



Kiss Moon

Laurie K. McConnachie

Hands trembling, my whole body shaking, I kneel in the darkness and fumble with the kitchen scissors. Tears flow down my face like a flash torrent of rain that came without warning. Droplets spatter on dry summer dirt, the moon illuminating dark stains spreading quickly, wide and deep. My heart pounds so wildly, it feels like it's going to rip through my ribcage and shatter all around me.

I try to focus on my task, but another wave of unbearable realization rolls over me, and I collapse on the cold, damp grass, aching

for it to swallow me and take me from this impossible place.

A handful of pansies severed roughly from their roots lays strewn at my feet next to the scissor's sharp, gaping jaws. The only sounds piercing the silence are my raw sobs as they reach far into the emptiness of the night and echo back upon me. All the while, neighbors lie sleeping, safe in their dreams.

A tornado has blasted a path to our little spot on the planet, sucking up and spitting out every last bit of hope that was left here. Hope that she would live to guide me through my

still-burgeoning womanhood. That someday, she would stand beside me in the delivery room helping shepherd her grandchild into the world, eager to share in the unfolding of a new life as she grew into an old woman. Just as we imagined. Dreams that the deadly cancer would suddenly dissipate and the deficits it declared be miraculously reversed. Dashed with that last wrenching gasp.

•

Moonlight touches the velvety lavender petals in indigo and gold iridescence—the only hint of color. There are no more richly verdant evergreens and lush, welcoming lawn. No more peach and crimson roses climbing up the old brick wall, gracing our days with their subtle perfume. Just shadows and darkness, and muggy, suffocating air.

She had only just planted these pansies, taken from her mother's garden four states away. My grandmother, who had just lived to see 100 close up before dying, led me to trust that my mother would inherit the same fate. How tenderly she had dug up her mother's favorite flowers, days after watching her be buried deep in the earth's dirt. Swathing the delicate stems in dampened towels and cellophane, she cradled them on her lap on the ride home, knowing they were all she could bring back alive.

As the plane descended through the clouds, leaving behind the sun-filled, endless blue expanse, dropping into the steely Seattle gray, the glaciated peak of Mount Rainier loomed large outside the small oval window. Back home, she managed to take her spade to the dirt and dig a nest outside the kitchen window. Tenderly, she tucked the pansies in next to her own favorite flowers—baby's breath—loved for the purity of their tiny papery-white blossoms. But only just in time.

While the pansies' roots reached into the soil, trying to attach to their new foreign home, the tentacles of an aggressive tumor were rooting themselves deeply into the folds and crevices of my mother's brain. It happened mere days upon her return. Searing headaches and rushes to restrooms to retch up food her stomach refused to retain. "The flu," she said when she took to her bed for a week that would slide into two disease-rapt years.

Trapped in the back bedroom between surgeries and seizures and legs that forgot how to walk, and the insidious descension into a coma, she never saw the pansies bloom in her beloved garden. Her place of peace, where on balmy summer evenings under the shade of the towering spruce and pines, she would become so one with the earth and plants that time would seem to cease. There, as the sun sank low and slipped into the layers of the distant blue mountain shadows, the moon would rise over her shoulder, lighting up the night soil where her hands still toiled.

•

Through the large plate glass window, the one through which she used to gaze upon the garden on lazy summer mornings when her breath was slow and easy, I see her lying there. Still. The dim light from the old lamp glows upon her, the tangle of tubes that reach into her arms, her stomach and chest, suddenly purposeless. I watch my father collapse over her body, searching for the fleeting warmth of her. His fingertips trace the arc of her eyebrows and land upon her eyelids, swollen from steroids, gently drawing them closed. Abruptly, they spring back open. Sky-blue eyes staring blankly beyond him.

They will come soon to take her, the two black-suited men with their tipped-

down heads and blue rubber-gloved hands, guiding the gurney through the dark tunnel of our narrow hallway to the bedroom. As the cart rattles past me, my insides twist at the wafting scent of pungent disinfectant mingled with the stale breath of someone just off a smoke break. I strain to decipher the murmur of lowered voices behind the closed door, wince at the sound of things shifting and lifting. Nameless strangers alone with my mother and her modesty.

My father and I wait, sentinels in the night. Our backs against the wall that holds us up, as we push back against reality. As they head back toward us, the shiny silver wheels squeaking and catching on the carpet, I gasp when I see they have transferred my mother into a black body bag. Like a crime scene. No white sheet discreetly drawn.

I raise my hand for them to stop before they jostle the cart with my mother across the threshold into the starless night. The porchlight shines upon the gaping back doors of the glossy black van waiting to swallow her. Eyeing the silver tab at the start of the wide-tracked zipper and glancing at the man standing closet to it, I proffer the bright violet and yellow bouquet. "Against her heart, please," I whisper, imploring his chin to lift, his eyes to rise and meet mine.

•

"I love you, tree!" he calls out as he races up to a madrona tree in the playground, the air heady with the scent of freshly sprung leaves and possibility. He presses his two-year-old lips, soft as petals, against the cool, smooth bark. Turning his cheek to rest against the rust-colored trunk, he spreads his arms as far as they can around it, a wide embrace. Eyeing a loose snag of bark, he reaches for it and pulls on it until it separates from the tree. He runs

his fingers along the strip, pulls it toward his nose, inhales, turns it in his fingers, smiles and drops it in his pocket.

Skipping off to a cherry tree, its pink buds beginning to burst, he stops to run his fingers over the dark textured trunk. He peels off another piece and rubs it over his face, lips turning upward, and he drops it and watches it float and land on the fresh grass. "I love you tree!" he exclaims, laughing and darting to another on his random path from tree to tree, the perimeter of nature that surrounds the swings and slides. He is creamy skin and tousled brown hair in exalted motion.

