

Steel Moon

By Christine Warner

They had been in the car for about twenty minutes. He had not turned the radio on and they were not speaking. It was silent, except for the low- pitched thrum of the engine and the hiss of the air- conditioning. The interior of the car was frigid-- all of the hairs on her arms were standing on end and her flesh was pimpled with goosebumps. She sat in her seat, half turned away from him, hating the brand- new smell of the leather interior, and, keeping her gaze averted, stared out the window into the darkness, hypnotized by the rhythmic flashes of arcing white light made by other cars' headlights. She imagined the people inside of those cars as happy-- laughing, listening to music, sharing with each other the events of their day as their cars sped along.

He was driving in his usual manner-- deliberately within the speed limit, both hands stiffly holding the wheel, always signaling before changing lanes, whether there were any other cars around or not. Thirty- five miles per hour, whether there were any other cars around or not. All she wanted was to go fast, to end this drive, to get there. Quickly. To be around other people. To be out of this car. Away from him. She clenched her jaw a little tighter and thought of the enamel on her teeth being worn away by the corrosion of their life together, and just how much it was going to cost her the next time she sat in the dentist's chair. It was Wednesday night and the moon was hanging low in the sky-- a glittering silver coin on a blanket of darkness.

Tuesday afternoon, his sister- in- law had called the house.

"Hi, Terry, this is Maria. I was calling to find out if you guys wanted to go out and eat crabs with us tomorrow night. We're leaving for Greece on Friday and we wanted to get together with you before we go. I think Jason and Brenda and Scott and Michelle are going to go too. And probably some of Tony's friends, but I'm not sure who, at this point. Do you think that Frank would want to go?"

She and Maria spoke for about ten minutes, and she promised to call Maria back if Frank didn't want to go. She pushed the "flash" button on the handset. Fumbling to get her cigarette lit, she dialed his work number. He answered on the first ring.

"Transways. Can I help you."

"Hi honey!"

"Hey."

"Listen, Maria just called and asked us to eat crabs with she and your brother tomorrow night, before they leave for Greece. I think that a bunch of their friends are going, too. I told her that if it was okay with you, we'd meet them around 8:00."

"What are you doing home? I thought you were supposed to work until noon."

"Well, Val came in on time and it was slow so they let me go early. And guess what? You're never gonna believe this! They gave me my raise! Can you believe it?! They gave me the whole thing-- another two dollars an hour!"

"I told you you'd get it."

"Well, yeah, I know that you thought I'd get it, but I didn't know if I would or not. I'm so happy about it-- I just can't believe it!"

"Great. What time did you get home?"

"Just now."

"Why didn't you call me?"

She sat for a moment, rigid in her chair. Took a deep drag off her cigarette and exhaled slowly, her jaws clenching and unclenching. In an even, controlled tone, she replied, "I just did call you."

"You told me you got off early and that you've been home talking on the phone. How long were you going to wait to call me?"

"Frank, I just walked in the door. I put my purse down and the phone rang. As soon as Maria and I hung up I called you. That was just about, oh, seven minutes ago. OK?"

"So, what, did you just take it upon yourself to make the decision and tell Maria that we would go tomorrow night?"

She sat quietly, not saying a word, a lungful of hot smoke held deep inside.

He said, "You know that I have to work. Or did you forget that, too?"

"No," she sighed, " I didn't forget, that's why I said we'd meet them at 8:00. You get off at 7:30 and I thought that maybe you could get your shower and stuff before you work."

"Oh, you thought. You're just always thinking, aren't you? Especially if it's something you want to do."

Silence. She sat in silence, her cigarette burnt down to an ashy stub in her fingers, tiny flecks of grey and white cinders strewn over the gleaming wood table.

"Frank, we don't have to go if you don't want to. I just thou... I just figured that it would be nice. We don't see Tony and Maria too often, and you were just saying the other day that we never do anything anymore."

"Oh, sure, we never do anything anymore 'cause you never want to do anything that I want to do. You couldn't even put your work aside for one day to go to the party with me last week."

