

Still You

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The mirror must be a liar, there has to be a piece of you left behind those amber eyes. The burning of incalculable muscle fibers tingles across every inch of your strengthened body but you don't relish it. There is no revelry in this lunar dance, you're a stranger in a body not your own. You cling to whatever scraps of clothing, pieces of the past, that hold the memories of what you once were.

Nothing has changed, right? Your friends say they still like you, your family says they still love you, there's no government agencies trying to pry you apart. They're sympathetic too, as sympathetic as they can be as feigned reproduction signatures written across sterile pages in 12-pt serif font by faceless bureaucrats and idle politicians who acknowledge that you've been 'moon-blessed' while not caring about the ramifications of what 'you' think about your circumstances.

"It's not a big deal." Your significant other says, their soft human skin against the coarse flesh of your toughened pawpads arranged in a mockery of both canine and human. "We'll get through this."

But it isn't just about getting through this, is it? No. You want to be human again, you want the wolf's face to melt away and to see something normal for a change. You don't want to be this sleek and ferocious predator, you know that under the auspices of fascination lies the admission fee to the freak show. 'Come and See' is written in curvaceous scarlet letters across a billing that features a caricature of what you were and what you have become. Through the looking glass, exposed moral mortality now bound as a beast. How glorious, no? But the show never starts, you don't let the audience get close enough to dare hear the true voices of their hearts. You push them away, and leave them behind as trailing shadows.

You flee to the depths of the city, where the smog-laden air is poisonous and vitriolic. You can smell the flavors of cancer drifting through the afternoon sky, corrupting and ruining the lungs of those yuppies who thought themselves sophisticated with \$300 suits and \$500 briefcases. They look at you, briefly, but the gazes don't linger as they did back home. You're not alone in the

blessing of the moon in this place.

They go about their business as well. They changed. They look just like your new unwanted form, of brilliant fur with magnificent sheen that catches the light just the right way as they go about their business. Some are artists, some are drivers, some are businessmen, and some are the Lunar Aristocracy who look down upon unmarked humanity as inferior and disconnected with pure nature. You know because they tell you as such when you cross their paths and they ask you what your purpose in town is as a new wolf. You feel eyes upon you, damp noses that drink your scent and tell your story for you.

Friendliness wins, and the gracious moon-blessed are quick to bring you into the fold. To show you how their semi-parallel society functions. They offer you jobs, a place to live, a new family... as long as you accept the lunar hierarchy. As long as you play by their new rules. But you don't want a new family, you want to shed the false masque and return to your old one in the way that it was. You tell the furred faces this, and they rebuke you. Friendliness turns to disinterest, but they assure you that the door isn't closed. You just have to play by the rules, to accept what you are. No, not just accept. You have to love what you've become. Then you can come back into their pack structure and fill whatever role they have in mind.

You are the outlier, it seems, for those who most relish the moon's blessing often sought it out. They wanted strength, purpose, harmony with the absolute. They hated the raw materialism, the limits of the human world. The change was easy for them, it was desired. A step up the evolutionary ladder in their eyes. Others came across the blessing unwillingly, but soon came into the fold. There is a nagging sensation in the back of your mind that perhaps, too, you will fall in line as well. That you'll live semi-parallel and soon forget returning to the world you came from and, by tradition, forget your face. Because new is better and old is tattered. But that just makes you seethe and rage harder. You want to step out of this furred veil-skin and back into what you were.

The puddles are slicked with rainbow film, of delicate layers of different oil contaminants. The rain clings to your fur, the water sinking into what patches poke free from your ill-fitting human clothes. You can feel the dampness, both in the air and against your suffocated skin. You're in the haze now, wandering the streets searching for purpose. You wrapped your feet in gauze, not because the earth was uncomfortable beneath your digitigrade feet but because to walk barefoot everywhere felt wrong. It was a reclamation of something, though the dirt turned the white cloth running up your furred ankles a distinct gray.

“New in town, eh?” The man on the park bench still thinks plaid turtlenecks will someday come into style. He reeks of barbecue potato chips

and Mountain Dew mixed with blue Powerade, but he tries to cover it with fragrant beard oil that has a hint of lemongrass and cheap cologne. You sit on the bench directly across from him, and have the first human interaction of your day.

