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2019 Conference

Mar 1st, 11:00 AM

Lunar

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Shaw, Rinnah, "Lunar" (2019). *Making Literature Conference. 2.*
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It's the summer of 1983, and a runaway boy lives in my house. His name is Raymond, and he lives in the stuffy hot furnace room, right next to the kitchen. He's been here for at least half a year, maybe longer, and he talks to me more than anyone. That's why I like him.

He's at the front door, getting ready to leave for work. I watch him from behind the banister as he pulls on his favorite jacket, the puffy neon one with the purple stripes up the sides. Once I asked him why he wore a jacket to work in the summer, and he told me that sometimes it gets really cold in the Dairy Queen, because they have to keep the ice cream cold, right? But it keeps the people cold, too. I also wonder if he wears it to cover some of those circle-shaped scars on his forearms, but I don't ask about those.

"Are you leaving?" I ask him, knowing that he is, wishing that he wouldn't. Sometimes, if he has a day off, we play Monopoly. I like playing Monopoly with Raymond, because sometimes I win. When I play with my older brother, Matt, I never win.

"Yeah." He brushes a strand of golden-brown hair out of his eyes. "Gotta pay the bills."

I lean my face between the cool wood of the banister. "What bills?"

"The bills." He laughs, reaches over the railing to ruffle my hair. "The ones that gotta be paid."

"Okay," I say slowly. I'm fairly sure he's avoiding a real answer, but I let it pass. "Can we play Monopoly later?"

"Mm." He purses his lips as he pulls up the jacket zipper. "Don't know about tonight, Mel. I'm going out with some pals...might be back late."

He tugs on one sneaker, then the other. He's got on the coolest blue and red striped socks, but even that can't stop the disappointment from pooling in my stomach.

Raymond tuts and shrugs his backpack onto his shoulder. He pats his pockets to check for his keys.

"Hey, don't look down," he says, "You're basically a young adult now, aren't you, Mel? Nearly nine! You can find something to do. Tag along with Matt or something."

I press my face harder against the wood, crowding out half of my vision with the flesh of my cheek. "Matt doesn't like me."

Raymond takes a quick breath and says, "Well, that's a shame. You're pretty great." He flashes a crooked smile and swings open the door.

“See ya later, Meligator.”

“In a while,” I mumble, turning my back before he does. The door clicks shut, and I know he’s bounding down the steps to run to work. Raymond’s always late, but I like that he still stops to talk to me.

I scoop up my book from where it sits on the stairs and wander to the back door. I can see our kid neighbor, Bobby Schwitz, through the glass, brandishing an archery bow. He spots me in the window and waves, accidentally releasing the arrow he’d been nocking. It flies swift across the yard and sticks with a *clunk* in the wood of our fence. I don’t even flinch. Matt still has a red scar right above his knee from Bobby Schwitz. Playing the backyard is out of the question.

I turn on my heel and walk down the hall, past the front room. Mom sits on the couch, staring blankly out the window. Joshua, my baby brother, plays at her feet. The morning light filters over their faces and glows in Joshua’s dark hair. The clattering of the ancient dishwasher mimics the noise of my brother’s toy cars cracking together, and the *whush-whushing* of the washing machine way older than me echoes down the hall. I consider getting some food, but then I remember that Matt ate the last of the cereal yesterday, and the milk has been gone for days. If Dad were home, he’d fix me some butter toast with raspberry jelly, but Dad isn’t here.

There’s no jelly-butter toast when your dad is a traveling minister and your mom is empty-eyed.

My dad is a big man, a wrestler-turned-golfer, an atheist-turned-minister with a head of jet black hair that he keeps combed back. He’s got a big voice and a loud laugh, but lately I don’t hear it too much, because he’s been traveling for a lot of faith conferences. My mom is thin, with a long torso and wild auburn hair that she likes to tease into a great big tuft at the top of her forehead. During the school year she works part time as an office lady at my school, but during the summers she’s just sad.

