

Winking at the Moon

Emmaline looked at herself in the medicine cabinet mirror. She picked up her hair and put it down again, the frizzy lumps of curls landing down her back. She tried pushing her hair behind her ears. The look gave her the effect of an overgrown alpaca. She straightened her glasses.

Rummaging past the dusty bottles of mercury, Emmaline finds the rusty pair of scissors. The quick snips and it was done. The bangs changed her enough that anyone who recognized her facial features would have to take a second look to make sure. By then, she would be long gone. She smiled.

She needed to pack food. She walked down the stairs, pushing open the back door that led to the garden. The cold Maine air enveloped Emmaline as she made her way to her section of the garden. Chimney smoke filled her view as she could hear faint laughter from children walking towards the neighborhood pond. Emmaline shook her head as she knelt down to cut another cabbage.

Whereas her mother complained of the icicles that formed around the house, Emmaline preferred the freezing temperatures. She would disappear beneath a pile of red quilts until her whole body was concealed.

She had woken up two months ago from a dream. She had heard a deep voice laughing, feeling a cold splash of water as if someone had thrown her off the deep end. Someone had scooped her up, even though she protested and wrinkled out of the stranger's hands. She tried to explain that the tight water floaties her mother had restled her into wouldn't let her drown.

She felt a hand on the top of her head, smoothing down her unruly curls with water. It felt warm. She awoke, surprised to not see the red rim the floaties left on her arm.

As a child, she would ask her about her father before she could talk in full sentences. Once she pointed to the TV screen airing a picture of JFK at the space center in Florida as if to say, "Daddy?"

Her mother shook her head no before clutching her throat. The picture had changed, in its place portraits of the head astronauts on the next mission.

"That one is." Her mother pointed to one in the left corner, turning her body before Emmaline could see the look of fear flashed across her mother's face.

Day turned to night and the soft wind settled as Emmaline finished packing. She glanced out the window to check if her mother had left the studio. Emmaline hated the way that the nature around her seemed so bright. The colors confused and unsettled her. Each external noise felt too loud, splitting open her raw ear drums with every hoot of an owl or caw of an eagle. She liked the way her neighbor's cows were so soft. She could manipulate them, following her around in circles and confused when she wouldn't play with them anymore. She hated when the cows tired of her, the way they just sat in the grass for hours after a couple minutes of play. She felt that way about most people too.

Mother and daughter ate quickly and quietly that night, finishing their meal with blueberries they had canned from the cellar last winter. Emmaline bit through the flesh of the fruit, the rough exterior making way for the gooshey sweetness.

Emmaline felt her mother's eyes on her as they sat next to the fire.

"What's your biggest dream?" her mother asked.

"I- I don't really know. I've never thought about that before." Emmaline shifted uncomfortably at such a straightforward question. Her mother always talked about her big dreams, the ones she had before Emmaline's birth. She had wanted to build a studio in California, sell her artwork and travel around the world. She was pregnant as she made her way through the 50 states, stopping in Maine and having stayed there ever since.

"Of course you have. With that big head of yours, you must have wants, dreams. Maybe they're just things you don't want to share with me."

Emmaline patted her mother's hand to ensure that she didn't. Her mother breathed in slightly, patting her hand back to show her that she knew Emmaline did.

"Was I enough for you?", Natalie said suddenly.

"What?" Emmaline said.

"Was I enough for you?" she repeated, "Because I really did try."

She heard the tears before she saw them. Her mother heaved dry sobs, clutching the folds of the quilt like they were the only thing that was anchoring her to earth. As she reached out to touch her face, her mother enveloped her arms around her daughter. Emmaline could smell the wet

clay, the pine needles that seemed to always stick onto their clothes, their hair, their lungs. It felt hard to breathe.

“You were mine before you became anyone else’s,” Natalie said as she whispered urgently into Emmaline’s ear. “I need you to remember that.”

Emmaline pulled back to look at her mother’s face. Her mother thought about the last time she had seen those same pale green eyes on TV. They looked worn-out and sad, similar to the ones she saw in front of her. She had seen Emmaline through the window of her pottery shed in the garden, Emmaline looking like an angry soldier going into battle. She had also found the packing list Emmaline left on the windowsill in the kitchen. She wondered at the time if Emmaline had done that on purpose. It seemed easier to tell her mother that she was leaving without a discussion.

She tucked Emmaline in that night, the same way that she did when Emmaline was a baby. Her mother closed the door, leaving Emmaline alone in her room for the last time.

It felt like Emmaline had already left; packed up and left her room bare except for one poster. The illustration of the moon, with its faded yellow ends and penciled in cradles, called to Emmaline every night since she could remember. Her eyes roamed to the familiar signature at the bottom, the man’s signature laden with its wirly L’s that Emmaline had traced by heart. It was the same name she had seen on the bottom of the television all those years ago.

“Neil,” she fumbled, feeling the name on her heavy tongue. she said the next part so quietly only the stars could hear her.

“I’m your daughter.”

Emmaline left before daybreak. She took one last turn about the house, stroking the picture frames, pocketing one small ceramic bird her mother had made for her for a birthday. She made sure each stair creaked loudly as she moved towards the front door.

She paused again at the door, waiting for its familiar creak to raise the hair on her arms. She felt push from behind to open the door. She breathed out and fell into the inky morning. She walked the ten minutes to the train station, forcing herself to not look back.

She found a compartment on the train next to the window. She pulled the curtain down immediately. She arranged the bags and then re-arranged them on the floor. She folded her legs

underneath her, and then unfolded them to dangle in case of the need for a quick getaway. She layed her coat across her legs to make a blanket. 11 hours until D.C.

The day after her dream, Emmaline visited the library in town. She side-stepped a group of classmates that called to her from the film room, the shelves of canisters shriveling under the heat of their cigarettes.

