can have some of the boxes.” Mom’s head snapped upwards.

“I wasn’t eating salt.” Her hand recoiled from the bag in the time it took me to blink. “Don’t tell Philip.”

“You know, from pickles to ketchup, all you need is a beef flavor and you’ll be eating the starchiest hamburger ever created.” I laughed, expecting her to as well, instead she considered this. She *actually* considered it for a moment.

“Do they make those?”

“Mom!”

“What!?”

“That’s disgusting.”

“They totally do.” A voice said from behind me. Frantically, my mom leapt to her feet, brushing her unruly hair away from her face. We had that in common.

“Oh my God, I am so sorry. We weren’t expecting neighbors to say hello just yet! I promise I’m usually more put together. We’re much tidier than this.” A lie. But, I let it slide.

Ruth took a step inside, holding her hands up.

“She’s not a neighbor, she just wanted to have some of the boxes.” I said.

“Actually, I live right there,” Ruth pointed. “Ruth Miller-Tivit”, she held out her hand for my mom to shake. “And you can totally buy beef flavored potato chips at Ralph’s.” She smiled, but then leaned in to whisper. “Though, I’d recommend steering clear of those if I were you. Bad aftertaste. Nothing like a good burger.”

Mom was still holding onto Ruth’s hand for a few moments longer than was probably comfortable, though Ruth didn’t seem to mind. Mom eyed her, and then broke out into a mischievous smile.

“Let me ask my husband if he has any plans for the boxes, but I’m sure you can take a couple. But, we aren’t done discussing these chips.”

She snuck away, leaving Ruth and me alone in the middle of our would-be-could-be dining room. The silence fell like a layer of dust between us. I didn’t know if it was up to me or her to start a conversation. As the new kid on the block, surely it should be her responsibility to come up with something clever to say, an ice breaker. Maybe if she didn’t make all of my organs feel like they were only created to implode every time our eyes met, I’d be able to come up with something to say. But, all my mind could think of illustrating with the green in her eyes on my brown ones was a blank.

“You a senior?” She asked.

Thank God.

“Yeah.”

“Me too.”

“So, do you collect cardboard boxes?” I asked. Pathetic, I knew, but it felt like a valiant try.

Before she could answer Mom appeared again with good news for Ruth, and she was on her way back to her house, M&E’s overpriced boxes underneath her arms, and my Mom with the directions to the closest Ralph’s in her hands. I hadn’t even offered to help her carry them. Instead, I just watched her leave with the material that carried my life from one place to another, suddenly demolished, ready for her repurpose, whatever that may be. Mom got back to work unpacking, this time breaking open the box that held our dining room table.

“There’s no way we’re eating on the floor like slobs,” she said, as if she could also lie to me about the fact that we were, indeed, a family that *would* and *had* eaten on the floor. Even though the delivery guy would most likely be at the house before she could even find the legs of the table, I sat next to her and pulled out the instructions.

I had a tight grip on what the instructions promised was Leg C, but Mom and I swore was Leg D when Philip emerged from one of the back rooms into the living room, an old tattered box clung tightly against his stomach. While it was the first thing he unpacked, and the last thing he had packed back home, he hadn't opened it until then. Not until the movers had set up the secondhand shelving unit and tv stand we had bought from the thrift store, not until he himself had built furniture around us, two desks and a futon, did he bring out that old box I knew so well.

From it, he retrieved all kinds of picture frames, of every size and color and style, each containing an equally unique photo. There were no posed mall family photos in there. He made his way around the house, carefully placing them on any surface after quietly contemplating if they belonged there. My eyes followed him, shadowing his every move as he placed one on the bookshelf in the living room; I'd undoubtedly pull out a book and be greeted by a photo of myself, most likely the one where I'm eating ice cream, a cone I still dreamt about. One went next to the TV, a speckled turquoise frame that hugged a family photo, featuring Snuffles, my stuffed giraffe I couldn't bear to part with when I was six. Every channel I flipped through would reflect in those beady eyes of his, reminding me of how he always smelled like the lavender detergent Mom used. Philip disappeared upstairs, and I knew that no matter how long we would live here, no matter how well I thought I knew the place, I'd find a photo somewhere I had never seen one before. A silent, although cute, reminder to any snooper that **THE BAUDINS LIVE HERE AND WE ARE A CUTE, ADORABLE, LOVING FAMILY, THANK YOU VERY MUCH.**

More seemed to go into that box than out of it, since Philip and Mom were never without a camera, especially since they both got smartphones. I knew that box would fill faster with photos than frames could be bought. Philip kept them safe in the bottom right drawer of his work desk, waiting there, a box of memories and moments to divulge into and share at a moments notice. As if memories were something we could exchange and lent to anyone needing a new one or two.

