

PINK MOON

Norman tries willing his belly full but when he fails he can no longer hold off going for his one meal of the day. Because he hates waking mornings with nothing in his stomach, his habit is to wait until midnight before walking the six blocks to the bus terminal from where he stays in an alley at Ninth and Springdale. Frigid gusts of wind suck at the frayed lapels of the overcoat he took last winter from the public library on a day just as cold, and if stealing is a sin, then sleeping cold is a thousand times more so.

The dry heat inside the terminal sticks to his face like wet fingers to ice and the smell of greasy food twists his gut, reminding him of the smell of freshly torched bodies. He stands at the counter and nods to the waitress he's come to know as Shirley. Her dark eyes are dull buttons pressed into her dough-like face and any warmth she might have once had has long ago eroded, leaving in its wake a fatigued shell of a woman, not unlike those he'd seen hurriedly escorted along the shattered streets of Iraq.

He orders coffee and the house special, dry tuna on yesterday's white bread with a side of crumbled potato chips. Shirley slides a cup toward him, spilling coffee that puddles like oil on the counter. He bites his tongue, screaming profanities inside his head, then pleads with her for a top off.

"Sure, anything for music land's prince charming." Her voice is thick with contempt and her thin, ruby-red mouth twists into near-permanent sarcasm.

"Now now, sweetheart, don't be unnecessarily naughty." He pushes the empty cup across the counter. "Make a teeny-tiny slip-up behind that counter and you and I become neighbors." He mocks her, measuring his index finger to his thumb while flashing his best *have a good life* smile.

Her sneer vanishes as if he'd slammed her pudgy face behind a heavy door and she hisses through gapped teeth. "Drop dead, freak. I ain't like you." Her expression is that of the fearful old women huddled in vacant doorways, their swollen ankles crossed, their knees spread, and their possessions clutched to bloated stomachs. He wishes for the simple pleasure of despising Shirley, but instead he settles for filling his pocket with tiny tubs of cream and packages of hardened sugar over her silent protest.

Norman crosses the terminal and takes a seat at a booth near the video arcade. He forces himself to eat slowly, putting the sandwich back down onto the thick, chipped plate after each measured bite. Caressing the coffee cup between his palms, he sips the heavily sweetened white liquid and it warms and soothes him like he believed Sarah's breast milk nurtured and comforted her fretful son.

He met Sarah last spring, after a winter of bargaining sex in exchange for a warm apartment with full cupboards and racks of good domestic wines. When he tired of the owner's possessiveness, he drifted southward, following the promise of sun and sanity. He'd traveled no further than Tallahassee where he first saw Sarah, sitting alone on a park bench beneath the ghostly glow of a pre-dawn streetlight. She invited him to sit and they shared a smoke, and he came to know her as a near-perfect replica of his own loneliness.

Sarah took him in, never complaining that he spent his summer days writing bad poetry at the university's air-conditioned library, and when he asked her why not, she leaned against him and quietly said, "Good doesn't always need to come with half the rent. I like that you don't hit on me and that you make my little boy smile."

Although there was no mention of the baby's father, he believes that Sarah was never a woman whose child had a father she couldn't name. Evenings, when the summer's heat had relaxed its suffocating hold, he, Sarah, and the child took slow walks along cool, tree-lined streets, stopping to buy double strawberry ice cream cones. On one such walk, Sarah said, "Walking from the shade into the sunlight is like letting go. Yet nothing ever feels free enough to be love."

They walked on in silence and he too felt mostly empty.

When he and Sarah got high, she sometimes cried, and he'd hold her, stroking her ordinary brown hair that smelled of the fried foods she served to college students at one of several near-campus bars. In times like these, he knew only to say to her that which his mother had promised. "For now, you're caught beneath the dark side of the moon," he whispered, placing his arm around Sarah's thin shoulders. "You're due a pink moon. Any time now, I think."

"Norman, do you really believe in the magic of a pink moon?"

He answered Sarah in the same hopeful way his mother had when promising him the same.