“Everybody needs to find their group, no sense being a loner in this world.” He says, opening up a granola bar and taking a bite so that the honey-scented crumbs collect on his shirt. With attuned hearing you listen as he crunches and chews. It’s stale. “Can’t be a lone wolf.”

It isn’t a hot day in the park, just the beginning moments of Spring, but the sun cuts through your tattered clothing to warm the fur underneath. You can’t sweat anymore, and the more you fidget on the bench the more you realize how desperately you want to cast the heat aside and breathe again.

“I’m not a wolf.” You find yourself saying, through an embarrassing pant. The man’s reaction is one of amusement.

“Well regardless of what you are, I think you’ll find this city more welcoming than it looks.” The man says, still chewing. “Once you get past the edge.”

You don’t reply, just lightly pull at another torn thread on what was once your shirt. It’s slightly more engaging than twirling your shaggy hair. At least you think it is still hair. You still aren’t 100% sure where the delineation between your hair and the fur coating your body begins.

“If you need a place to stay, and this is just a suggestion, The Brethren Church of Saint Christopher offers lodging to all those in need. I find it comfier than your typical homeless shelter, and they don’t make you read the literature.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” You find yourself saying in a disinterested voice, but your mind is anything but. The heat clings too close, the last few cents in your pocket not enough to rent another AirBNB after four consecutive nights of spending too much while having too little. You don’t want to curl up like a dog on the sidewalk or crawl into some alley.

“It isn’t easy coming to a new place. It can take a long time to get settled, and some of us never do. But don’t let the first few days throw you off.” He says.

“Thank you.” You say, in a growl a little too animalistic for your liking. It makes you pause, rooting you in the moment.

“Just a daily dose of park wisdom. If you come back tomorrow, I’ll have more.”

The Brethren Church of Saint Christopher doesn’t resemble a typical church, nor a shelter. It’s a regal old Victorian held together by a patchwork paint-job and off-colored boards with iron nails spaced every 16 inches to let the rust trickle more evenly as it runs over the years. Moon-blessed live there.

Some are freshly turned, others are seasoned. There are humans there too; some down on their luck and others looking rather out of place with fancy suits and slick hats. All are locked in upbeat conversation. A man in priestly regalia walks among them, smiling and shaking hands.

They ask you for your name, with polite smiles and welcoming grace, and you provide it. Fumbling with your wallet to provide an ID is more difficult with your changed hands, but somehow you manage without dropping the card. They approve you and give you a key for a personal locker that sits at the foot of the cot. It isn't a home, but they offer a bed with the added bonus of three hot meals a day. So you stay and try to find new ways to make yourself comfortable as you plan out your next move. Another unopened text from your Significant Other goes unanswered, deferred to a later day when you're feeling in a better headspace. The foot-wrappings are cast aside and you get a restful night on a cot surrounded by people holding quiet conversations about religious philosophy and the true natures that lie within purpose.

Morning brings exploration. The building's interior is more telling of what glory was lost to the years, 1890s grandeur wrapped around ornate stylings and prehistoric wealth judging from the odd remnant photo showing oil development along the frontier. Few faces of the original family remain, but their deeds are proudly displayed across frames and realist paintings that yearn for an impressionist's touch to make the starkness just a little more homely.

Each room is much like the last as your pawpads tread across the wooden floors dressed with fine Persian carpets that appear vintage but are tagged as being made in a factory in upstate New York circa 1977. These moments in time reek of contained decay and the odd forgotten moth ball that has crept behind the corners of furniture as stained by Lysol as by their original varnish.

Another doorway leads down a narrow hallway to the rear of the house. You're no longer by the lodgings, by the common areas, or by the historical remnants of the house. This is a glistening portal that leads to sunlight and soft grass beneath your paws. It was a greenhouse, once, although the proper term in such a regal house might be 'conservatory'. But now it is clearly so much more. The pews stand in firm rows between the flowers and the pulpit lies in the shadow of a tree ordained with leaves and marvelous citrus fruit of an unfamiliar cultivar. The room is quiet, except for the occasional fluttering insect, and the air is a pure relief when contrasted with the smog that's assaulted you since you first stepped off the bus.