"Damn it," Mom shrieked, scrunching up the second page of the instructions.

"Okay, maybe we should have bought that building service." I said, and then immediately regretted it.

She exhaled sharply, her face swollen from anger and scowls. After a deep breath, she placed her hand on her stomach, closing her eyes.

"See, he's kicking cuz he wants you to stop." I said, she raised an eyebrow at me.

"I'm sure it's just indigestion." I eyed all the snacks that surrounded her.

“No! I mean, how? From all of this health?” She laughed but also told me to shut up in the same breath. She opened the box marked “pantry” and stuck the chips back inside, but she left the pickles out. For good measure, she assured me.

“Come on. Let’s stand this bad boy up.”

It took multiple pregnancy related pivots to even get Mom to a standing position, but after a few huffs and puffs, we stood and flipped the table over. Remarkably, it stayed, and looked like the one in the picture. A wonky more crooked version, but recognizable, at least! Mom started clapping and cheering, never one to let even the tiniest victory go uncelebrated. She grabbed me by the back of my shirt and pulled me into a stomach-filled hug.

Philip entered the room at the sound of our celebration. He hugged her and lifted her up gently, her mini victories still one of his favorite things.

“Now there’s Mrs. Solahasky, she lives at 1950, across the street.” Philip held up his fingers as he counted the neighbors he had already said hello to while Mom and I shoveled Thai food into our mouths.

“Is she the aggressive one with the rugelach?” I asked, a noodle hung out of my mouth.

Philip pointed at me and nodded. Bingo. I got it right. She came over almost the second we arrived. Mom was already making a beeline for the bathroom, so missed what she would call “a bad first impression” by the thin lining of her bladder. She came over with a box of Tupperware filled with airy pastries swirled with chocolate. Mom had already eaten five.

“And the Miller-Tivits,” Mom’s words butt in, her mouth almost as full as mine. My stomach curls. Maybe one egg roll was more than enough. “What was her name? The girl came over. The hamburger chip one.”

“Hamburger chips?” Philip asked.

“Ruth,” I said, the words flying out of my mouth, nipping at the tail end of Philip’s question.

“Ruth, right. Yes. About your age, wasn’t she?” None the wiser. Either of them. At the way her name twisted against the corners of my mouth, producing new edges and curves of tingles I never knew existed. Her name, a word my stomach wanted to hold, and yet was afraid to hear. I cleared my throat. My tongue still tingled.

“Yeah. I think so.” I responded, finally.

The conversation ebbed then, the way it often did around the dinner table at our house. Healthy conversation matched only by even healthier appetites, and the Baudins were nothing if not good eaters. At least, we liked to think so. And, as always, when the conversation dipped and low tide fell upon us, it was Philip who reminded us of the beauty of the waves.

“So, Orion, what do you think of California so far?” It was a simple enough question. A “fine” or “it’s alright” answer would suffice. But, in my head, all I heard were the sounds of the ocean crashing, the sun glistening down on a sandy lawn, and the crisp, hushed rustles of cardboard boxes. And green.

“Golden,” I said. “Just golden.”

I let them believe I was talking about the coast.

Foretold

Chapter 1

The baker and his cart wait for no one. Once the morning's bread is gone, it's gone. Nights aren't very dark, at least not for him. He stokes the oven with more fire, sprinkles more white flour onto his old oak board, kneads more. His elbows haven't stopped aching in over a decade. Their slight inability to move with the same kind of youthful grace he sees in his son is long forgotten. He works out the kinks in the dough and the kinks in his joints. He sits and sips on tea while the dough raises with the sun. The back left wheel of his cart squeaks softly when he draws it out of its home in the stall next to the kitchen, which by the time the sun has passed the horizon, is filled with a sweet, sticky heat he used to hate but has now grown used to. His wife wipes off the flour that always ends up on his cheek and gives him a sugary kiss, because he's already sampled the sweet bun before filling up the cart, putting on his hat with two holes, one from moths, the other from the jagged nail he hangs it on, and he heads out on his route.

The sweet buns are kept on top, the rosemary sourdough in the side pouches. They smell the best, at least in his opinion. His first stop is the potter, who always trades a small container of sugar or flour for two loaves of white bread. He splits it and shares with his daughter who looks nothing like him, but the baker never asked. The potter splits it in half and gives the bigger one to his daughter as the baker pauses for a moment to put the goods in his cart, filling the space the first loaf has now left vacant. They sit on the stump, clay splatters on their hands and knees as they eat a very early breakfast before a very long day.

The baker doesn't make a lot of noise when he goes along his path. That back wheel lets his customers know he is on the way. By the time the wheel hits the cobblestone of the main village, his usuals are already waiting for him. In the summer, the sun is hot enough that little droplets of sweat have gathered at the nape of his neck, tempting to fall, but they never do until he's started on his

way home. In the winter, this is the time when his body has adjusted, and the cold doesn't bite on his cheeks as much.