He stayed with Sarah and her son until the notion that if not poetry, then maybe song lyrics. He kissed her and the boy good-bye and made his way to Nashville, where his songs have so far failed to catch on.

He chooses to believe that it was his mother's faith that led her to deposit him with an already burdened aunt, explaining only that her ticket drove an SUV with barely room for two. She yelled back that he was to expect a bus ticket. He went daily to the rural mailbox, but the ticket never came; only a single birthday card the year he turned twelve that had arrived two years and three months late.

He hitchhiked to Galveston only to learn that she'd left the SUV man for one driving a big-assed Buick with California plates. He spent the balance of the year walking Galveston, searching for such

a Buick, and by the time he accepted the futility of his search, Rita had blown in and he had forfeited his welcome back with his aunt.

Norman puts the last of the sandwich back onto the plate, distracting his hunger by watching bumpy-faced soldiers clad in olive-drab uniforms prowl among flashing video screens, noisily killing electronic enemies, and he's sure these boys have yet to see combat. He imagines that their games too are distractions from hunger, but not his hunger. Their hunger is fed by dreams of sweet, wet reunions at the end of long bus rides.

After Galveston, he'd worn the same uniform, motivated by the promise of three squares and a roof, and there was the assurance of money to pursue his dream of college. He served two tours in Iraq, his dream still intact, until in a fit of mutual passion he shared a shower with his platoon sergeant, and instead of perks and privileges he earned a dishonorable discharge.

A man leans across the table, catching Norman by surprise, and the intruder says something about the place being overrun with holiday cheer. He holds a cup of coffee in one hand and the tuna special in the other. The thick cup clatters against the coffee flooded saucer he holds in a small trembling hand.

"No," Norman says.

"Fuck you, Cinderella," the boy-man says, turning away.

"No, no, it's okay. Sit, if you want." Norman motions toward the vacant seat.

The man places a tattered copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* on the table and slides onto the ripped plastic seat across from Norman. He doesn't bother to remove his cap, but greedily takes up the tuna sandwich, wolfing it down like an abandoned dog. When he's stuffed the last morsel of food into his mouth and slurped the remaining coffee from the saucer, he deftly sweeps crumbs from the table into his palm and with a pink, wet tongue, he licks them from a nasty palm. When he's done, he runs his hands along the legs of his baggy trousers. He has yet to speak, having carefully avoided eye contact.

Still Norman says, "A wonderful book, pity there weren't more."

The man's face flashes a cornered look and reaches for the book and opens it to a tattered page three-quarters of the way into the book.

"I mean ... only that there are no more books from her," Norman stammers, an embarrassment left over from his childhood.

The man runs a quick finger down the left-hand page, stopping at a middle paragraph, his gaze moving rapidly back and forth across the page.

Norman steals glances at the man, deciding that he's in his early twenties. He has beautifully shaped hands spoiled by dirty nails, bitten back into ragged cuticles. He's dressed in the multiple layers of oversized clothing common to the streets, and he looks all together like a small black capped chickadee, ruffled against a cold night. Norman tries to imagine what the tiny man might look like after a hot bath, shampoo and shave. He pictures him dressed in white trousers and a loose-fitting white silk shirt, and barefoot.

Norman brushes at a soiled spot on the sleeve of his coat, wondering what the stranger notices about him. He wishes he'd washed up earlier and worn the cleaner shirt stuffed in the pocket of his overcoat. He would have wet down his too long hair and combed it straight back, even though he doesn't think of the style as flattering with his oblong shaped face. He remembers the many taunts of "horse-face" from classmates and the way they'd imitated whinnying sounds.

Over the noise of the crowded bus terminal, Norman hears Shirley calling out an order for a double cheeseburger and fries. How simple his taste has become, and he imagines the immense comfort he'd derive from a greasy burger, even with the artificial yellow cheese he once detested.