The ordained priest, of an unfamiliar order illustrated by his gold and white regalia, is not behind the wooden pulpit but rather is tending to his

flowers. A rose bush, of wrapped thorns around a green post with fresh mulch spread around the base, is capturing his attention. A watering can's last few drips escape to earth, before he rights it and sets it upon the gentle earth.

"A real beauty, isn't it?" He says, walking over toward you. "I don't think we've been properly introduced. I'm Father McKenzie."

You introduce yourself, even going as far to tell him where you're from and who you were. Talking about it as if it were another life; but this reincarnation happened only a few weeks prior. He nods, in an understanding manner. No doubt he's heard many similar stories before, animal confessionals. The priest's hands are caked with dirt and the odd thorn's scratch that is half-bandaged with rubber that doesn't match the skin tone.

"It's quite a journey you've been on, is this your final destination?" He asks.

"Only if there's a cure to be found." You gesture to the thick gray fur on your arms that pokes through the tattered cloth still pieced together by just a few spindly threads.

"You might be searching for quite a while." He laughs. "To be moon-blessed is not to be afflicted by some disease."

"What is it then, if not a disease?"

"Sit down and I'll explain it."

What follows is a stark tale of nature come undone, of genetic memory and mitochondrial purpose, of awareness and spiritualism that permeates deeper than the material flesh that it can change. It wasn't a conventional disease in that it was spread by germ or mythological bite. It was a mark of the earth itself, something obtained when a person crossed paths with the aether. Transformation's initiation rite happened where the world was thinner and energy could trickle through the veil.

"Obviously you weren't bitten, no?" Father McKenzie asks. You're both sitting across from one-another on the pews. Like an open-air confessional minus the booth.

"No, I wasn't." You say.

"But you started changing."

"I thought it was a disease. Not one that can spread from person to person, but one you pick up from places. From the air or water."

"Most people are close to understanding how the changes come about, they just don't understand the 'why' which is more important." Father McKenzie says.

"But it progressed like a disease, the changes came sequentially... gradually." You say, thinking back to that first morning where your nails seemed darker and your teeth a little sharper. But then patches of gray hair

began to fill in on your arms and face and your nose and lips turned black and that's exactly when you knew what was happening. It wasn't a good few days; mostly spent avoiding people despite those who only wanted to help. The ones who were afraid cleared their own path. But that's just how it was with uncertainty; with the unknown. You hid all the same and then you fled.

"Of course it did, nature is an artist that takes its time with the canvas. It works slow so that it does not err.

"Why then?"

"Humanity is no longer synchronized with nature. It is a divorce that has been a long time coming. The moon-blessing is nature extending an olive branch to pull humanity away from its materialistic ways and remind them of the importance of balance. It is not meant to be a curse nor a disease."

"It feels that way to me."

"Yes, some people eagerly seek out the blessing. Others are indifferent. And some despise it. But I would like to ask you... why do you feel this way?" Father McKenzie says.

"Because it isn't me." You say. "I didn't seek this out, and I don't see how the pros outweigh the cons. I miss my old life, when things were simpler and made sense."

"Did your friends and family abandon you after the blessing?"

"No."

"Did you lose your job?"

"No."

"So it's the face in the mirror that bothers you. The fact that nature has decided to give you heightened perception and the wolfish traits that accompany it." Father McKenzie says and you nod in agreement.

"You said it yourself, there are a lot of people who actively seek out receiving the... blessing..." You say. "I just don't understand why I was unlucky enough to hike that particular trail that day, to brush against those particular thorns."

The priest smiles and looks up at the sunlight trickling through the glass. "Want to hear something a bit heterodox? My own little theory."

"What?"

"I think nature itself is a trickster, as much as man is. Morality aside, I think that's why it provided the moon-blessing to random faces across every race, ethnicity, sexuality, and religious creed. It doesn't just want sycophants to run through the forest in mock-hunts as wolves in a primitivist exercise, it wants people to evaluate and think about the blessing from every possible perspective."

"So I'm supposed to be miserable about it?" You say. "Because that's what nature wants from me... struggle?"

