

CHILDREN OF THE HARVEST MOON

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While staring at the full moon above the trees he suddenly remembered the song the children sang in his third grade class—

In those days there was still hope for instilling the appreciation of music in young minds, before public education became an endless preparation for state tests. And though his was a poor school, the music teacher would place the boxes of simple instruments on the tables in the auditorium and allow the children to select one each, a tambourine for the fortunate child, rhythm sticks, triangles, and a small set of cymbals always played with passion. Sheets of lyrics were passed around the tables and the teacher would lead the children through choruses of Christmas carols, or old folk songs. At that time there wasn't much of an objection to the singing of religious songs, and the simple high voices of children rang with ethereal beauty.

But he really *loved* only one song, the old German folk song sung somberly in high notes, in the plaintive sopranos and falsettos of eight year olds.

He studied the moon from the front porch of the house, the cold air pulling away from him as he breathed. The pure white light frosted the houses like translucent snow. Was this the same moon he'd seen as a child? Though he knew it was, he preferred to think it was born new every night.

What were the lyrics again? He searched his memory, and after a moment the words came back to him and he sang the song inside his mind.

Autumn comes,
The summer is past,
Winter will come too soon,
Stars will shine clearer,
Skies seem nearer
Under the harvest moon.

There was another verse he couldn't immediately remember, but that was understandable. So many years had passed since the

last time he'd heard it sung, since the last time he'd sung it himself. He began humming the melody, but became conscious of the sound echoing from the porch and stopped. Rachel's words had initiated the memory, the question she had asked, concerning a subject they had discussed long before they were married. But she'd asked it again, perhaps believing that time would change his mind. Time hadn't changed his mind, or his feelings. Nothing would change his mind, though perhaps she thought intimate discussions would suffice.

The moon filled his field of vision, as if it were the only object in the world to see. Then the second verse came to him and he recited the words in his mind as he recalled the sticks in his hands beating out an awkward tempo. The beautiful words, sung by beautiful children.

Autumn comes,
Let us be glad,
Singing an autumn tune,
Hearts will be lighter
Nights will be brighter
Under the harvest moon.

His lips moved in unison to the recitation in his mind, but they stopped moving when Rachel opened the door and stood next to him.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

He turned briefly and glanced at her. She was attractive, and seven years younger than him, but their age difference never seemed to be a problem to her. Her dark black hair shone deeply in the porch light, a light that also lit her dark, pensive eyes and recondite smile. *What are you concealing behind that smile? What secrets?* She'd kept this particular secret for three years, though now it was no longer quiescent.

"I'm fine," he said.

"What are you doing?"

"Watching the moon."

She touched his shoulder, then folded her hands under her arms. "It's too cold."

He said nothing for a moment. His hands flexed inside the pockets of his jacket. Then, without turning away from the moon, he said, "Cold air makes for the best viewing of the stars at night. Did you know that? They always seem so much clearer."

"No, I didn't."

They stood this way for another few minutes, wordlessly sta-

tioned against the winter night. He felt her gaze on his body, his face, but he refused to turn. What would it mean, now? When she finally realized that he wouldn't change his mind? Divorce? If that's what it had to be—

"Can we talk about it?"

He shrugged. She wasn't going to leave him alone, but he really had nothing more to say.

"Please?"

"All right," he said, relenting.

"Explain to me why you won't consider it?"

"I've already told you. You've known for a long time."

"I know how much his death hurt you. But that shouldn't keep you from wanting any more children."

"Why not?"

He turned fully and stared into her eyes. He wondered if she could see far enough into his thoughts to know the real reason why he wouldn't consider having another child.

"It won't happen again," she said.

"How can you be certain?"

"Nick, it was an accident. You have to believe that. You can't keep carrying the guilt with you."

He turned away from her. "You don't understand."

"Help me understand."

"What good would it do?"

"We could find a way to work through the pain. We could find a therapist and solve the problem together."

"Rachel, no therapist could fix this."

"Won't you even try?"

"No, I won't," he said.

"And I don't have any say in the matter?"

"I told you before we were married that I didn't want to have children. I was very specific on the subject. Or don't you remember?"

"I remember."

"Then what is there to discuss?"

"People change their minds all the time."

"I haven't."

"I have," she said. "And I want to have children now. I want to have *your* children."

He ground his teeth, trying not to release his anger. Anger was the emotion she'd expect to see first. He wanted desperately not to appear to be the controlling neurotic she often accused him of being. He wasn't always obsessive—ambitious, aggressive perhaps. But that was how he'd kept his life together after his divorce

from his first wife. No one in his family had supported him. Sure, they'd passed their transparent platitudes around during David's funeral, but no one returned later to reassure him.