"Have you ever seen a little boy kiss trees? Isn't it beautiful?" I say to the mother who sits on the bench, the one whose son is smashing toy tractors into each other in the sandbox.

"Kind of strange," she replies with a frown and turns away.

"Well, his name is Forrest," I declare to the breeze as he continues to giggle and skip and kiss tree after tree, ignoring the metal and plastic creations of factories and men.

•

"How ecstatic Forrest will be to have a tree in the living room!" I exclaim as we click the buckle closed on his car seat and head out of the city to the tree farm in the foothills, tucked in the shadows of Mount Rainier, its majestic presence a constant backdrop and silent, steadfast witness to the constant ebbing and flowing of our lives.

The field abounds with evergreens and buzzes with bright-eyed children racing through the rows while parents follow with smiles, saws, and gloved hands clutching cups of steaming sweet cider. It is the kind of day when the sun pushes its rays through the hovering blanket of gray clouds and turns the color on in the world.

In his cabled cream sweater, baggy black fleece pants he has yet to grow into, and that cuff at the ankle above his tiny brown suede boots, Forrest runs and spins along the rows of evergreens. His hands reach for the branches, pulling the tips toward his nose for long, closed-eyed inhales, the scent of sap and pine seeping straight into his lungs, full lips turning upward.

After winding our way through the maze of trees, Forrest leads us to the one he has discovered holds a small abandoned bird's nest still tucked inside its branches. Round and delicate, its bowl now hollow, it still holds the promise of the lives it once held. "This one!" he declares as he stands proudly next to it, his hazel eyes leaning more toward green as the winter sunlight bounces off the tree and hits them just right. He stands close to it, reaching for his fullest height, guarding it protectively from the eyes and claims of other potential admirers.

As I help hold the Noble Fir steady, Tim leans low with the saw and starts to cut into the trunk. The blade's deep serrations move back and forth, slowly at first, then more rapidly as the metal takes hold. Chips of bark start flying, flecks landing on Forrest's pants and boots. And then the saw goes still, and the sounds of the severing go silent. Suddenly, the upturn of Forrest's mouth shoots downwards, and he starts to tremble uncontrollably. The glint in his eyes turns dark. He looks at me imploringly as tears fill his eyes and spill over. Sobs erupt from a place so deep inside of him that the sound can barely escape.

Focused on lifting and wrangling the unwieldy tree, Tim has headed back toward the car, saw under arm, tree over shoulder. He doesn't realize that Forrest has sunk to his knees and is staring incredulously at the

stump, head in hands, tears flooding the dirt, spatters spreading quickly, wide and deep.

I sit on the needle-strewn ground next to Forrest, the freezing December air piercing our bones, and call out for Tim, who quickly returns. He lays the tree that had stood tall and majestic mere moments ago, on its side, feet from its own woody source. The branches heave and droop as they settle into their foreign horizontal position. No longer spreading outwards, their tips curving toward the sun and the moon. The nest tumbles and rolls onto the dirt, landing upside down. I grab for it and offer it to Forrest, who glances at it and cries all the harder. We encircle the severed stub of trunk, gazes low, hearts pounding, and we wonder, what have we done?

"We'll take the tree home, give it water, decorate it with sparkly lights, and gingerbread men we'll bake ourselves," I hear myself try to reason, pulling Forrest into my arms. "No!" he screams, pushing me away and crumpling back on the ground, specks of bark sticking to his wet cheeks. He grabs hold of the woody remnant with his tiny mittened hands, refusing to let go of what remains connected to the earth.

•

It is a July night like the one when I watched my mother die so many years ago. The moon is a wisp, a glowing eyelash in a twilight sky. "I love you, moon!" he calls out across the field to where the moon rises low, hanging like a delicate ornament in the indigo expanse. "Blow a kiss to the moon," I coax, touching fingertips to lips, then extending them upward. Forrest watches me intently, and then suddenly, he is running fast away from me.

He is a moving blur of tan shorts, tiny

legs, a royal blue shirt, and brown fisherman sandals. His legs are young and plump. His feet have not yet trodden far on this planet. As I trail behind him, I look and see that if he reaches up just a little farther with his outstretched hand, it appears he might just reach it. Now, I feel his wonder and excitement surge through me too.

"Kiss moon, kiss moon!" his voice, pure and high-pitched, sings over and over as he looks up to the sky, dodging dogs, children, strollers, his eyes not straying from his goal. It hits me, right in the core of my being, that he believes what I have stopped believing. It is in the same way that he thinks he can pick up the string on the balloon that I have drawn in the sand with a stick and trail it behind him as he runs on the beach.

He is the child the doctors said I might not ever have. The one with the old-soul eyes that seem to look outward with that peaceful knowingness, like somehow, they see that everything in life turns out the way it is supposed to.

She is laughter. She is tender of flowers, lover of trees. She is the mystical moonlight shimmering down upon us. She is the grandmother he will never meet.

"I love you, moon!" he calls out, and now I see where he is running. He is at the fence on the field's edge, the one that sits under the moon. He tries to climb up, knowing it will bring him closer, but he can't reach high enough with his foot to get a hold.

Winded, I catch up and gather Forrest in my arms. I lift him and hand stand him on top of the fencepost where his feet are just small enough to fit and find their grounding. I watch as his fingers lightly press upon his tender lips, then reach high above us and trace the graceful curve of the eternal moon. ❖