

They're Only Made of Moonlight

By Taibat Ahmed

Papa was the first drop to your pond of malaise; you were his exercise and consolation. You didn't like his rancor, how it filled the cells in the air, swelled your nostrils. His quiet litany was always, "You look just like your Mama". He wouldn't let Mama die even though she wanted to.

You remember Mama's funeral, late July, the whispers of apple blossoms turbulent with yesterday's rain. The sky was sunny; beautiful; azul. The cars flying by on the asphalt burned an acidic taste in your throat. Other Mamas and other Papas and dear children were laughing with the windows rolled down, heading somewhere far away, like the moon, to dance barefoot on beaches.

Mama's name was scratched onto gray slab, *Elanor Sanféra*, the earth damp with tears, fresh and alive. Your brain was too small to understand what death truly meant, your heart too fragile to grasp that you would never again sit on her lap under the glow of night, humming your favorite canciones. Cousins and aunties talked low, low enough to hear their dismay for Papa who was drowning in liquor, for you who was as well off as an orphan.

They were right, you suppose now, rubbing the crimson and plum along your thighs and forearms until the pain turns apathetic, numb. As do you.

Papa knows his faults. His brief jobs behind a register; his useless daughter. He knows his strengths too. He is grown, a man, stronger, built of ire.

Yesterday, the ravens absorbed Papa's hot cigarette. You threw the windows open and cried.

Eric is the boy your eyes latch onto. His lopsided dark curls, crescent smile, hands deep in pockets. You laugh (in your head) at his jokes (overheard). You notice how he misses school every other week. In the hallway, your eyes meet (*blush*). For a nanosecond, you pretend you are pretty.

It is third period, art class, the day after Papa left. His silhouette would stumble back into the house one night, perhaps in a week, or two, or three. Today, Ms. Layson reassigned seats, so now you and Eric share a round wooded table with splintered curves. You have never been so close to him, so opportune to distinguish each obsidian eyelash, long and delicate as breaths.

You spend the period watching the morning sun filter onto his face, rosy, tanned, pretending to be absorbed in silent contemplation with your palms cupping a clay flower vase. He doesn't speak. To Eric, like everyone else, you are thin as air, pale as water.

You had a friend once, her name was Violet. She was the girl you tried to shake off. She said you didn't know how to dress and Goodwill was for beggars, but she was the only person who invited you out. Once, she locked you in her basement, six hours, while you crouched and sobbed in the darkness of musty underground. You wish you were the one who made her disappear, but you'll never complain that she's gone.

Whatever. It's fine. Friends aren't for everyone.

The sun burns your neck walking home. At home, with Papa gone, you no longer have to tiptoe across the floorboards with your heart burrowing a depression in your ribcage, the crevice along your spine trickling with sweat. The only food in the house, a hard half-loaf of bread, is dinner. Hours later, your stomach still sighs under the sheets. With the curtains pulled high, you fall asleep under the pearly glow of the sky.

Sometime, about a week later, in art class, you feel the warmth of life waking you, like a spring thawing after eons of icy slumber.

“Elora.”

You stare, irises wide, across the circle table.

“Do you want to work with me?” Eric’s eyes are on yours, his brows raised slightly, like hope.

Your face warms, mouth bleeds for hydration, before you can speak, “Sure.”

That afternoon is the first since Violet that you spend with someone else. You take pictures of Eric, smiling shyly at his puckering faces and bulged-eyes expressions. When he turns serious, his face is handsome, his gaze occasionally poring into you. You are glad you have the camera to hide behind.

It is your turn to pose against the tree now. Eric asked earlier if you were too hot. You said you were fine. You didn’t tell him that you wear long-sleeve shirts because you have to. Eric stands meters away, holding the camera before his face. His faded black jeans stamped against the grass, summer green shirt billowing in the breeze. He snaps, you trail your

fingertips along the aged skin of the tree. He snaps again, you reach out for a falling apple blossom, its touch is velvet, its skin alabaster white.

Eric and you sit under the latticed shade of his apple tree, flicking through the cameral roll. Before you leave, he reaches one hand deep into his pockets, brings a polaroid before your faces, and snaps. It develops quickly, the black surface morphing to reflect a happy girl and a normal boy. He hands it to you and while you stare, he takes another.

With the second in his fingers, he says, "Your smile is pretty."

On your walk home, you feel like you are flying. Your converse feet keep tripping off the curbs, drunk with blush and butterflies.

But then you're home, and it is evening, and the house is dark. You eat the two apples and a banana you smuggled from the cafeteria during lunch. Under the light from your cellphone, you struggle to finish homework. Damn geometry. Damn history and damn chemistry. None of this stupid stuff makes any sense.