My father met Raymond at his youth organization at the local high school, but my mother had been the one to invite the runaway boy to stay. Mom says that even if we don’t have milk or heat always, we have a home for runaway boys. *Bad home lives*, she’ll murmur with a meaningful glance towards the furnace room door, Raymond’s room.

Dad says that sometimes Mom’s heart gets too heavy, so that’s why she has to sit down, or lie down, or cry some of the weight out until she can get up again. Sometimes the heaviness makes blinking hard, and she’ll stare out the front window for hours without any change in expression, watching the cars streak by too fast for a neighborhood. For hours, she just watches the shadows of fluttering maple tree as Joshua plays with his Matchbox cars.

Today is one of those Sad Days, and Dad is gone on a trip, the last one of the summer.

I leave without a word, shutting the front door behind me.

«»

Raymond comes home late, long after dinner. I hear first his right shoe- *thud*- then his left one- *thud*- in the threshold as he throws them off. Joshua knocks down the card tower I was building on the living room floor with a giggle.

Raymond comes in and collapses into the chair, his hair disheveled. He smells like cigarettes and something else I can't identify. He drops his bag onto the carpet with a heavy sigh.

"Hey Mel," he says, without looking at me. His voice is low and scratchy. "How're you?"

Before I can answer, Matt calls out from the kitchen. "She got in trouble with Crazy Dave today." His summer math homework is flung across the table like a tornado grabbed it, his thin lips twist up in a grin.

I shoot him a glare, then glance back at Raymond. His light blue eyes watch me from under the shadows of his hair. Sometimes I wish I had blue eyes instead of brown. My whole family has brown eyes speckled with black, like wet sand. Joshua pushes some cards onto my knee, hoping that I'll build another tower so he can knock it over.

"I didn't do anything wrong," I protest. "I just fell into his rose bushes."

Raymond blinks. "Rose bushes?"

"They have a lotta thorns." I show him the palms of my hands, which Mom dabbed in ointment and plastered with Baby Muppet band aids. By the time I had run back home, rivulets of blood were trickling down my fingers, dripping on the sidewalk and my black Converse.

Crazy Dave's shouts still ring in my ears, *Damn kids! I'll call the cops on you, I swear I will! Make you pay for damages!*

Crazy Dave used to be a vacuum salesman, but now that he's retired, he likes to yell at children, tend to his rose bushes, and paint his trees the same blue as his house. The blue paint is as light as the sky, spreading from root to boughs. I used to wonder if Crazy Dave had managed to catch slices of the sky to wrap around the trees, but now I know that that can't be true. The paint is starting to flake around the knots in the bark, revealing the natural darkness within, and the top branches are beginning to die, turning gray and ashy as the leaves wilt.

I still think that if I were to take a chisel and chip at the sky, I'd somehow find dying tree bark underneath.

"God, Mel," Raymond breathes. There are dark bags under his eyes that I haven't noticed before. "Be careful around people like him."

I shrug and turn to build another card castle for Joshua. He's nudging a black beetle with his finger as it picks its way over the beige carpet.

"Do you have a story today?" I ask.

The stories are our thing, Raymond and I. He's told me that coming up with them gets him through slow days at work. That they keep his feet on the ground, whatever that means.

"I... yes." He takes a moment to collect himself. He sits with his legs draped over the chair's arm, chin tucked to his chest like he's sleeping.

"There once was a boy with a hole in his stomach. It was a pretty big hole, as big as this." Raymond forms a softball-sized circle with his hands, eyebrows pulled into worried lines.

"He had always lived with it. When he was born, the doctor said, 'This boy is not finished growing, but I can't put him back.' So he had to live with it. It didn't hurt much, but it made him feel cold when the wind would whistle through, and he was always hungry. Sometimes people would laugh at him. They would say, 'Why does that boy have a circle of empty in his stomach? Why is he incomplete?' So he thought, maybe I can find something to fill this empty space, here. Maybe I will find the right circle thing, so that I can be whole again."

