

The Moon is Drifting Away from Earth

Joshua Kraus

There's a faucet dripping somewhere in this house but I'm on the moon looking for Alice. To the people who say the moon is lifeless, I say you're wrong. I say you haven't looked hard enough. You haven't been patient. There is life here, but it's buried under oceans of lunar dust and hidden in distant craters. To have a chance at finding it you need to know exactly what you're looking for.

The science is strange up here. Things don't work right. I aim for a nearby ridge and end up in some dark channel with unscalable walls. It's hard to move straight and I stumble slowly and fall lightly and the dust meets me. Soon I'll be completely covered with a chalky exoskeleton and I'm afraid Alice won't recognize me. Maybe I won't recognize her. The day that happens is the day I die.

She grew up exactly nine house down from me, Alice, and wrote in journals which she'd bury in the backyard once they were filled. She wanted the dirt to decompose her pages and inseminate plants with her words and for bees to pollinate the earth with little parts of her. Back then I didn't know the meaning of quixotic and was immune to its implications. Back then there were no leaks in our hearts and every pain was from something we'd eventually fall in love with.



When I first met Alice she didn't seem to care about the moon, although sometimes I'd catch her glancing at it like a student looking at a clock as class neared its end. But she was more concerned with moist earth, ocean spray, throwing rocks at empty cans and screaming triumphantly when she knocked one over.

So I hitched myself to Alice and off we went, testing each floorboard of a life slowly assembling itself in front of us. There was a summer when all we did was search for fossils in the dried beds of Onawa Creek. There was a winter when I was granted a lengthy viewing of her sweet pale stomach as she struggled to take off her sweater. There was the day we finally touched and the day we finally said it and the day – much, much later – when I realized those words never mean as much as the first time you say them, and that every time after is just preservation.

The second Alice and I turned that magical age we threw what little we had into her mother's hatchback and drove without thinking, counting each mile as a victory. We ended up in a town named after some Civil War general and decided we were home. I got a job in a motel while Alice went to work at Tasty Tom's Ribs 'N Waffles where she served sloppy plates to bored cops and families either going to or coming from church.

The first time Alice expressed real interest in the moon was the day she quit Tasty Tom's. Apparently Tasty Tom was really more of a Touchy Tom and a Tit-Pinching Tom and a Tip-Swiping Tom, so in a rage I ran over there and demanded that Tasty Tom show himself and answer for his sins. He stepped out of the kitchen looking like a butcher in his sauce-stained smock and returned every one of my accusations with a *her?* or a *huh?* or a *you shittin' me kid?* Finally I turned around and Alice was there, crying, and then another girl stood up and pointed to Alice and yelled *that slut is crazy!*

We went home and nursed each other like babes and Alice whispered *did you know that the moon has no wind?*

A few months later she disappeared for three days and came back with sand in her hair and a bible under her arm. *Only twelve people have walked on the moon*, she said that night. One time she got high and slashed her left breast with a kitchen knife. Later she told me *the moon is drifting away from Earth.*



I started not being able to want things the way she wanted them. I couldn't hate things the way she hated them. Alice knew when I was only pretending to see patterns in the sky. She knew that I couldn't really hear our neighbors making plans to set the building on fire.

Alice couldn't keep a job and I could barely make enough working two. I tried getting a third but Alice pulled at my clothes and begged me to stay close to her. She needed constant reassurance. Constant looking after. She'd wander out of the apartment and get lost and I'd have to take off work to go pick her up. I'd come home to piles of shredded paper and bowls filled with only condiments. The stove would be on. The medicine cabinet would be ransacked.

Before she got really bad we ran out of money, so I went to the Army recruiting office in the next town over and found out that Alice would be taken care of if I signed a few papers. When she saw me in uniform she laughed and said if I really wanted to blend in I should strip naked and lie in the sand and stay perfectly still forever. I should count backward from one hundred forever. Pretend I'm a piece of ticker tape in a never-ending ticker tape parade. Go to the moon and try sweeping up dust.

One day I left and was gone forever. To her it was forever. She got lost again and I wasn't there to find her. Then I got shot and didn't die so I went home with money and a limp and a terrible feeling that it was too late.

A friend told me that six months after I'd left, Alice had taken the hatchback and driven it straight into the side of Tasty Tom's. After a few days in one hospital and a few months in a different kind of hospital, she was sent to live with her mother who told everyone that I had been killed in combat and that Alice was having a tough time coping. Furious, I tried using my money to get us a small house so Alice could come live with me, but she'd been ordered into the custody of a legal guardian and Alice and I weren't married, so that was that.

I bought the house anyway and made it up like Alice would have wanted. Big green potted plants in the living room. A pool in the backyard. A rock garden in the front. Pictures of us on the fridge. All her favorite food. It would all be there when she was ready.

I visited the moon whenever her mother let me. Right now I'm up there looking for footprints. She's here somewhere, Alice. But I was away for too long and the moon got bigger and colder and farther away. I start calling for her. I talk about when we were kids and how I used to practice hitting cans with rocks in secret just to impress her. I tell her the story about the raccoon in the roof of our first apartment who scared us to death on Halloween. I sing that one pop song we changed the words to.

And out of some crater she comes to me softly, a lily white vision holding the black of space at bay. When I say her name her eyes grow brighter. Her lips are dry and cracked because she forgets to drink water sometimes, so I touch them to mine. A cowlick dominates her hair and I focus on it because it's so silly, and with a little effort I can see silly as innocent. I can see silly as pure. I can see silly as proof that not all is lost. I can make that happen. For her I can make that happen. I love you Alice. I love that you turned out wrong.

