

Moon Chasing

I felt it in my bones when the moon changed. I didn't see it happen— anyone unlucky enough to glance up at the night sky was quick to form raving congregations in the deserted streets of Times Square. This, too, I did not see, since I was occupied huddling all night in my closet crawl space with my cat.

My phone buzzed and its screen came to life. My eyes burned from the sudden brightness of my lock screen, also a picture of my cat. I saw the time was 6:59 a.m., and the text from my landlord read: *'u better not have wrecked the place like Ignis did or I'm not renewing your lease in May. I'm coming by later to check'*. I stared in stunned silence at the text, positioned below the time and above the twelve national security alerts I had periodically received throughout the night. Unable to conjure up the mind to respond, I simply shot back a *'k'* and tiredly tossed the phone down as I pressed the button to turn it off. It skidded across the cold, tile floor of the crawlspace, and I leaned back against the wall, my hiding spot once again plunged into darkness and silence.

After a vague period of time had elapsed in the safety of the crawl space, the silence and darkness only rarely punctured by my imagination of the horrors that might be unfolding in the street below, I finally decided it was time to stir. Pepper hissed at me when I accidentally pressed my hand down over his tail, and I whispered an apology to him as I pushed open the door of the hidden storage space. I climbed out, squeezing past old coats and shoes, and looked around my apartment. It was completely unchanged, just the way I had abruptly left it the night before.

Venturing around my apartment, I searched for any inconsequential abnormality to confirm to me that, yes, what happened last night *was* real, that it really did affect *me*. But I found nothing, everything exactly as it was at sunset last night when I snatched Pepper from his bed and fled in panic to the crawlspace hidden in my closet.

Unsure of what else to do, I did what I always did when I was overwhelmed by confusion and isolation: I opened my phone. The text message from Matt warning about my rent was still at the top of the stack of notifications, below the clock which now read 7:32; I swiped the message away and scrolled through the emergency alerts, only really processing keywords.

"Cognitive impairment"

"Delusions"

"Compulsions"

"Moon gazing"

I couldn't make sense of any of it. The fluorescent glow from my phone screen seemed to wash me in a sinister light, like a glowing eye that watched me, violated the security of my otherwise unlit apartment. I had seen online last night that there could have been some kind of radio wave, or a UFO, or a satanic ritual, but the only real continuity was that anybody outside would be targeted by... whatever it was. There were also rumors that it made the victims act *strange*. But *there's no way that could be possible*, I thought. That infamous "War of the Worlds" radio broadcast came to mind— nothing more than an overly elaborate joke. Looking outside my apartment window, I saw right away that I was mistaken.

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All along the street below my apartment, an entire New York City Avenue was completely trashed— more so than usual. Cars had swerved onto the sidewalk, leaving black skid marks painted on the pavement. Fire hydrants launched streams of water onto the street, countless puddles forming on the even more countless potholes. What caught my attention the most, though, was the tower.

In the middle of the street now stood a makeshift structure reaching haphazardly into the air. It looked to be twenty feet tall, give or take, and seemingly constructed of loose street debris which had been thrown together some time over the last night. At its base was a large alleyway garbage can, followed by a random assortment of what seemed to be any loose items which could be found along the street. The incorporated metal of the trash cans, sewer grates, and bicycles made the morning sunlight glint off its many ridged, sharp corners, giving the whole structure a sort of ethereal look.

The tower held tight onto my attention, and apparently that of everybody else— everyone on the street, even the cleanup crews and police officers, seemed transfixed. Some circled its base, staring in awe at its height, while others analyzed it from a safe distance. Throughout that day, as people called me and I called them and the entire country tried to process the incomprehensible, I could barely draw myself away from watching the tower. When they finally brought in a bulldozer to tear it down, I felt... not sad, but disappointed, deep inside my chest, like something one-of-a-kind had just been razed.