He sighs, eyes fluttering closed. Matt flips over one of his papers, clicks at his calculator. The beagle next door yodels a long, warbling howl.

"Sorry, Mel. I'm too tired to finish," Raymond says, swinging his legs down from the chair. He rubs the back of his neck and stifles a yawn. "I'm going to turn in."

"Okay," I say, wondering about the hole-in-the-stomach boy and how someone like that could be. He shuffles through the kitchen, squeezing Matt's shoulder on the way. He pauses to grab a piece of bread and an orange off of the counter.

I finish the card castle, and Joshua knocks it over with a sharp laugh.

The beetle inches across the floor.

Raymond comes home from work at the normal time the next day, and it's a Better Day for Mom. She even cooks a beef stew in the crockpot, with peas and carrots and onions and everything. My hands still hurt, so I can't help cut up the vegetables or the bread. I set out paper napkins instead. Joshua is in the living room, trying to pull the fur out of our cat's face. It poofs up and hisses at him, but he doesn't stop.

"Evening, Mrs. Andrews. Hey, Mel." Raymond dodges around my mom as she ladles stew into bowls. "How was your day?"

I shrug. It's been a Better Day. I didn't fall into anyone's rose bushes.

Matt sticks his head around the corner and grins, showing off the gap between his two front teeth. "The housing project got burned down again."

"Really?" Raymond scoops up some spoons and scatters them on the table. He forgets that Dad isn't here, because he puts down six.

"Yeah. Everyone knows it's Tony, but he says if anyone tells, he'll burn down their house before the police can get 'em." Matt's eyes are gleaming, as if he wished that he had been the one to do it. "The smoke was so thick, you could smell it across town. They were almost done with the skeleton of the project, too."

Mom shakes her head. Her glasses steam up with the heat of the stew.

"We're just lucky he's sticking to houses without people in them."

Mom always says that Crazy Dave is only one of the many "wild" people in our neighborhood, that the whole place is full of them.

"The summer heat brings it out more," she likes to say, "Sin festers when it's warm."

I've never been too sure of what that means, or if I believe it, but as the summer drags on, and houses burn, and the cuts from the rose bushes sting in my palms, I'm starting to consider it.

Joshua yanks out a tuft of fur from the cat. It claws him in the cheek, and soon they're both yowling. Mom rushes over. Maybe Joshua will learn his lesson this time, maybe not, but who cares, really? Matt, Raymond, and I pick up our bowls and take our seats at the table, murmuring a quick prayer under our breath before plunging into the hearty stew.

We eat, then Raymond scrubs his face and yawns. "I have a story for you, Mel."

I straighten, thinking about the hole-in-the-stomach boy. "Okay."

He taps his fingers on the table. He's wearing a faded Coca Cola shirt, and his eyes are brighter today. The purple bags are still there, though, and there's dirt under his fingernails.

"There's a man who lives on the dark side of the moon, all by himself. He doesn't know how he got there, just that he is." Raymond takes a long pause, eats a bite of stew.

"The dark side of the moon isn't all that bad, but it's lonely, and cold. The man can see the sun sometimes, out of the corner of his eye, and somehow, he knows that on the other side of the moon, there's the Earth. A planet full of people like him, living in the light. And he knows that the moon revolved around that Earth, so certainly, one day he would have to see it."

I imagine the crater-pocked ground of the moon from my school books, spreading in every direction, and a man with no one else. A gaping loneliness opens up in me, and I pity the moon man. I want him to find Earth.

"You know what the funny thing about the moon is, Mel?" Raymond asks, tapping on the table again.

Joshua walks over to sit beside him. He stares into his bowl of stew, a bandaid on his cheekbone.