The slender man coughs several times into the sleeve of his coat, his cheeks flushed pink, and he's begun to sweat. He looks in the direction of the window at the front of the terminal. "Goddamn, it's snowing again. I hate the bitching cold." He shoves his hands into the side pockets of his jacket and lifts his narrow shoulders, shuddering.

"I'm Norman. And down in Macon, Georgia, where I come from, I prayed for just one snowy Christmas. Had I only known." He risks a slight smile.

The small man stares with watery eyes that give away nothing and then he says, "Fuck you Norman Bates and your goddamn snowy Christmas." He clutches the book to his chest, as though preparing to leave.

The man's surprising rudeness stings Norman and he stands, placing the last of the bread crust into the pocket of his overcoat. "For the birds in the park. Oh, yes, I feed the birds. Why wouldn't I?" Needlessly shamed by the man, Norman steps away from the table.

"Fair Norman, Sir, please wait. I am your servant, Sidney Who-Gives-a-Fuck. I apologize and beg of you to stay. It is, after all, the season of good will."

Uncertain as to why, maybe only that the man's pleading echoes his loss, Norman turns back. The man is standing next to the table, his body swept into a courtly bow.

"You have a loud, unnecessarily vulgar mouth." Norman crams his hand into his coat pocket, fingering the last of the loose change there. The accent is southern Appalachian, Norman decides, and

although he despises Sidney's crudeness, he's captivated by his voice. How could such beautiful resonance pass through the mouth of a tiny man with a chipped front tooth?

"Yeah, I do, Norm. Loud is hereditary and vulgar is acquired, the result of extensive travels through my less than serene life."

"Yes, well, I'm going for a donut." His stuttering worsens under stress.

"Sure thing, Norm, make mine jelly filled, if you've got extra on you."

"All right, but don't call me Norm. I hate superficial familiarity, and in a bus terminal for Christsakes."

"Relax, my generous man. Here now, gone tomorrow. Sinking ships passing and all that bullshit."

Norman forgives Sidney his tangled cliché and even his cheap theatrics. He walks across the terminal to the counter and orders donuts, fearful of spending his last dollar. He can always set aside his song writing and work the corner he's come to think of as wishful Washington and never Lincoln. If good fortune eludes him, he can easily hook up with some aged queen who'll buy his favor for an evening.

While a limp eighties tune plays from the juke in the arcade, Norman sits, watching as Sidney squeezes thick cherry jelly through the hole in the doughnut. He licks the jelly playfully, squeezes the doughnut, licking again and again until the doughnut shell grows limp. He wraps the spent shell in a napkin and tucks it inside his jacket pocket.

"For the birds, right Norman?" Sidney pushes back against the seat and he smiles with a sweetness that causes Norman to overlook the chipped tooth. "Don't know about you, but I hate waking to my guts romping and stomping. Reminds me too much of home."

"West Virginia?" Norman offers.

Sidney frowns as though bested at some unfamiliar game. "Now I remember where I've seen you. You work the first-floor bathroom at the main library."

"If it's any of your business, I go to the library, but I go there to write." He doubts Sidney would understand the sense of kinship he derives from the quiet proximity of other library patrons.

"You write?" Sidney drops the meanness as quickly as he'd picked it up.

"Yes, I've written poetry until recently."

Sidney looks at him like a true believer and Norman relaxes a bit.

"Most recently, I'm trying my hand at writing lyrics...it's like writing poetry but set to music without actually knowing how to write music." He giggles shamefully, diverting Sidney's penetrating gaze.

He'd duped himself into leaving Sarah and the boy on the chance that he might write hit songs. He's daydreamed about flying her and the boy first-class to the Grammy awards where he would stand on stage and include a tearful Sarah among those he thanked in a rambling speech that expressed a liar's deeply felt gratitude to loving parents. He wouldn't thank the father his mother had laughed and named "Tom, Dick or Harry Fucker." He'd laughed at her remark too, although he hadn't felt to.

"Shit, Norm. You don't look nothing like a poet." His tone changes like playful sex turned ugly.