As I pulled myself away from the window and tuned back in to the news, though, I quickly discovered that nothing unique was lost. These *constructions* appeared worldwide, wherever and whenever night fell. Since it was now morning on the East Coast, California was still grappling with the same phenomenon in the streets of Los Angeles. But, of course, the towers didn't just fall out of the sky, and it only took until that afternoon for authorities to uncover the real explanation.

The video surfaced from China. Ever since the “Moon Crisis” started in the U.S., East Asia had the most time to prepare, and seeing the chaos that was spreading along with the sunset in the West, the Chinese government had curfews in place before the sun had even risen again over New York. It seems, though, that in a country of more than a billion people, some will slip through the cracks. And, as seen in the video, some did.

It was anonymously submitted to just about every news outlet in North America. As it played on a loop on every channel with occasional bits of faceless newscaster commentary, it showed what I first thought to be riots. What with the shaky camerawork from several stories above street level and the grainy low-light footage, I initially could only seem to make out what appeared to be people tearing up a street— ripping out garbage cans, pushing cars, smashing windows. I could see a fallen police line, several of their cars still with their colored lights piercing the dim darkness of the street and their sirens howling uselessly as the mob descended on the city street. Then, the video cuts to a playback, slowed down and digitally enhanced just enough for me to make out that it isn't a riot, and it isn't mere senseless violence. In the epicenter of the chaos, people were stacking debris in a tower unnervingly similar to the one I

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had seen outside my window. People clamored to climb to the top of the tower, and those already up stood in stoic stillness as they craned their necks toward the sky. The caption on the video was in Mandarin, but according to the translation provided by CNN, it apparently said “Moon Chasers in Beijing”.

This caption would later turn out to be incorrectly interpreted, with the original being more akin to “people watching the moon in Beijing”, but the phrase “Moon Chasers” seemed to stick. Every night, like clockwork, anyone to catch a glimpse of the moon would amass outside and begin to assemble these absurd towers out of anything they could get their hands on. They rarely got very tall, in equal parts due to the instability of their materials and the fact that they were being slapped together by a nonverbal mob in the middle of the night. Just about anything the Chasers could get their hands on would get stacked on top of the pile, and they would keep going until the moon slipped out of view, sometimes just until it sank below the crest of a building, but sometimes all night and into the afternoon.

Knowing nothing about the situation, the entire world held its breath as night fell over the eastern shore of Canada on the second evening. The military had been sent to maintain order—*just in case*, because we couldn’t even know if the events of the previous night would repeat themselves. The apprehension turned quickly to horror as, just like the night before, people gathered in the streets and on roofs, hysterically piling loose furniture ten, twenty feet in the air. Just like the night before, I snatched up a very ungrateful Pepper from his cat bed on the couch and unsuccessfully explained the situation to him as I stuffed us into my closet crawl space, but I could still hear sounds of commotion on the street from my apartment. It was happening again.

And it happened every night since.

Slipping peeks from my apartment window, I noticed all types of government efforts to try and resolve the Moon Crisis. For the next few days, law enforcement was sent out every night to maintain order, but it didn’t take very long for them to concede to just pursuing damage control—reinforcing metal fixtures, removing trash cans, implementing curfews. Whenever they tried to intervene directly, they entirely failed to stop even a single one of the Moon Chasers, and most of the officers and soldiers soon enough would join in. As the following nights came and went across the United States, no emergency policy put in place made even the slightest of impacts beyond superficially strengthening infrastructure and offering coupons for volunteer morning clean-up. Apparently, when you can’t seem to stop at least some people from taking a glimpse of the moon, and all it takes is a clear sky for your police officers and soldiers to drop their guns and start tossing debris onto the towers with them, not much more could be done.