"The far side of the moon *never* faces us, even though it's always turning. We always see the same side. So even though the moon man tried to walk around, he remained in the dark side of the moon, because he was walking against the rotation."

I blink slowly. "So... he'll never find the Earth?"

Raymond tilts his head, presses his lips together. I know that he is only eighteen, but he suddenly strikes me as very, very old. He has an answer, but he asks a question instead.

"Have you ever seen an eclipse, Mel?"

I shake my head. "No."

He picks up his bowl and goes to the sink. "Yeah. Neither have I."

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Later that night, I go out into the backyard and gaze up at the new night sky, inky and scattered with stars. The moon is there, but only barely, like a thin fragment of egg shell. I wonder about the two boys from Raymond's stories. Maybe the boy with the hole in his stomach needed the moon, I think. Maybe the moon man just needed to start walking in the other direction.

I go back into the house.



Summer break is over, and Raymond has been gone for five days. He went to his second-to-last day of work on Friday and didn't come back.

I sit on the front porch steps, the summer dying hot on my skin. A brilliant crimson spreads over the roofs of my neighborhood, and some birds gather in our maple tree, sing a hesitant song.

I stare out at my street, lined with houses that look the same, filled with people that look the same, too. The houses are all the same mold, the same tan color (except Crazy Dave's blue house, with trees that match the sky). I wonder if identical houses mean identical stories. I wonder how many runaway boys live in their furnace rooms. I wonder if they think about boys-with-a-hole-in-his-stomach or moon men, all alone and cold.

My birthday was yesterday. Dad came home just in time, pleased but exhausted after the drive from Cincinnati. His broad shoulders filled the entire hallway when he came back, suitcase in tow, black hair swept neatly over his one bald spot. His booming voice fills the house again, and it is somehow even warmer with him here. Mom made me a cake, but it was a Sad Day, so Dad sang louder than anyone as if he could drown out the sadness that curled under the table and in our guts.

I'm nine, now. Matt turns eleven in September. He says that when you turn eleven, you enter the age of doubles, of which you probably only experience nine, if you're lucky. *11, 22, 33, 44... all the way to 99, and then maybe 100, a double zero. But that's really old, and you'll probably die before that*, he told me last year. It's strange to think that he's had the same amount of doubles as Raymond has: one for turning eleven, even though Raymond is a whole seven years older.

I'm nine, and Raymond is gone. No one has mentioned him.

The dying sun is bright and painful, and suddenly my eyes are full of tears. Raymond didn't come back for my birthday, so why should I think about his?

I scrub my eyes and blink rapidly, suddenly ashamed and fully aware that I'm crying on the front porch step. The world is too big for me, I think. The people don't make any sense. Sometimes they paint their trees blue, or yell at you for cutting your hands on roses, or stare with empty eyes. Sometimes they tell you stories of the moon, and then they leave. For days, or maybe forever.

I go inside. I get out Monopoly, even though I know that there's no one to play with.

Late August birthdays can be bittersweet like that, I think.

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That night, the front door clicks open and closed. Matt turns over in his sleep above me, the bunk bed creaking. I slip out from under my sheets. My dad's t-shirt tangles over my athletic shorts as I creep down the upstairs hall in the pitch black. I hear a deep sigh, the *thud...thud* of shoes hitting the threshold.

Raymond.

My chest fills with a bubble of joy, but then I pause. I'm still angry at him for leaving. The bubble sinks into my stomach, turning into something greasy.

I climb down the stairs anyway.

His shadowy figure is outlined by the dim outdoor lights by the front door. He is standing still, a hand over his face. I lean against the banister, watching him. My eyes adjust, and I can see that his shoulders are slumped, like he is holding up the whole world.

"...Raymond?"

He startles violently, stumbling back and nearly cracking his head on the framed picture of our family, from before Joshua was born. Mom keeps saying that we'll replace it soon, when she can hire a professional photographer again.

Raymond draws in a raw, cracked breath.