"When did you decide this?" he asked.

"I've been thinking about it over the last few months," she said. Her intonation was beautifully premeditated, he thought. Passionate, as if some epiphany had descended on her. Perhaps so. It made no difference.

"And you've waited this long to tell me?"

"I knew how you felt. I didn't know *how* to tell you."

She'd told him in bed, after they'd made love. If she thought he would be swept away on a wave of contentment she'd badly misjudged him. He'd rolled out of bed as if she'd brought out a knife. And now he stood out beneath the night sky wondering how he could have so badly misjudged her intentions.

"What changed your mind?"

"I don't know, really." She sighed, her frozen breath rolling over his shoulder. She was beginning to shiver. "How can I explain to you what a woman feels about having children? I never had those feelings before. But now I do have them, and they're very strong. I don't know how else to explain it to you."

No doubt those feelings had been buried inside her for a long, long time, just waiting for the right moment to manifest themselves.

"Do you know how difficult it is living with an autistic child?"

She waited a moment before answering. "No. You've never wanted to talk about it, so how could I know?"

"I don't want to relive that part of my life."

"You never talk about that part of your life. I don't know anything about your ex-wife, or your son, or what your life was like before we were married. You won't share those things with me. It's as if you don't trust me with those memories."

"Memories can be phenomenally painful. Sometimes it's better to leave them buried."

"You don't have to be afraid to talk to me about that part of your life. Nick, please."

He stared at the moon a long time before speaking again.

"Not all autistic children are the same," he said. "Some are hyperactive, and some are almost catatonic, like David. They're locked into a world of their own, they focus on one thing constantly, they're unaware of the world around them. In the six years my son was alive I never even knew if he recognized me as his father. He wouldn't allow himself to be held. I couldn't hug him without traumatizing him. Some autistics are high functioning, but he spent most of the day playing with the same toy over and over

again, watching it, handling it as if he never understood what it was for. But his worst symptom was unresponsiveness. He'd just stand around the house staring into space, lost inside himself."

His hands were fists in his pockets. He didn't want to tell her these things—they were none of her business. But if he told her, she might change her mind.

"I tried my best to bring him out of it. I did everything the therapists said to do, but nothing worked. Keri was so protective of him, too. She never let him out of her sight. She held him like a toy on her lap, but he just stared into space and said nothing. Can you possibly imagine how I felt about my son's condition? Our world revolved around him, we never went out, never saw movies, never ate at restaurants. We couldn't leave him with sitters, either, because my wife never trusted anyone with his care. Our marriage was a prison. But I still loved my son. I really didn't know *how* to love him, but I tried."

He felt her hand on his arm, but he didn't turn.

"That's all in the past," she said. "It won't happen again. Your life is different now."

"How can you be sure?"

"Our children won't be autistic."

"No one is even certain what causes autism. It could be genetic. And I could be carrying the gene for it."

"If that's true, your ex-wife could have passed on the trait."

"Are you willing to take the chance?"

"Yes, I am."

"I'm not."

She pulled her hand away. "Nick, let's go inside."

The cold air was burning his skin, so he knew she was also feeling its effects. If he waited long enough she might just give up and leave the porch. Perhaps she would leave the discussion there, too.

"I'd like to watch the moon a little longer."

"Why?" she said. "What's so special about the moon tonight?"

"I've always loved watching the full moon," he said, "ever since I was a child. I heard a song about it once. When I was older I built my own telescope to study the stars. I can still remember the first time I saw the craters of the moon up close. When you're young those kinds of things are so beautiful, so meaningful. I wish my son could have known those kinds of experiences."

"I'm sorry he never got the chance."

"Even if he was still alive he wouldn't have been able to."

"Are you so sure?"

Autistics often responded to therapy, and some actually broke out of their mental isolation. But too many didn't. He'd

always thought that his son would never be able to relate meaningfully to the world. Anyway, he'd given up the hope long before the accident.

"What does it matter?" he said. "He's dead."

"And that wasn't your fault, either."

"Wasn't it? Keri thought so. She spent the last months of our marriage reminding me of it. Every day she had some different way of telling me I was responsible. That I had left the front door open. That I didn't bother looking behind me as I was backing out of the driveway. That I should have doubled-checked everything before I left the house. I was so damned sick of living that way. But I swear I didn't know. I swear I didn't leave the door open. He must have opened the door himself and walked out into the street. As slowly as I was backing up the truck, he should have moved out of the way. But he didn't move. He just stood there—"

The words caught in his throat and refused to be voiced. He closed his eyes against the memory of it, the first few minutes of hysterical crying, the ambulance, the emergency room, the tears and screams of his ex-wife as the emergency room doctor told them their son was dead. He didn't know it at the time, but his first marriage had also been a casualty.