The blacksmith and her partner are his second stop. They like the sugared bread, but also the sturdy oatmeal, which they use for dinner, they've told him. Then, the single mother of six, who barely has room in her house for all her orphans, but keeps adopting them anyways. The baker always saves and scraps he has to cut off to make the white loafs cleaner in a jar for her. Even the littlest extra helps, and he always liked the twinkle in her eye and the love in her "good morning, Baker!" The three words held a sweet melody even in the early morning.

By now, his cart has become lighter, easier to push, and the wheel doesn't creak as much; it has found a groove and a rhythm in its rustiness. As he pushes further into town, he passes the fountain that marks the beginning of the rich quarter. They aren't the richest of the rich, but they have far more than anyone else in the small corner of the country he calls home. They don't buy his bread. But, around the back, even in the morning's heat, the young men of the castle are out training.

The clashing and clamoring of swords comes to a crescendo as the baker rounds the corner. Every day around that corner was different. Sometimes bread was the last thing any of these warriors in training wanted to think about. Sometimes they had been forced into training without food, and the baker became their hero. But, one fighter, a child to the baker, but a child to himself he was not, always bought the last piece of honey loaf the baker had, because there was always only one left. He never said anything, but he'd look at the baker, hand over the money, take the bread, then nod. The baker always liked his eyes, dark and fierce, steadfast and iron like he was trained, but soft, and sometimes, if the boy didn't look away too fast, the baker could swear he saw something that looked like longing.

The baker would then make his way back home. Sometimes he had little dough scraps he would fry right before leaving and cover in sugar and cardamom and give to the wild children that ran on the outskirts of the village, running with scuffed and scabbed knees, with wild and tangled hair, with a smile and a laughter. The little scraps would crackle in their mouths as they crunched down. Today he only has a couple bags. Not every child will get a hole one to eat, but none of them mind. They thank him just the same.

Two miles away from the village, and a mile still to go till home and start preparing the next day's batch, the baker would take a small detour every third day of every second week. The path gets harder to push the cart on, the trees fewer, and the songs of the village quieter, fading into the

background. By the time he sees the tall, grey walls of the orphanage, a soft fog has settled, covering the spikes at the top. The day has barely begun.

The baker and his cart wait for no one.

But, today, he stands by the tree that has long since started to die, and he waits, for the girl with the red hair.

Lavender Roots

Creative Nonfiction Short Story

The three of us, my sister, dad, and I were adjusting to a family built on four pillars, suddenly stabilized on three since my mom had been diagnosed with cancer. When the sickness got my mom, my dad stopped going to work and stayed with her, either at home or at the hospital every day. One weekend, when I was in first grade, my mom wasn't feeling well. Everything felt dark without the light that she brought. I was sitting on top of my dad's lunchbox (which often held a rogue granola bar or day-old banana I could steal), when he came in bumbling, as he often does, his worn Birkenstocks slapping against the marble floor.

"Your mom wants a warm towel."

We kept the towels in the right, bottommost drawer next to the sink, washed and neatly folded, all of them a bright blue, my mom's favorite color. My dad pulled one out and stared at it.

"Do you know how to heat up a towel?" he asked me.

I had a piece of stolen banana in my mouth, so I just shrugged in response. I knew how to cook, how to clean, I knew how to call for my dad or an ambulance in case my mom needed something. I knew that if I smelled lavender, it meant she was home, that she had survived another day, and I could do my homework with more relaxed shoulders than the day before.

I did not, however, know how to make a towel warm.

My dad opened up the microwave and stuck the towel in. We both stood in front of it watching as it spun.

"Umm..." That time it was both of us.

There was a pop, then the blue dish towel suddenly was a flickering red. Frantically, my dad pushed the button, the door exploded open, and a plume of smoke erupted out of the appliance. I ran and grabbed the salad tongs, throwing them to my dad who reached in and snapped up the now ashy blue, tattered, and holey towel from the depths of the demonic heating machine.

Silence.

My dad looked at me, towel in tongs. I looked at my dad, towel in tongs.

Then, we laughed.

It had been a cancer diagnosis since we had last laughed.

Then, my dad brought the towel into my parents' room. Tong and all.

And, then I heard it. My mom's laugh.

That day, I didn't have to smell lavender to know she was going to be okay. She had the strength to laugh. She'd always had it. Because that's who she is. And, that's who she taught me to be in that moment, on that weekend day in first grade.

Because even when life throws a malignant sized shit ball at you. You still have the strength to laugh. No matter what.

She and I do a whole lot of laughing today.