"And you don't look like a reader," Norman glances down at the open book and Sidney slowly nods, his blue eyes deeply sad.

"You're right, Norm. I can't read what I'd know to write." He caresses the book, the weak smile playing at the corners of his mouth doing nothing to brighten his eyes.

Norman looks away and aches to take back his part in their hurtful exchange. He doesn't have a single poem to offer in defense of his claim. What little he wrote, he left with sweet Sarah who promised to read daily to her boy in the hope that someday he too, would grow up to write great poetry. He liked that she'd pretended.

"If you're going to someday read a book, you've made an excellent choice." He thinks about offering to teach Sidney to read, but nobody stays around that long.

Sidney leans across the table, his face as innocent as a sugar cookie. "Did the one-armed colored dude really buy it, like in that old black and white movie?"

"If by that you mean was he falsely convicted? Yes, he was and yes, he died."

"Poor dumb bastard. He should've fucked the lying cracker bitch." Sidney pounds the table with a tiny fist, sending a spoon clattering to the floor.

In spite of his better judgment, Norman wants to embrace the tiny loudmouth carrying a tattered book he can't read, but the momentary good he feels is shaken by the noticeable anger of the four men seated at a nearby table. Their hateful stares signal that they too have heard Sidney's ill-considered remark. Norman is no bigot, but he wishes these men would return to their earlier lambasting of welfare mothers and their bastard babies.

Sidney has pushed to the front of the seat and now he leans across the table, the book clutched in his hands. "Would've settled things with them rednecks, right Norm?"

"No, I don't agree." Although he thinks Sidney means only to balance the scales of injustice, Norman fears the electricity that has begun to surge from the next table.

"Look, a man died and he got nothing for his trouble."

"I know, but he was a better man."

“You think good matters?”

“I think it has to.”

He and Sidney continue to sit in the warmth of the bus terminal until most of those having destinations have boarded buses, leaving the station to an assemblage of men, women and children crowded along a dimly lighted corridor. Norman nods to a couple of old panhandlers he knows only as Mr. George and Ms. Chattahoochee Babe. She insists on being addressed as *Ms.*, laughing in the crazy way she has, claiming her share of entitlement to women’s liberation.

At the dreaded sound of batons slapping the leather-gloved palms of three security guards, the homeless slowly rise, gathering sleeping children and meager possession. Except for a girl who bargains sex for a longer stay, they shuffle through the station door and into a Christmas Eve night fresh with snow.

“Say, Norm babe, you got a number where we might get in out of the cold?” Sidney winks. “I’m new in town without a proper reservation.”

Norman thinks about touching Sidney’s slender hand. “I can offer you an all-weather crate at the end of a nearby alley.”

“Meaning your box can accommodate two cock suckers?” Sidney grins, again showing the chipped tooth.

Sidney’s boorishness disturbs Norman and he thinks about withdrawing his offer until Sidney says, “Pardon my rudeness, my dear man. Please consider me as your grateful crate-guest for what’s left of this beautiful Christmas Eve.” He tenderly picks up the book and places it in one of the many pockets inside his jacket, gingerly patting it down.

From the bus terminal they walk the six blocks, straight into the teeth of a frigid wind.

“My castle, Sir Sidney.” Norman blushes, lifts a loose corner of the blue tarp that serves as door to the two refrigerator-sized, heavy-duty cartons he’s duct taped together and covered with a larger tarp for better insulation, and steps back.

Sidney ducks through the opening and pushes to one end, making room for Norman who squats to light a candle. Its glow flickers orange, their shadows dancing against the cardboard walls, illuminating the art of home Norman has drawn with colorful magic markers: a double bed covered with pastel pillow shams and comforter, two maroon-colored recliners, plasma TV/stereo, an apartment-sized refrigerator, microwave, and a flaming log fireplace, all on the interior walls of the crate.

“Whoa! Crate-man art.” Sidney’s huge baritone voice blasts against the flimsy walls of the crate. “You’re fucking Michelangelo.”