"Mel." His hand doesn't leave his face. He makes no move to turn on a light. "You should be in bed."

"I heard you come in," I say.

"Oh," he mumbles. "You... you should go sleep. I'm gonna crash, too."

There's something wrong, but I don't know what. His voice is scratchy, like mine when I've been fighting with Matt and yell too much. Raymond draws back from me, curving into himself.

"Mom made baked chicken and potatoes for dinner," I tell him, forgetting that I'm angry for a second. Sometimes he forgets to eat, which I never understand. "There's leftovers in the fridge."

He shakes his head almost imperceptibly. "That's okay. Go sleep, Meligator."

The greasy bubble starts welling back up in my stomach, angry and black. I stand up. How can he just come back after five days and then try to send me away? I thought he was my friend.

I reach for the light switch on the wall.

He takes a sharp step forward. "Mel, don't-"

My eyes smart at the sudden brightness as the lights snap on. I glimpse Raymond's face.

His eye is the color of eggplant, round and swollen like a small moon beneath his fingers. Raymond drops his hand, a dark emotion flashing over his face too quick for me to recognize. I don't say anything, but we both feel the question in the air.

"Go to bed, Mel," Raymond says, his voice low and hard.

He watches me for a moment before starting down the hall.

"You were gone for five days," I call after him. My voice is wobbly, and I hate it. "No one said anything, and you didn't tell me. You forgot about me."

Raymond stops with his back to me, muscles tensing.

"God, Mel," he spits out, "Not everything is about you, okay?"

His words ring in the air, sharp and awful. We both freeze, tasting them, holding the bitterness on our tongues. They go right through my body like radiation.

"Okay," I whisper.

He takes a deep, shuddering breath. "I'm sorry, Mel."

His right eye is sunken, hidden beneath the swollen red skin, and his lip is split. A tear glints in his good eye. "I'm going through a lot right now."

"Okay," I say.

"And I need you to go to bed."

"Okay," I say, louder, but my voice trembles again.

I turn to go back up the stairs. The bubble in my stomach has popped, and now all that greasy, cold blackness has coated my insides. I think about how it is like the far side of the moon, now. I don't like being there at all.

Raymond's voice echos up the stairs before I reach the top. "Mel..."

I look at him, at his purple eye, at his split lip, starting to scab, at the way he holds his shoulders. I am taller than him on the stairs. He suddenly looks like a very sad person, but it's a different sadness than Mom's, one that I'm both familiar and unfamiliar with.

"Let's go sit outside, okay? Please, Mel."

I don't say anything, this time. I walk down the stairs, push past him, and open the door.

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The moon is a sliver in a black sky, and the crickets sing. Raymond is silent beside me on the porch step, his breathing slow and even. I find a Monopoly dollar in my shorts pocket. I scrub it between my fingers as a cool breeze ruffles my hair. I'm not tired, but I don't feel awake. I'm just... there. We watch small ribbons of cloud shiver across the moon, one at a time.

Raymond says, "I wish I could still see the world like you do, Mel."

I don't say anything. I don't know what he means.

"You still see it as something to explore. Something *worth* exploring. You want to see it, because you think that there are good things to see. And... you could, if you tried."

He lapses into silence again, rubbing the circle scars on his arms.

I fidget with the paper money. I don't know if what he said is true. I know that there are trees the color of the sky, glossy black beetles and summer nights, parents who love you, birthdays. But I also know that there is a lot of wrong, that there are hole-in-their-stomach boys and Sad Days, burning houses, runaway kids with purple eyes, moon men, all alone. I don't know what to think of all that.

I tell Raymond this, and he smiles sadly. "Yeah. Neither do I."

Then I look at the sliver of the moon, which will be back to a whole in a few nights' time, and I think about how maybe there are dark times for everything, even the moon.

The crickets sing to me, Raymond, and all the universe, under a glistening tree bark sky.