Night comes quickly. You take your pills on time today. Disgust and shame lace the swallow down your throat. In bed, the occasional panic attack strikes. You press your hand against your stomach, close your eyes, and pray that you won't feel another heartbeat. You don't. How dumb you were to feel happy about Eric. As if he would ever want someone like you. Yet your head remains swollen with foolish wishes and you fall asleep humming the remnants of a rare memory with Mama.

Donde estas?

Amor eres tu...

Another week passes by. It's been long, Papa would come home soon. You wish he would stay away forever, like Violet. Bad people deserve to disappear.

You shake the thoughts away. Tonight, you are with Eric, completing the last half of your photography project. Eric's backyard is lit by the full, celestial orb in the sky. The spindly arms of the apple tree, the shimmering gray of his house, and the swaying hairs of grass all appear like ghosts.

"Everything is made of moonlight," you say.

He looks up at the moon for a while, then back to the earth. "Yeah, like you can see them clearly, but if you reached out and touched them, they wouldn't be there."

"What if I'm made of moonlight?"

The night is silent, like something alive and still. Arching lamps smolder dimly along the street, opposing the counters of drowsy houses and sleeping cars. Your back fits nicely against the slope of tree bark, and Eric's shoulder against yours feels cool through the fabric of your blouse. You think perhaps he didn't hear you, until—

"I don't think you're made of moonlight. The thing with people is that from the moment they are born, they can never be gone from existence if someone remembers them. And I know you. I'll remember you for a long time after now. Maybe forever."

A river overwhelms your sockets. No one since Mama has ever said such nice things to you. Eric puts his palm over the back of your hand. Unlike his shoulder, his palm is warm, you feel a pulse from his thumb into your wrist. His face turns towards you and you can feel his eyes on your face. It seems impossible and yet you know what he is about to do. You are

embarrassed that you are seventeen and have never kissed a boy. Suddenly, everything seems too much and you close your eyes.

Papa was a man. Papa was Papa. He didn't count.

"Elora, open your eyes," he says. You do. "Why are you scared?"

Because Papa has eyes everywhere. Eyes with ears and teeth and large, angry hands.

You stand up sharply with legs made of broken sticks. "We have the pictures, I'm gonna go home now." The world wavers before you, fading in and out of existence.

Eric gets up. "Let me walk you there," he says firmly. For a brief second, you think he knows. That he is peering into your mind and discovering everything.

You say nothing and begin walking. He keeps perfect harmony with your pace and matches your resolve to keep quiet. For a quarter of an hour, your thoughts spiral in on themselves. Here was Eric; he was kind, he didn't mind talking to you. And yet you were pushing him away, slamming down the dams to prevent him from slipping through. If he knew what your life was like and what Papa was like and what everything that happened was like, he wouldn't want to be seen with you.

So close, you could have had a friend. A real friend, not like Violet. You won't because of Papa. Papa ruins everything. He fills you with fear and hatred so white and hot that you could burn a hole through the center of the earth and fall miles deep into the underworld.

You would sleep with a weapon tonight. If papa came home today or tomorrow and felt his way through the ink of night, the searing and sour stench of booze on his body, stumbling through your bedroom door, you would draw the knife from beneath your pillow and angle it to his neck.

Liar. Your paper-strong shield of bravery cracks when you see the house lights on. Papa's red car is parked slanted near the sidewalk. A silhouette is sitting on the porch. You can no longer walk.

Eric stops beside you. "What's wrong?"

"*Elanor,*" the silhouette with Papa's voice drawls. You inhale the hard stench of alcohol.

Eric solves something on your face. "Do you know him?" he asks.

Your voice shakes. "That my Papa." He will know. I can hear him wordlessly putting it all together, the drunk-wild man and the sallow girl that lives with him. He knows.

"*¿Quién es este gringo?*" His voice grows louder with each word. One hand clenches by his side, the other grips the belt around his waist. You can do nothing but cower back as Papa staggers forward.

"I'm not leaving her here."

"She's my daughter!" Papa barks, looking only at you, his eyes coal and beady.

"No," is all Eric says. "Let's go," he whispers to you. Papa has never looked so mad. You cannot go inside that house with him.

"*No mas.*" You turn around with Eric. Papa curses in Spanish, enraged that he is too drunk to go after you.

Your memory is foggy for the next hour. You are in Eric's house, laying on his living room couch under a blanket. He whispers with his mother and father in the next room, their conversation distant.

Eric looks frustrated with himself. There is no way he cannot know. He must know. He knew without forcing me to say it. He knows and he is still here. You are here.

You grip the jowls around your waist for comfort, to confirm that you are real. You want the day to end. At midnight, you memorize the black stars on the foreign ceiling and fantasize, imagining black holes will perlocate with moonlight.

You've had enough of this life. You want it to end, rebirth, emerge again as something bittersweet and wonderful. The past is rigid as cement, like Mama's tombstone. But the future...

The future is clear, liquid. Elora Sanéra is not a nugatory constellation.