

New Moon

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A bright moon rose silver-white in the east, over the barren foothills crowned with red-hued rimrock. A moon impossibly large. Impossibly bright. The brightness hurt his eyes, making it too hard to identify the familiar lunar features. He turned away to the opposite horizon, where the setting sun still lit a thin scrim of golden-red clouds. In the twin light in between he could clearly see the tall amber grass waving in the warm breeze like a wheatfield.

In the midst of the sea of waving grass sat a ragged line of mismatched vehicles, strung out like toys dropped from the sky. There was no road. The tire tracks had already been erased by the resilient spring of the grass. He had no idea where he was. Where they were.

Tom Quetzal stood on a rough splinter of weathered lava rock atop a knoll a quarter mile above the vehicles. He had climbed up into the sagebrush to inhale the fragrance of sage and juniper. A wildlife biologist by trade, Tom was familiar with this environment. His specialty was sage-juniper grasslands. Only the pale gray-green shrub surrounding him was not sagebrush. He had crushed the leaves in his fingers to release the familiar pungent aroma and was met with a bitter, faintly turpentine smell. On closer inspection, he discovered that the leaves were wrong. For one thing, there were too many lobes. It was not sagebrush at all, but something else. Something he had never seen before. An imposter filling this ecological niche. And the rabbitbrush was not rabbitbrush either. He had scabbled farther up the rocky slope to a group of juniper shrubs and pierced a ripe berry with his thumbnail and examined the scaley branches. It was not juniper. It was something he had never seen before. And he suspected that the mountain mahogany sprouting in umbrella-like clusters on the rimrock far above was not mountain mahogany at all.

Tom had plucked a few berries and folded them into a tissue in his pocket. He wanted to see if they would germinate in a different environment. Then he climbed down and shook some seeds from the faux sagebrush into the palm of his hand and added them to the berries. The breeze bore the clear, descending trill of a bird he could not quite identify. *Almost a canyon wren*, he thought with bitter amusement.

Below him his wife, Gretchen, was talking quietly with their new black friends, the Saunders. Together they sat in folding chairs on a patch of carpet thrown over the grass beside the Saunders' pickup-mounted RV. Tom's own camper van sat three vehicles up, at the head of the line, like a ghostly white whale leading a parade of beached sea creatures. The other occupants had all gone ahead on foot, following a gravel trail around a hummock to the shelters. Or what they believed to be shelters. Twelve small cabins newly built of rough-hewn wood stood beneath the bare branches of a cottonwood grove along a clear flowing stream. Curious. Twelve cabins to match the twelve stranded vehicles. A coincidence? Tom thought maybe not.

With the first hint of chill in the air, Tom started back down through the moonlight, following his faint matted trace through the tall grass. Slowly he went, placing each footstep with care. It wouldn't do to sprain an ankle on this rocky volcanic soil.

As he descended, Tom considered again how they had ended up in this forsaken place.

He could barely recall the Navajo campground at Canyon de Chelly, although they had awakened there just that morning. In another life, it seemed now. He pictured the tall shade trees. The numbered campsites with fire pits and picnic tables. The tribal cafeteria where he and Gretchen had eaten huevos rancheros for breakfast. But mostly he remembered the bustle of people coming and going, the traffic, and the constant background noise of civilization. All were gone now.

When had it all vanished? he wondered. They had been motoring south from Chinle on the straight, lonesome two-lane blacktop of Highway 191, through open Navajo country with its sparse settlement of shacks and hogans, when they were stopped by road work. Their van was first in line. The flagman was a big, round fellow in a yellow hard hat and vest with a yellow bandana tied around his face and tucked up under his sunglasses. Protection from the dust, Tom had assumed.

Tom climbed down and tried to talk with him. "How long?" he asked.

The man did not reply.

"How long *a wait?*"

The flagman shook his head slowly, holding his gloved thumb and forefinger an inch apart to indicate a short pinch of time.

Navajo, Tom assumed, as he climbed inside through the side door of the van. They waited with the side door slid open. It was hot and quiet. He watched the arrow-straight contrails being drawn east to west across the indigo sky. Gretchen made tuna fish sandwiches and they ate a late lunch while other vehicles pulled up behind them. He could remember the black BMW right behind them, with an attractive young dark-haired woman leaning against the fender while an impatient young man paced up and down irritably. Then an eighteen-wheeler pulled in behind them, blocking the rearward view of later arrivals. Its idling diesel engine seemed to bruise the still air.