"Only if you want to be, because I'm afraid there is no 'cure' for it. At

least not one that I know of and I am wholly involved in the affairs of the Lunar Aristocracy, humanity, and every permeation in-between.”

The pit in your stomach has been growing throughout the conversation and you feel like heaving and passing out while simultaneously wanting to punch the wall with a clawed fist.

“You’re welcome to stay here as long as you like.” The priest says.

“If there is no cure, then I’m going home.” You reply.

“Very well. Thank you for joining us.” Father McKenzie says. “I hope you find your path... and your peace.”

You gather what meager belongings you brought with you and spend the last of your money on both a bus ticket and a cheap hoodie large enough to accommodate the extra fur that clings to your body. You’ll suffer the heat to keep the fur at bay.

It’s a long ride back, one you spend with one ill-fitting earbud dangerously perched on the edge of your new ear. You don’t tell anyone that you’re coming home, no messages. You don’t want to commit to facing them yet, you’ll message them in the morning and spend the night elsewhere.

It’s raining when the bus pulls into the station at the witching hour. Only a few stray souls are milling about as you sit on a bench and check your phone. Over the past few days in the city you’ve adjusted to your changed hands just enough so that you can navigate your phone without constantly exiting out of apps or selecting the wrong words.

“You’re back! Glad I didn’t get on the outbound bus yet!” An excited and familiar voice catches your attention and your ears perk as you gaze up from your phone.

“What... but how?” You say, your phone falling between your fingers as it clatters on the floor glass-side up.

“I thought about you a lot after you left, about what you were going through. I wanted to understand. So I followed your steps.”

Your Significant Other’s face is in active metamorphosis; half-way between human and wolf. The hair color is still there, blended into the fur. Their eyes burn amber staring down the bridge of an emerging muzzle tipped with a black-lipped smile.

“Why?”

“Because I love you and don’t want you to go through this alone.” They say.

They embrace you as you rise to your feet, a numbness tingling throughout your arms as your Significant Other squeezes tighter.

“You don’t have to like the blessing, but I just want you to know that I’m not going to let you weather it alone.”

“I just... can’t believe...”

“Might be spoiling the surprise, but your family is having dinner tomorrow.” They nuzzle their half-changed face against yours. “I was supposed to go to the city and find you, but you saved me the trouble.”

You’re speechless and comforted in their embrace; you didn’t realize how much you missed the touch of another person.

“It’s been hard...” You find yourself saying.

“Well it’s going to get easier.” They say. “Let me help you with your bags.”

It isn’t a full moon yet, but it’s close enough to cast a strong glow over the parking lot. You feel their fingers curl around yours, palm against pad as their changes have not yet given them the dexterous paw-like hands of the moon-blessed. They lean close to you, helping with your bags as they promised, as you walk along the quiet road that leads back into town.

“You don’t have to love the hand you’ve been dealt.” Your Significant Other says as you get closer to your house. You can see the lights are on in the parlor and the upper bedrooms. “You’re allowed to be upset about it. But please don’t run away from the people who love you.”

“Don’t worry.” You say with a smile that you somehow found the strength to muster. “I think I’ve learned my lesson.”

“Big city change you? And here I’m missing out on the experience.”

“It wasn’t the city, no. Met some interesting people there with interesting perspectives. But seeing you, talking to you again... that’s what made it all click.” You can’t hold back the words, they just trickle out. You feel a squeeze against your palm. Do wolves cry? You’ve felt more angry than sad over the past few weeks, but something is finally welling up behind your eyes.

“Thank you so much for coming back.” Your Significant Other says, as you open the door to your old family home and face more friendly faces and homecoming excitement that overwhelms and exhausts you in the most pleasant of ways. The welcoming committee does not disappoint.

There’s a lot about your situation you still don’t like, the unexpected unfairness of it a sour note against the boons of sharper senses and increased strength. When you muster up the courage to gaze into the mirror again, the lupine face that stares back is a little less alien. Your posture conveys a sense of majesty and warm confidence you didn’t have before. The closer you look across every tuft or curl of fur to study the subtle patterns that lie in minute color changes across your muzzle, the greater your sense of relief and calm. For all that has changed, both in your body and attitude, you finally realize that behind those amber eyes and long fangs you’re still you.