And then he'd met Rachel. A quiet, uneventful life was all he wanted for them, no children, no complications, and no tragedies. He thought he'd chosen well. She seemed to reflect every belief he found valuable at that point in his life. She'd wanted an unencumbered life. Her career had been her main focus; she was professionally ambitious. She'd envisioned becoming a junior partner in her firm, perhaps even a full partner. Children would only get in the way. That's what she'd said at the time.

"You shouldn't be holding this kind of pain inside you," she said. "It's the kind of guilt a therapist can help you with. Once you get rid of the guilt you'll realize you can have children in your life again."

"I *have* children," he said.

She stood silently for a moment.

"I don't understand," she said. "What other children do you have?"

"Dream children," he said. His lips were raw in the cold air. He licked them and shuddered against the pain. "Beautiful dream children, the perfect children in my memories. How can you improve on a perfect memory? It never changes, it has no flaws."

"I don't understand what you're saying. An imaginary child can't compare to a real child. An imaginary child could never be as beautiful as a real child."

“You don’t think so?”

“No, of course not. You can’t live your life inside your mind.”

He laughed at the irony of the statement. He opened his eyes to the sight of the brilliant moon floating motionlessly in the sky. The old folk song played in his thoughts again, the children’s voices singing mournfully. But still so beautifully. Perfect children singing so beautifully.

“No harm could ever come to an imaginary child,” he said. “Could it?”

“You’re not thinking rationally.”

“I’m perfectly rational. How can you possibly argue against the wisdom of my reasoning?”

“Now you’re just being cruel.” Her voice was strained by a subdued anger. She was becoming upset, he was certain. “You can’t dismiss my desires that way. They’re legitimate desires, and we’re going to have to talk about them as mature adults.”

“There’s nothing to talk about that we didn’t talk about before we were married.”

“We’re going to have to talk about this.”

“No,” he said.

She said nothing for a long time. He refused to turn around, or acknowledge her presence.

Finally, she said, “You can’t use what happened in the past as an excuse not to discuss this. I won’t let you. We’re going to have to talk about it.”

He said nothing.

“It’s too cold,” Rachel said, before turning away from the porch.

He heard the front door open and close. He was alone again.

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He let his eyes close on the vision of the moon, just long enough to let the tension ease from his muscles, from his jaw, before opening them again. He’d thought he wouldn’t have to face this question ever again in his life, that he’d left his past behind and would never have to revisit the same fears, the same guilt. But now she’d brought both back to him, and he knew she wouldn’t stop until he acquiesced or sent her away.

The memory of singing children was so beautiful to him, so pure, that he wouldn’t let any other memory of his life contaminate it. The sound of high voices singing in the auditorium — *stars will shine clearer — skies seem nearer* —

The first promise he’d had Keri make to him after they were married was to have his children. He’d wanted children in his life,

he'd wanted to be a father, though he was still a young man and wasn't prepared for the responsibility. But the memory of those beautiful singing children had stayed with him over the years; he wanted those children in his life again. He wanted his own children to sing with him, to watch the rising harvest moon and learn about the beautiful things in the world. He'd wanted his children to feel the same love of life he felt.

When David was born he thought he'd finally fulfilled that dream. But his son never sang, never listened to his father's words about the beautiful things in life, never watched the full moon on a cold winter's night and marveled at the beauty of the universe. He couldn't. As the years passed he realized his child would never know any of the things he'd wanted him to know, that their life together would be dictated by an unfathomable mental barrier, that he would never be the father he wanted to be. And perhaps Keri was right; perhaps he did begin neglecting his son, but it hurt him too much to keep up the struggle, to keep pretending he cared in the same way a decent father should care. She'd said he'd left the door open. At first, despite the pain she felt, she'd told everyone it had only been an accident. But then, a few months after the funeral, she told him she no longer believed he'd only acted carelessly.

That was when he knew his first marriage was over.

He studied the moon and thought about the dream children singing deep in his memory, the perfect children, the beautiful children. *Autumn comes—the summer is past—winter will come too soon—*

But—

If he did have another child—if he *did* surrender to Rachel's desires—would that child be as beautiful as the children in his memory?

He watched the full, bright moon a moment longer before turning away from the porch and walking inside the house.