"I tried to explain to you that I had a deadline. I couldn't help it. And I had to finish it that day because we had gone to the anniversary party the week before and I hadn't gotten any work done."

"Whatever. You always have some excuse. Besides, I don't have the money to go out and eat crabs."

"Well I'll pay, then. All right? I'm working tomorrow during the day and I'll take that money and buy the crabs."

"Oh, sure, Miss Rich. Never has any money to pay bills around here, but has money to go out and eat crabs."

"How much is it that you need for bills? I mean, I just spent a hundred dollars at the grocery store, your dry-cleaning was twenty, I bought the weed-killer and the spreader for the lawn. What else do you want me to do?"

"Just forget it! Christ, I can't believe how you think! You're really sick, you know it? I just love how you keep this running tally in your head."

She sat in her chair, frozen in place, hot shame and steely rage silently washing over her body. Waiting for him to continue.

"And besides, Little-Miss-Quiet-all-of-a-Sudden, as usual, you've completely missed the point. The last time that we went out and ate crabs, they were forty dollars a dozen. I can't see spending that kind of money."

"I said I'd pay, Frank. If you don't want to go, you call Maria back and tell her that you don't want to spend the money, because I'm not doing it. I'll talk to you later," and she'd gently replaced the handset and cut the connection. Her mouth felt dry and nasty. Her heart pumped furiously in her chest. All that kept going through her mind was the night before, when she'd gone upstairs and caught him counting his stash. Twenty thousand dollars, all in twenties and fifties. Neatly folded, rubber-banded and placed beneath the silk lining in a suit jacket pocket.

Later that afternoon, he came in the door from work. Her stomach tightened and she swallowed the taste of bile which rose in her throat, wishing that it was earlier in the day so that he wouldn't be coming home yet. Wishing that he'd never come home. Hating him. Hating

herself for still being there. She thought that if she looked at him, she would spew hot chunks of anger all over the floor. He walked into the kitchen; she stared straight ahead and out of the window at the backyard. Two pigeons were nesting in the flowerbox just outside the window. Their coos were eerily melancholy as they snuggled together, wings rustling in time to their plaintive cries, grey and white feathers fluttering down to the ground. He went to the refrigerator for a soda; he did not look at her. He was humming some jaunty little tune under his breath; beneath the table's edge, her hands clenched involuntarily into fists. She wanted to just smash his face in. He never hummed when they were getting along-- in fact, the way that she had learned to tell if they were getting along was to judge by the degree of his silence. The fewer words he spoke to her, the better they were getting along. Through jaws which refused to open fully, she forced herself to say hello to him, and all that he said, without turning to look at her, was,

"What time are we supposed to be there tomorrow?"

They got to the crab house at ten after eight, or at least they got to the parking lot. He had to drive around the lot three times before pulling his car into the only space that was empty, the same space which had been empty the first time they drove through the lot. Maria and Tony were already there, so were two other people that she didn't know. She kissed Maria and Tony and sat down next to Frank, careful not to touch his arm, which was slung across the back of her chair. When the waitress came over to their table, they ordered two dozen crabs, at thirty-two dollars a dozen, and a pitcher of beer; she ordered a large coke for herself.

"I'm so glad you guys made it! We really wanted to see you before we left," Maria said.

"I'm really glad you asked us-- plus, I never turn down a chance to eat crabs!" she said, laughing.

Frank had turned to look at the big screen television across the room, but as she spoke, he turned back to the table and sneered, "Yeah, she never turns down a chance to go out anywhere. Anything just so she doesn't have to cook."

She felt as if all the air had been sucked out of her, and she tried to plaster a smile across her face, tried to laugh it off. She glanced across the table at Maria and wished that she hadn't. Maria's eyes were wide and her mouth was open. As she looked at Maria, Maria gave her such a pity-filled gaze that she wanted to slap her and then slap him and then walk the fuck out of this restaurant and out of his life. Instead, she swallowed, tried for a smile, and said, hating herself, "Well, you know how I am! Cooking is something that I'll try to get out of any way that I can. Sarah Lee I'm not!"