The newspaper archives were in the back of the first floor. Emmaline stopped at a headline written in 1973 with a picture underneath it. The headline stated that Mr. Armstrong had moved , having accepted a role as director at the NASA headquarters in D.C. The picture showed a smiling man next to a woman who appeared to be his wife, and two children wrestling under the weight of their parents' hands on their shoulders. Emmaline booked a train ticket a week later.

Now Emmaline peers out the window as the taxi drives around Dupont Circle. The taxi driver peers into the mirror.

“ So what are you doing in town?” he asks.

“ I’m here to see my father.” she replies. She looks pointedly out the window.

“He a bigwig up here?” he said. “ All these fancy policitians running around and one of them your pa! How bout that.” He drums his fingers on the steering wheel absentmindedly.

“ You could say that.” Emmaline said, her lips pursed. She wasn’t counting on this much interaction with other people.

“ Here ya go missy, 300 East Street.”

Emmaline climbs out the back and thrusts a five dollars into the driver’s hand. He sits patiently for the next person to come out the building, ready to give them a ride.

Getting through the building was surprisingly easy. Emmaline smiles so sweetly at passing employees that it hurts, trying to flash a look that radiates a loving daughter to visit her beloved dad. She steps into the elevator, a steel box with chicken wire lining the outside.

“What floor?” An old man stuffed into a blue velvet suit asked. He has a tiny hat and a patch on his jacket that reads “Operator”.

“ I’m here to see Neil Armstrong. I have his floor right here- um...” Emmaline stalls, rummaging through her bag for a phantom piece of paper. She had gotten this far and was prepared to get out

at the next floor and just wait for another elevator to appear once she had rehearsed what she was going to say.

“Neil?” a voice says from the corner. “ I think he’s on the 5th floor.”

Emmaline turns to thank the voice when she stops. A man in orange corduroys and a green sweater smirks.

“Leo Seeley, at your service.” Leo bows mockingly and reaches his hand out, his smirk getting wider by the minute.

Emmaline shakes his hand briefly before yanking her hand back, the disgust of shaking his hand visible on her face. Leo laughs and leans against the elevator. Emmaline turns around, embarrassed. She focuses her eyes at the peculiar dial at the front. Small planets replaced where the number of the floor was supposed to be. A star at the end of the dial hand lit up each planet as the elevator climbed up the building.

The 5th planet lights up and Emmaline starts to make her way towards the door when Leo places his hand on her shoulder.

“Follow me,” he whispers in her ear.

Startled, yet intrigued by Leo’s apparent wealth of knowledge about this place, Emmaline obliges. Maybe he can take her straight to Neil. Emmaline practices her speech in her head as Leo takes the lead and they walk out onto the floor.

Red lamps line the wall as men and women with headphones yell instructions to each other. Emmaline’s eyes roam around the room, trying to find her father. Instead, a man on the microphone is giving some sort of count-down. A woman with papers and a pot of coffee in her hand trips on a wire, splashing the desk and the man in front of her. He grunts and walks off, using his notebook to sop off the coffee from his tie.

“ Welcome to Mission Control, ” Leo says as Emmaline’s eyes continue to follow the now disgruntled, wet employee. “ I said, " Welcome to Mission Control. Now who are you?” Emmaline snaps her head back to Leo, blocking her way.

“ My name is Emmaline.” she said.

“Emmaline,” Leo repeats back. “ Emmaline, why did you come here today?”

“To see Neil Armstrong.” She shrugs her shoulders and rolls her eyes. She looks past Leo’s shoulder to see if she missed him.

“Leo, Florida says there about to take off,” a woman in glasses says to Leo. He nods.

“Well Ms. Emmaline, I recommend coming back when Mr. Armstrong isn’t so busy.”

“Why?” she asks. She starts another sentence when suddenly a side door opens, and a pack of men in crumpled up suits (with more coffee stains) walk into the room. They take their seat at the head table behind Emmaline and Leo, who pushes Emmaline to the left and pushes her to an empty desk before walking towards the men.

They speak inaudibly while Emmaline turns to focus on the wall of TVs in front of her. Each TV projects a different image- the outside of the D.C building, a spacecraft sitting outside, the interior of another room set up similar to the control room Emmaline sits in now. Emmaline leans in to get a closer look of the spacecraft when an intercom crackles. The room goes silent.

“D.C. this is Command Center Tampa. Flight Penguin is all systems go. Ready and waiting for your response.”

A man in glasses at the head pushes a button and speaks into the microphone

“Tampa, this is D.C. Flight Penguin all clear. All systems go and are ready for lift-off.”

All employees stop mid-movement, their eyes now glued to the TVs. Emmaline walks back to Leo and tugs his sweater.

“Why? Why can’t I see him?” Emmaline asks again. The red lamps lunge towards her, the excited hum from the employees getting louder and louder in her ear. Somewhere, a person is counting down. She hears a cannon boom and the hair on the back of her neck stands up. The room erupts into screams, the men at the head table hugging each other and running down to celebrate with their employees.

Leo faces Emmaline points to the TV, his hand shaking.

“Because he’s leaving Earth, that’s why.” Emmaline follows his hand to the TV’s on the wall. A single aircraft has plunged into the sky, it’s fiery tail propelling it further and further into the clouds. The command center in Tampa is screaming, waving at their friends in D.C. Only the exterior of the building seems unchanged.

The intercom crackles again. This time, a deep laughter fills the room.

Emmaline sees a hand smooths down her curls. The water feels too cold, too blue, too flimsy. She's drowning until two hands scoop her up and thrust her in the air. She protests and tries to explain that the water floaties her mother forced her into would have saved her anyway. And that same deep voice.

The employees stop their celebration because they heard a thump. It was like something had hit the floor.