

The Moon Owes me Twenty Bucks

Jim woke to the sound of something thumping overhead. The noise was too sharp, too erratic, and too irregular to be a fallen branch or late night traffic. For a long while, he just listened. Another scuffle. Another crash. Another clang. Then, something that sounded like glass skittering across the shingles.

Glancing over at the clock, he read the digits “2:43 AM” glowing faintly in the gloom. He sat up slowly, his arms stiff from falling asleep over his shop’s ledger earlier that evening. The room above his small bookshop was usually quiet. His mind raced through the possibilities — raccoons, a stray cat, maybe a kid pulling a prank? But as the noise continued, it felt less and less like any of those. It felt more deliberate.

Another thud shook a bit of plaster from the ceiling. He pulled himself over to the staircase. With a sigh and a muttered curse, he pushed through the door to bear witness to the mysterious sound.

There was an unkempt man. A hunchbacked, staggering, pointed figure silhouetted in moonlight. He wore a threadbare coat, mismatched shoes, and a pair of pants about three sizes too large. He was muttering to himself, his tone low and shaky as he rambled on about nothing. His words were lost in the night.

“Hey uh, excuse me?” The man’s head snapped in Jim’s direction. He moved like someone navigating a ship deck in a storm. He approached Jim with outstretched arms, heavy strides, and his head bobbing with each misstep. A bottle slipped from his grip and shattered somewhere out of sight. The sharp noise made Jim flinch. The stranger didn’t notice. Nor did he really care.

“No, excuse *me!*” he barked, slamming a finger into Jim’s chest. “This is a private matter.”

“Well, this is a private rooftop. I’m gonna have to ask you to leave —”

The man pulled Jim out from the door and over towards the middle of the roof. He lurched over with awkward footing and flung a wavering arm over Jim’s shoulders. “Can you fucking believe this guy?!” he yelled out.

Jim brushed Rowan’s arms from off of him and took a moment to readjust his clothes. “Uh, believe who, sir?” he asked, taking a small step back to create a more respectable distance between the two of them.

The man shot a trembling finger toward the sky. “This is Luna. My supposed *friend*,” he hissed, his words laced with wet venom. It was a cloudless night, an inky canvas painted by dozens of

glistening stars. Within its center, in stoic grace, stood the moon. “How long have we known each other now?! Months? Years? Decades? *Centuries*? We’ve been there for each other, through thick and thin. It was us against... against the world back then! Well, what fucking changed? Is a couple of beers all it takes to come between us?!”

“Um... are you pointing at the moon?” The man’s eyes never once met his. They were locked onto the moon, silent and unwavering. The man slouched back down on the roof, his pointer finger falling back down at his side.

“The moon... are you blind? Who else would I be talking to?”

“Right...” Jim shifted his feet, brushing against one of the many piles of glass bottles scattered across the rooftop. “How many drinks have you had?”

“They were all for her!” He screamed through choked sobs. He wobbled down to crouch his knees as Jim rushed over to his side to ensure he wouldn’t fall off the edge. “Twelve beers... three shots of tequila... and a damn good number of jello shots! And I didn’t see you do shit!”

“I’m sorry, sir, but uh... this is dangerous. Let’s get you back down on the ground.” Jim latched onto Rowan’s forearms with a firm grasp before hoisting him up to his feet. He attempted to brush some of the dust off his shoulders before leading him inside, only for Rowan to push himself off of him. He stumbled over to the very edge of the roof and once again shot his accusatory finger up into the heavens.

“I sent my ten years of sobriety straight into the can for you and this is how you choose to repay me?! Are you really this stingy over a fucking twenty?!”

“If you really need twenty bucks I can spot you. Let’s just get down.”

“Oh, but it’s not about the twenty, is it?! No, it’s more than... so much more than...!” The man’s eyes dropped from the sky and fixated on Jim’s. “What’s your name, son?”

“Um, it’s Jim.”

“Jimmy, Jimmy, Jiminy Criminy. Great name. Strong name. Also, stop calling me sir. It’s Rowan. Look... Jim. Have you ever had a moment where you felt betrayed? But betrayed not just by anyone. Betrayed by someone who really counts. Someone that you’re supposed to rely on. That’s always been there and should’ve always stayed there, only for them to cast you to the wayside?”

Jim coughed into a handkerchief and stashed it away into his coat pocket. “That’s highly personal, sir,” he remarked, eyes darting toward the ground.

“Personal shmersonal. You got a story in there, somewhere. I just know it.”

“I only just met you. I’m not going to tell you that.”

“You want me off this roof? This is how you do it. But until then...!” Rowan grabs a glass bottle and smashes the end against the side of the roof. With a swaying stance, he brandishes his new sharpened weapon towards Jim’s chest. “I’m not leaving!”

“Jesus, okay! Okay alright, uh... my friend was supposed to give me notes for a math test, but on the day-of he was sick and I failed?”

Rowan rolls his eyes and tosses the bottle back towards the ground. “Booooooring.”

“My landlord keeps upcharging my rent?”

Rowan rolls his eyes and sits cross-legged back on the floor. “Yawn!” he exclaims, holding an exaggerated hand toward his mouth.

“One of my dumbass customers keeps using my roof to get wasted even though it’s employees only?”

“Lame! Wait, that one sounds familiar...”

“Okay, that’s it. I’m calling the cops.”

“No no no! Wait!” Rowan rushes onto his feet and grabs onto Jim’s arm before he has the chance to head back inside. He looks up at him with a strange sense of desperation in his eyes.

“What?”