And then what had happened? Tom remembered seeing an orange pilot truck approaching from far ahead, a red light pulsing on top. He had thought it odd that it was not leading any traffic north. And that the windows were all so tinted that he could not make out the driver inside. But none of that troubled him much. The orange pilot truck pulled off and swung around to show its "Follow Me" sign, and Tom started the engine and followed. In the rearview mirror he saw the flagman holding up the stop sign in front of the big rig and waving the other vehicles around the protesting driver. That had seemed odd to him too, and he had said something to Gretchen. But it all began to make sense when the pilot truck signaled a left turn and then veered onto a graded gravel road climbing diagonally over a greasewood mesa and then down through a mesquite bosque. This detour was not intended for big rigs. That poor truck driver would have to wait until the blacktop was open again.

The road became bumpier and dust obscured his view. The trailing vehicles began to string out. The gravel became dirt and the dirt became the white alkaline powder of the playa floor. The pilot truck began to pull ahead faster than Tom felt comfortable driving. In the mirror he saw the cars strung out behind, each throwing up a rooster-tail of obscuring dust. *And that's when it happened*, Tom thought. *In the dust cloud.* The road became a rough, grassy track following the slope of rounded hills. And the pilot car was gone, though he could still follow its tire tracks. Tom found himself leading a parade of vehicles, plowing blindly across a field of tall

grass, the van lurching and bouncing on the rocky soil.

So he stopped. One by one the vehicles bunched up behind him. People climbed out, some very angry. One young man accused Tom of leading them astray. But Tom held up his empty palms. There was no longer a road. Not ahead of them. Not behind them.

The occupants of eleven vehicles milled around in the tall grass and watched one Latino couple manage to turn their small Toyota pickup around and try to drive back out. They didn't get far before a rock dented their differential and they had to walk back. After that, the assembly turned into an impromptu meet-and-greet. Tom counted twenty-four people. Twelve couples. Most of them were young, in their early twenties, Tom guessed, some even younger. All seemed slender and fit. All appeared to be intelligent, reasonable folks. All were attractive. Blacks. Latinos. Asians. But mostly Caucasian. An ER doctor and his nurse wife from Omaha. A male nurse and his accountant wife from Phoenix. A carpenter. A mason. A blacksmith and farrier. Two couples operating small farms. Mostly, Tom liked them all.

Tom and Gretchen were especially drawn to Herb and Cecilia Saunders, despite the racial divide. Probably it was because of their ages. The Saunders, like themselves, were in their early thirties and seemed more mature than the younger couples. Sure, like the younger ones they bemoaned the loss of a cell phone signal, but they were not lost and at sea without their iPads and smart phones. Herb worked as a civil engineer out of Detroit. Cecilia practiced as a hospital nutritionist in the city. And Cecilia, they confided, was pregnant with their first child. As was Gretchen.

Several couples followed the gravel path around the hummock and discovered the cabins. The shelters, they called them. Others followed to see, but eventually everyone returned to the vehicles to talk about what exactly had happened and what they should do next. The discussions grew heated and chaotic, fired by confusion and insecurity, until an Asian couple from San Francisco, both lawyers for the League of Small Cities, gave it a civic twist by calling for each person to present his or her viewpoint, followed by a vote. In the end a strong majority chose to spend the night in the shelters. Each cabin had a clean bed, a small bathroom, and running water. Tom and Gretchen and the Sanders would sleep in their campers and watch over the vehicles. In the morning, if the helicopters had not found them already, they would figure out how to get back to the highway.

A party atmosphere ensued. Everyone seemed to have beer or wine and even some hard liquor, and a car stereo was cranked up. A few couples danced in the grass as the sun dropped toward the horizon. Those with food and propane stoves cooked up a potluck, which they freely shared with those who had nothing to eat. Spirits were high. This was an experience that might never come again. Tom was not much of a party animal, so he grabbed a couple of energy bars and headed up into the sagebrush to think things through. Into the sagebrush that turned out not to be sagebrush.

Now, tromping down the moderating slope with Gretchen and Herb and Cecilia watching him, his fingers touched the tissue holding the seeds and berries he had collected, and the dots began to connect. Tom felt a sad, sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach. He wondered how many of the other women were pregnant too.

As he neared the campers, his wife and the Sanders rose to their feet as one, seeming to stare at him in surprise. He was now on the flat of the valley floor with his moonshadow striding

out before him, and he quickened his pace. But they continued to gape. “What?” he called out, closing on them. “Are you alright?”

“*Look, Tom,*” Gretchen cried, pointing directly at him. Her mouth was drawn into a tight circle and her eyes were wide with terror.

“*What?*” he demanded, glancing down at his arms and legs and checking his fly.

“*Look! Behind you!*”

Tom spun around, and there it was. Smaller and redder in hue than the first one, perhaps further away, but dazzlingly bright nonetheless. Rising slowly above the rimrock. A second moon.