Norman laughs and picks up a marker, expanding a chair into a loveseat on the wall opposite the fireplace. “Remodeling is such a breeze,” he says with an artistic flare. “Let’s cozy up near the fire.”

They sit on the cold, bare floor of the crate, sharing a reefer Sidney retrieved from the hem of his jacket sleeve. He wants Norman to know that he had a life before the streets. “But when Father Roy got done with me, I’d lost all interest in seventh grade. When the entire world took his side, I started drifting, staying wherever I could.” Sidney pauses, his arms folded across his chest, his small hands slipped beneath his arm pits, rocking back and forth in a hypnotic rhythm. “The one after Father Roy gave me a safer place to stay and all the peanut butter I could eat. It was my favorite, the crunchy kind.” Sidney shivers and Norman reaches to hold him.

“I know,” he whispers, “then the price of peanut butter went sky high.”

Sidney slips Norman’s embrace. “Jesus Christ, Norm, don’t go and bum out on me. Think of the streets as an education with no reading required.” Sidney’s laughter rings hollow, but Norman manages a quick smile, recognizing Sidney’s need for such terrible lies.

“We’re only temporarily caught on the dark side of the moon.” Why does he choose now to return to his old religion? He has declared belief in a pink moon to be heresy, like bad poetry and lyrics without moving chords.

“Shit, Norm, you’re balancing on a razor’s edge with that kind of bullshit.” Sidney shifts, moving away from Norman. “I’m going for a cold one.” Sidney pantomimes. “What can I get you, blues boy?”

“Amaretto please, Sidney.”

“And just what the hell would that be?” A twisted grin lights up his round, sweet face.

“It’s an almond-flavored liqueur made from the pits of apricots.”

“Damned if you ain’t the fucking internet.”

They have perfunctory sex, although Norman would have preferred tenderness. He studies Sidney’s face in the candlelight and imagines a longer, sweeter moment with him someplace truly warm. He moves closer, pushing against Sidney for added heat, grateful not to be alone. Closing his eyes, he silently vows to teach Sidney to read if he should decide to stay around.

Norman’s mind drifts into that murky state between reality and dreamland, only to be awakened by animal-like noises from the street end of the alley, and the air inside the crate electrifies with their fear.

Although Norman knows the approaching avengers of decency won’t be fooled by silence, he whispers that they are to hold still and pinches out the candle’s flickering light. Sidney takes Norman’s

face between his palms and kisses him fully on the mouth, arousing in Norman the intimacy he'd hoped for earlier.

"Just a little something for your trouble, Norm baby," Sidney says in a jerky voice, trembling with his fear.

There's a blinding light and the side of the crate opposite the fireplace caves in. Norman tries to stand and when he does the skin across his right cheekbone rips open and he tastes blood on the raw pulpy flesh of his bottom lip. He gropes in the darkness for Sidney before his left arm twists in the strong hands of one of the men he remembers from the bus terminal. When his arm cracks and a white pain races along its length, he loses all will to resist, collapsing to the floor of the crate.

Norman manages a weak response to the woman's voice calling to him from behind the glow of a flashlight. She slips on protective gloves before offering to drive him in her patrol car to the nearest emergency room that treats charity cases. In a deep southern drawl, she claims to have only seen the four men run from the alley and drive away in a black F-250 king cab, too late at any chance of apprehending them.

Hours later, he leaves the hospital with his arm in a wrist to shoulder cast and twenty- five stitches across his right cheek. The young female intern advises that he should stay indoors and keep warm. Norman pulls the coat tightly across his chest and laughs.

The young woman's failure to appreciate his humor is tattooed on her pale face for a moment before she turns her newly acquired skills to the next case, and Norman imagines her lack of humor is fueled by the notion that his world is one of choice.

"Hell yeah. This is America, not some sand pile oozing black gold like mother fucking Iraq," he shouts in passing to a bundled form cuddled against a federal building. His only explanation for having done so is simple insanity.