Slowly, gradually, I— and just about everyone else— came to a point of acceptance. By the end of the first week, I no longer hid in the crawl space, and I stopped playing the news all night on my T.V., though I *never* forgot to fasten the safety pins on my curtains by 5 p.m. every day. After just a handful of days, I found myself largely back into my normal routine— I was never out late very much anyway, and I wasn’t going to be mourning the loss of night flights and graveyard shifts at the deli where I worked. I simply came to accept that when the moon came up, some people just went crazy and built stuff. Just like how any famous landmark can suddenly

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topple and be reduced to nothing, the moon as I knew it no longer existed, and there was no use worrying about something so colossally unchangeable. I never did stop wondering what *exactly* had changed about the moon, though; the Chasers never could remember by the time their trance wore off, and whenever ground-level cameras or satellites were pointed toward the celestial rock, they never seemed able to focus enough to show more than a nondescript white blur on the black backdrop of space.

For some of the Chasers, though, the sense of apathy and indifference was replaced with something altogether different. I encountered this type firsthand on the fourth day, when I was on my way home from my first shift at work since I had worked up the courage to leave my apartment. It was getting late, and I was rushing down the sidewalk as fast as I could when I saw a small group lounging on a street corner. Living in New York, this was just about the least surprising thing I could have expected to see, but their behavior seemed too *normal* not to stand out. Walking past the government crews as they finished bolting the trash cans into the concrete and locking up the last chains around parking meters and bike racks, I couldn't take my eyes off of the group. There were about nine people, but a tenth walked up and joined as I watched. And they weren't moving. As the crosswalk light turned and pedestrians scuttled away, eager to get back indoors, the ten people only stood perfectly still, watching the dwindling sunlight. Before anything else happened, I was already on another street, but I couldn't shake them from my mind. *What were they thinking?* I thought as I entered my apartment, but I already had a suspicion. They were waiting for nightfall. They *wanted* to see the moon. I locked the door.

By the end of the month, reports of these types of groups had sprung up in most cities and were even beginning to spread beyond. Pepper purring next to me, I sat in front of my TV as the president gave a hastily prepared public address. Visibly nervous and worn down from stress, he danced around the topic for a good while before concisely denying the existence of "moon cults" and attempting to dispel the rumor that an entire town in Arkansas had come under their influence. Contrary to his cause, however, this only really served to bring uncomfortable legitimacy to both. When a journalist released pictures of an entire town gathered in a wintry, dead wheat field, staring up at the sky as the sun set down to touch the tree line, there was no more use containing any panic. Attacks against suspected moon cultists became daily and often went unreported; suspicion swelled around anybody who even stayed out after 5 p.m.

Even still, moon cults grew. Hundreds of people joined every day in New York alone, organizing to conquer entire blocks or streets come sunset, but soon enough they were no longer contained even just to the nighttime. I lost my job because the avenue the deli was on had been overtaken by the mob, but it's not as though I would be leaving my apartment much anyway—not much was worth the risk of facing one of them. I kept my curtains closed all day long, the unnatural, sterile light of a newsroom pouring in from the TV as an exhausted anchor mumbled about an international investigation into NASA, some U.N. ethics report. I wasn't listening.

Checking the time, I saw that it was now almost 9 p.m., well after dark. I put my ear against the curtain, feeling the coldness of the window seep through the fabric onto my cheek. I could hear chaos outside, as I had heard every night for what felt like my whole life. There was

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the sound of metal crumbling against the street; a misplaced bike rack, maybe, that had been claimed by gravity. A crack, like solid steel twisting and breaking, echoed up between the buildings and ricocheted off my window, so loud I could feel it vibrating against my ear. Calling out to me.

A feeling rose in me, one I had become familiar with. I felt like some child locked away in a tower, forced to watch from a distance as all the other kids got to play. A feeling I had felt for the past several days, *weeks*, every time I would listen through the window or sneak the smallest glance down to the street. Trying to collect my thoughts, I shook my head and looked back into the apartment: the luminous white glow wafting from the T.V. set made my eyes burn. I closed them and again faced the covered window. The urge I felt in my core was overwhelming, pulling me toward it like the moon pulls a tide. My fists wrapped around the rough fabric.

I opened the curtains.