Everyone at the table had stopped talking and seemed to be watching, holding their collective breath, waiting to see what she would do, and the sound of the other customers all around them came to her from far away, as if she were under water, the sounds echoing and bouncing, meaningless. Hot shame spread over her body, her mouth was stuffed with paste. It was only a second, or an hour, and then everyone was talking again and four more of Maria and Tony's friends had joined the table. She could barely force herself to nod hello as she was introduced, could not trust herself to speak. Looking down, she fumbled in her purse for her

cigarettes and managed to get one lit. As she blew out the first deep lungful of hot comforting smoke, Frank turned to her, and, in a voice raised ever so slightly, said, "Can't you see that no one else here smokes? Do have to do that at the table?"

Her stomach contracted, the glass of coke that she had gulped down sloshed around sickeningly; her eyes stung with hot oncoming tears. She stood up stiffly and walked to the bathroom, holding tightly onto her cigarette.

Sometimes it's hard to figure out what is right and what is wrong, and sometimes even when you can figure that out, you can't seem to put it into action. She knew that this relationship was suffocating her and she knew that her love for him was dying-- had died a slow tortured death. She had known this for some time-- it was not a crab-house-restroom-blinding-discovery. And she knew that if she lived much longer with the mole-like pain that was gnawing away at her insides, she would be irrevocably changed. And she was afraid. Afraid of changing because he had been the center around which she'd fashioned her life, her self. Afraid of giving up, of failure. Her mother had always told her to never be a quitter, to never give up. Her mother had told her many things. To be a good girl, to be quiet, to listen. That if she wasn't a good girl, she would grow up to be the kind of woman that men-only-want-for-one-thing. What had happened, the reality of her life, was puzzling. She had always been her mother's good girl. She had learned to sit with her hands folded neatly in her lap. She always checked herself when she felt the urge to cross her legs. And yet she had failed, somehow, miserably. And then there was her smoking-- she could not help herself, could not make herself stop smoking. Good girls did not smoke. Only those other kind of girls smoked, the kind of girls who wore their sweaters stretched tight across their breasts, who cursed and swung their hips and ran with boys. And now, she was not only a girl who smoked, she was a failure. And if she left him, she would then be a quitter, too. But she was finding out that her mother's rules didn't matter. Had never mattered. She saw other women who talked loudly, who laughed and crossed their legs. She saw those women with men who sat close to them, and the men smiled into their eyes and rested their hands on the womens' thighs. And the women laughed and their laughter rang out-- roomfuls of laughter-- laughter which rose and fell and floated up to the ceiling, swelling and filling all of the available space. Her own laughter, she knew, was choked and forced, there was no joy inside of her when she laughed. It was hard to laugh when you were supposed to be quiet, to be good. She had been quiet for so long she no longer knew the sound of her own voice. She no longer knew if there was anything within her worth saying at all. Much less anything to laugh about. Her chest felt tight, airless, and her insides felt purpled and bruised-- smashed plums left out in the summer sun for too many days. She sat down on the toilet seat in the tiny crab house bathroom and cried, her cigarette turning to ash in her hand, tendrils of dusky smoke twining and intertwining, weaving their way towards the ceiling.

When they got out to the car, she handed him a fifty dollar bill, wordlessly, and he took it from her and put it into his pocket without glancing over at her. She slid into the unyielding leather of the brand new seat and pulled the door shut, ever so softly. He had often complained of the way that she shut car doors. As they drove down the avenue towards the highway, she stared out of her window, and everything rushed past her in a haze, a senseless pageant of multi-colored light. The streetlights ran together, rippling strands of blurred flashes and the pavement beneath the car rolled smoothly along-- tick- tack- tacking-- lulling her, comforting her. The moon

seemed farther away than it had before, its distance from her endless now; the darkness between them stretching out like a tar- top road in the summer heat, always rolling away towards the horizon, a hazy mirage, beckoning, as far as she could see. And now even the moon, it seemed, had turned its shimmering face slightly away from her, dark hollows and shadowy craters, pieces of silver dripping soundlessly from its eyes.