Christmas snow is falling lightly on his shoulders and above the deserted street, in a piece of sky exposed between tall buildings, a sliver of moon floats overhead. He pulls his coat together against the icy winds, walking the twenty blocks to the alley entrance at Ninth and Springdale where he learns that Mr. George has moved on south without Ms. Chattahoochee Babe. The bearer of the news speculates that since she got pneumonia the cold has been too much and she put herself back in the squirrel cage.

Norman can't remember seeing one without the other. He shifts his broken arm inside his coat, the empty sleeve flapping in the wind like a tattered sail.

The man bows his head, buries his hands under his arm pits and shivers hard. There is a half-empty bottle of Night Train among the man's belongings and Norman wonders again how the four men knew which alley dwellers to torment.

Grief for the old couple lodges in Norman's chest like busted stones as he hurries along Springdale. He needs to learn Sidney's fate.

Inside the bus terminal, he brushes snow from the coat and spots Shirley.

"Hey, Shirl, did you miss me?"

"Don't come in here acting like we know each other." A blurry-eyed Shirley stands and steps to the counter. "If we did, you'd know already my name ain't Shirley. It's Mavis. This here name tag belonged to her before she got fired for being too old and slow."

"Darling, by any name, your rejection is breaking my heart." He exaggerates his best effeminate gestures.

She studies the empty sleeve of his coat. "That there empty arm hole don't bode well for you. Neither do them cuts and bruises on that pretty face you're so proud of. What happened?"

"How sweet of you to notice, but I would have thought you'd know exactly what happened." He takes a seat opposite her. "Then let's just say there was a small difference of opinion on the nature of man's greatest pleasure."

She steps back, putting space between them. "If you ain't ordering then you can't sit at the counter." Her words are harsh, but her face seems softer.

"The little guy I left here with, has he been back in?"

"You're joking, right? Do I look like I care enough to notice?" She glances toward a booth in the back corner where the night supervisor sprawls across the table from a young waitress.

"Listen, you cross-eyed old cow, tell me what you know before I go back there and tell that fat fuck that you're my long-lost mom's secret lover."

"Your kind's disgusting. Unfit to be around normal people."

"Yeah, maybe so, but you fucking know I'll do it."

"All right, all right, don't get your pantyhose in a wad. But you didn't hear it from me." She squints at him through crippled glasses, an unhinged leg held to the frame with a twisted bread tie.

Norman nods and takes the cup of coffee she slides across the counter.

"Some rough looking guys left out soon after you two freaks."

He drains the lukewarm coffee and pushes the cup across the table. She refills the cup, out of habit more than any sense of generosity, he thinks.

“They came back later bragging they’d put one fag in the hospital. The other got away in the ruckus.”

“Has he been here looking for me?”

“Am I so in love that I’d keep tabs? I ain’t the department of missing persons.”

“No darling, you’re Mary Magdalene and I’m Jesus Christ.”

She steps away from the counter, covers her open mouth with the back of her hand. He drains the last of the coffee, fills his pockets with packages of sugar and tubs of cream, and walks from the terminal.

He sits on the curb beneath the streetlight and, turning his face into a fully arrived Christmas day, his attention is drawn to a lone black capped chickadee. He takes the bread crust from his pocket, tosses into the snow, and the bird fluffs its feathers, hops about, pecking at the bread until it’s gone, then flies away.

Staring along the quiet street, he remembers his momma’s pitiful advice that in a flood, he should snag the nearest floating log. He chooses to believe that under the right circumstances he could have cared for Sidney-Who-Gives A Fuck, and he believes that by Sidney’s crude measure, they’d each gotten something for their troubles.

Norman goes to stand in the alley, sprinkled in wet, dirty snow, and assesses the damage to the crates. With more duct tape stolen from the hardware at Elm and 7th, he can make it a home once again. Maybe he’ll add a third crate, just in case. When he’s readied the crate-home he has in mind, he’ll return to the terminal tonight at his usual time.