

Crescent Moons

T---'s store had always been the most disconcerting place in town. She had never actually been inside, but each time she walked past its unobtrusive doors on her way to school and back home, she would see the line of nameless customers stretching out from within the store. Each time, she would cast her eyes down at the cracked sidewalk and pick up her pace.

T---'s store was very popular. Every day from nine-thirty in the morning to five in the afternoon, people shuffled in and out, hundreds of them each day. It was always the same man behind the counter with his tools in hand, helping customers with what they needed. She sometimes wondered how on earth he managed; after all, there were so many customers, and most of them wore long, gloomy faces and wouldn't look at him when they told him their request.

Sometimes, she wondered what a visit to the store would be like. No one she knew had been inside, but then again, she and her mother didn't socialize very much. Nevertheless, rumors would always reach her in the form of neighborhood gossip. *I think they blast your head with x-rays, and I heard that one woman from the next town over even brought her kids with her.* Most days, though, as she shuffled past its crumbling gray cement front, she tried not to think of the store and its line of customers with their tired, bent backs. She felt sorry for them, because she knew T---'s store was an ending, a last resort—a place for broken people with broken dreams. And above all, she was terrified that if her thoughts ever lingered too long on those people, she would become one of them.

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One afternoon in the dead of winter, she was walking home under a darkening sky. The sun desperately casted its dying rays of light over the deserted streets, distorting the shadow of every wall, lamppost, and tree. She hopped along briskly, watching the cloudy air that puffed out in front of her with each breath and idly wondering what her mom would make for dinner, and if she'd finished her newest painting yet, the one with the seven waning moons against a night sky. She smiled at the thought. Her mother, ever the eccentric artist, had never finished explaining its meaning. She'd have to prod her again.

When she neared her little two-story townhouse, her steps faltered. On her little porch stood one male and one female police officer, looking as if they'd been there for some time. Parked a few houses away sat an empty police car, looking forlorn with its engine and lights shut off. As she gazed at them, heart pounding louder and louder in her ears, the officers noticed her and immediately hurried over.

"Do you live here, at 7 Pendulum Lane?" the male officer asked her. When she nodded, her heartbeats climbing to unprecedented decibel levels, he glanced over at his partner with a furrowed brow. She willed the female officer to stay silent, striving to steal the dreaded words from the officer's mouth, but she was powerless.

"I'm sorry," the female said. Her voice was a low murmur. "There's been an accident."

All at once, she felt the beating of her heart go silent as it froze in the winter air and shattered into a thousand colorless pieces. The world must have muted, because although she saw the officer's lips continue to move, all she heard was the roaring of blood crashing in her ears. Numbly, she followed the police into their car. She couldn't cry—not yet—but as the officers climbed into the front seat, ready to take her to God knows where, her mind finally caught up to the remains of her heart rattling in her chest.

Her mom was gone.

Suddenly, she burst from the car and began to run, her legs moving by themselves. She sprinted down the street as her body tumbled and shook with hacking sobs. Graffitied walls and building corners flew past, blurring at the corners of her vision as her eyes filled with tears that left streaks of bitter salt down her pale, round cheeks. She had walked this route every day on her way to school, so she didn't even have to think as she ran. As she rounded the last corner and the gray cement of T---'s store came into view, she wiped her face with a sleeve and jogged towards it. It wasn't five o'clock yet; the store would still be open.

When she reached the store of broken hearts, the line had dwindled to only a couple of stragglers, and it always moved quickly. By the time the officers found her, everything would be done. The other customers paid her no mind as she halted at the end of the line, gasping the bitter air with burning lungs, ashen face plastered with frozen tears. She was going to go inside the store, and like the others, she was going to forget.

As she waited, she glanced at the people in front of her. The woman before her was old and sickly and was nearly hidden underneath a huge overcoat. Dangling from the woman's ears were two crescent moons, and in her stricken state, she briefly wondered if they were waxing or waning. Her mom had always loved dangling earrings. She remembered how they would go to the pawnshop twice a year, without fail, to buy a new pair. *These earrings need a new home and some fresh love*, her mom would say. *Now help me choose.*

As she inched up the line, she suddenly remembered how on her twelfth birthday, her mom had saved enough to take them to the art museum in the city. The ticket line had seemed never-ending, but her mom had smiled calmly at her impatient bouncing and pointed at the front doors. *The painting up there was made in 1570. Isn't that amazing? People will love it until the end of time.*

She squeezed her eyes shut. Memories, both cherished and nearly forgotten, began to tumble over in her mind like clothes in their old washing machine. *She's a trooper*, her mom would say each time the machine's groan signaled the end of another cycle. And after the two of them hauled a basket of fresh laundry up the narrow stairs, the warm scent of fresh linen would dance along the hallway, weaving through their identically silky hair.

Like the lingering smell of detergent, the memories of her mom would haunt her forever if she let them stay. The woman in the overcoat had already gone in the store; it would be her turn next. If she went inside, she would only have to ask, and her mind would be free from torment.

But did she want to forget? Did she want to forget the way her mom braided her hair on weekends, nimble fingers lightly brushing her scalp? Did she want to forget the way her mom's voice lowered when she taught her how to paint, the way she smiled when she said *I love you?*

Her head felt light, and she pressed her forehead against the cold cement wall as if it would help clear her mind. She itched to go in; the store was tugging at her like a child begging for attention, and

The woman in the overcoat stepped out of the store, looking a little dazed, then held the door open for her. The crescent moons on her ears shone under the recently lighted street lights, and from where she stood, they looked like they were waxing. She stood for a moment, a

young girl in front of T--'s store, staring at dangling golden droplets. She caught the woman's eye.

“Actually, I think I’m okay.”