“Please just... just do this one thing for me. And then I will leave. And I’ll never come back here again. I won’t stay on your roof anymore and—! And! I won’t litter the place with bottles! And I won’t tell a soul. I know what it’s like to hold a story that others don’t want to hear. To want to tell somebody things that you’re... that you’re scorned for. That you feel ashamed of. Or that others make you feel ashamed of. I know what it’s like to want understanding and to know it’s never there. I mean— I mean look at me! I’m hammered on a roof! And you didn’t understand me! You wanted me out of here or... yeah, you still want me out of here! But I feel like you understand me a bit more now!”

“You just threatened me with a glass bottle.”

“But trust me! And believe me when I say that I’ve heard it all! And whatever story it is that you hold is one you have every right to be understood for and I can be the one to listen! And— oh!”

Rowan shuffles around in the pockets of his jacket before fishing out a half-eaten pack of gum, some lint, a bent paper clip, a hollowed out tube of chapstick, a dime and two quarters, and a crisp twenty dollar bill. He flashes the bill in front of him with a cheeky grin. “And I can give you a tip!”

The world held its breath as Jim stared at him. Yet not long after, came the sigh. The long, weary exhale signaling his resignation. The faintest shake of his head and the slowest crouch back onto the shingled floor. Jim rubbed his temples and wrinkled his forehead.

“Fine... but the deal is, I give you my sob story and then you leave, right?”

“Scout’s honor.” Part of Jim doubts that he was ever a scout or that he ever had honor, but he indulges anyway. It’s been a long night. One he’s ready to be over with.

“My mom died.”

“Oh... that *bitch*.”

“That’s not the betrayal part.”

“Oh.”

Jim spends the next few hours going through all of his life’s woes. It felt odd, dedicating this much time trying to keep up appearances only to now have everything spill out into the open. Jim told Rowan about his recent falling out with his ex-wife that left him with the bookstore. He told him about the scene the two of them caused at his mother’s funeral and the disappointment from his father. He recounted other stories about his father in childhood — how he would have to rehearse conversations with him before they happened so as to not sound “stupid”, how he had to memorize his footsteps to know if it was safe to breathe, and how he has to constantly check his tone now just to make sure he doesn’t sound too much like him.

With each choked up word and drawn out “sob stories”, Rowan stayed quiet. His eyes were transfixed on Jim, only departing to gently nod at the right moments. He didn’t interrupt, didn’t look away or shift in his seat. As Jim continued, he kept leaning in closer as if to catch every syllable before it hit the ground.

Among the discard piles, Rowan was able to find a few untouched bottles of Guinness. Jim initially resisted, but eventually gave in to temptation. As Rowan predicted, the two of them found a sense of understanding with each other. They laughed, they cried, they bonded. They spent what must’ve been hours on that roof, regaling old tales and trading swigs of the bottle. Eventually, Rowan got up and shot one last pointed finger up at the sky.

“Come on, fuck you, moon!” With a hearty laugh, Jim pushed himself onto his feet and pointed at the sky, as well.

“F-fuck you, moon!”

“Yeah, fuck you, moon!”

“Who do you think you are?!”

“Yeah! Who the hell are you?! Fuck off, moon!”

“Fuck off, moon!”

“FUCK OFFFFFFF!”

The two of them collapsed onto the floor laughing for a very long time. Jim’s thoughts came thick and slow as his heavy pulse pounded behind his eyes. His mouth was dry. Head spinning. But it wasn’t the incoming hangover that knotted his stomach. It was everything else.

Somehow, he found it in him to peel himself open as if it was nothing. As if those walls, which he had been building for years, hadn’t been so casually bulldozed through in one drunken night. He rolled over and squeezed his eyes shut. Maybe this stranger would forget. Maybe he would forget too. Perhaps they both would. Or perhaps somehow, maybe, it mattered that someone had finally heard.

Jim gazed up at the sky above him. The canvas was no longer the inky chasm it once was, as warm hues of yellows, pinks, and oranges licked its edges. The myriad of stars began to fade as the moon retreated further down the horizon.

Jim greeted the new day with a smile, excited to see what new experiences he had in store, what new faces would greet him in his shop, what new stories he would have to tell. He turned over towards Rowan, only to see a new shadow settling over his features. His eyes were darting and unfocused — so wide Jim could swear they were about ready to fall right out of him. Rowan’s lips parted with a breath, trembling with words he couldn’t bring himself to say. His arms twitched. His muscles tensed. His forehead creased and dampened with beads of sweat.

It was dread that hung over him like a shroud. A newfound dread that Jim couldn’t comprehend. He brought a slow arm over to grip Rowan’s shoulder. Rowan jumped at contact and turned to face him. His gaze clouded as his brows pinched with a gentle furrow. He bit against his bottom lip before finally blurting out his final parting words: “I’m sorry about this.”

Rowan lunged at him. With inhuman speed, he slammed Jim down into the red bricks and piles of bottles with a bone-cracking thud. The glass shattered on impact, stabbing into his back and littering the roof in a sea of red-soaked stars. Jim gasped, choking up blood and barely managing a scream before the fangs pierced his neck. He thrashed under Rowan's iron grip. His fists flailed in desperation, slamming against Rowan's unyielding form. His blood ran fast. His eyes fluttered. His blows began to slow as his body went limp — stone-cold, pale, and lifeless.

Rowan rose, lips stained in crimson. His breath slow, staggered and warm, and his hunger finally satiated, leaving only silence in his wake. He reached towards one of the remaining intact bottles: a bottle of Guinness with just about one good splash left. He took his final swig and stared off at the sky. He wiped his face as tears mixed with blood and held his gaze with the celestial above.

"You..." Rowan choked, "you're lucky you're all I have."

But the moon didn't respond. Stoic and graceful. Silent and pensive. Unwavering and unmoving. It only stood and watched.