

Kathleen Furbee

One Thousand Moons

Wayne was in the hospital on the night of his thousandth full moon. It was an occasion he'd been looking forward to for years, for many moons, for his whole life really, but there he was, not draped in moonlight as he'd always thought he'd be, but dressed instead in hospital blue, feeling hospital blue, in a strange, otherworldly place of endless florescent lights and noise and continuous activity—hell, in other words. There is no moon in hell, Wayne had learned.

Wayne lay in his bed of stiff sheets and looked longingly towards the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of moonlight. All he could see was the pastel striped hospital curtain shielding him from a view of his neighbor, an older fellow with odiferous digestive issues. The curtain did nothing to shield either of them from each other's noises, smells, visitors, or unfortunate medical prognoses. Wayne's neighbor, Ralph, understood more about Wayne's prostate cancer progression than Wayne did, and as soon as the herd of white coated doctors left their room every morning, Ralph would review with Wayne, patiently and in detail, everything the doctors had just told him. Wayne wasn't as good with Ralph's information. He tried not to listen in and wouldn't have understood what they were saying anyway.

Wayne had always been attuned to the moon. He had been born just moments past the peak of the full moon, shortly after midnight, seventy-four years, nine months and nineteen days previously. He had inadvertently been delivered at home, arriving sooner than expected, and was caught by a neighbor woman just as he'd slipped yowling out into the moonlight. The neighbor had a mystical bent and a sour disposition. She'd informed Wayne's mother that the timing of Wayne's birth was inauspicious. If Wayne had arrived moments earlier, while the moon was still waxing, or at the height of its fullness, then his future might have been a little brighter.

"Oh hell," Wayne's father had said, taking a swig of beer, after arriving home from work to find his neighbor in his kitchen, his sons up past their bedtimes and his youngest, newly arrived and still wet behind the ears, cradled in his mother's arms. "So that means he was born when the moon was waning, right? I'd rather have a Wayne than a Wax any day." When Wayne's father told that story later, which he did, and often, Wayne's older brothers would complete it with taunts of "Ear Wax," and "Beeswax," and "None of your Beeswax," and stupid crybaby when he couldn't take it anymore.

The moon waxed outside the hospital, and, according to the *Farmer's Almanac*, it would not be fully full for another hour and twenty minutes. Wayne anxiously watched the hospital clock as it ticked above his bed. Ralph was asleep, snoring with vigor. Outside in the hallway, several hours past shift change, the nurses scurried about. Wayne knew, from the many nights he had spent on the ward, that their pace should soon begin to settle down, at least for a few hours. Whether it would be soon enough, though, Wayne couldn't predict.

He'd tried to ask the night nurse, Nancy, about the state of the moon when she'd come on duty earlier that night. "Moon? Geez, I don't know. All I could see was headlights as I was driving in." Then she'd launched into a fairly heated diatribe about the inconsideration of other drivers who refused to dim their lights and the difficulties of driving to work at night with all the drunks on the road and by then she had adjusted Wayne's IV and hung a bag of antibiotics and listened to his lungs, which Wayne wondered how she could really hear with her talking nonstop, and then she asked Wayne how he was feeling and was out of the room before he could even think of what to say in reply.

Wayne thought about putting on his call light for the nurse's aide, but the aide that was on this night, Georgia, was a rather angry sort of older woman who had made it clear early on that if Wayne had any hopes of getting her attention at all, it had better be for just the direst of needs. Putting him in a wheelchair and wheeling him down through the endless hospital corridors and out into the moonlight was clearly, Wayne knew, not in her job description.

So he waited anxiously, watching the clock.

Wayne had hoped and expected to be out of the hospital long before this night. He had come in many weeks before, for another round of chemo, and one thing had led to another. Low blood counts, infections, and now, a large and painful bedsore. As he had no one at home to care for him, and no nursing home that would accept him while he was receiving expensive medications, Wayne had had to stay in the hospital, adapting as well as he could to the routines and changing faces of the people who were paid to care for him.

The social worker was annoyed with Wayne for having no one to go home to, but what was he supposed to do? Wayne's family, what was left of it, lived in the southern part of the state and he'd pretty much lost contact with them. He and his wife Peggy had moved to the northern part years before. He'd gotten a job in a factory, which was now closed, and she'd worked as a secretary at the college. They'd lived in a small double wide on the outskirts of town, and kept a nice yard, where Peggy grew her flowers and fussed over her little dogs, and Wayne cut the grass and watched TV in the evenings. That was pretty much it. Not a single neighbor had shown up at the funeral

home when Peggy died. But Wayne and Peggy hadn't been to see the neighbors either, Wayne recognized, alive or dead. It was just the way of the world these days.

Out in the hallway Wayne heard the intercom crackle, "Code Blue Room 952, Code Blue Room 952," followed by the thunder of feet and machines rushing past his room. That gave him an idea. He was sorry for 952, for sure. He didn't know who 952 was—he'd gotten to know a few of his fellow inmates on the cancer ward, but 952 had just arrived that night. He sent out a wish to them for Godspeed, whatever that meant, God speed back to life or on to death, and out of this hell hole of a hospital, he supposed. He also sent them a silent thanks, as he pushed the button to raise the head of his bed. It was like riding in a Goddamn space ship, the bed was, with all the buttons and controls.

Wayne worked his legs over to the side of the bed, then slowly eased himself up into a sitting position with his feet dangling below. His feet were cold, thin skinned and purplish. He sat on the edge of the bed a minute to get his head on straight. Finally he stood up. It hurt to move. The cancer had spread to his bones, the doctors had told him just that morning. His scans had shown a new spot on his spine and another on his left femur. Ralph had had to explain what a spot meant to Wayne after the doctors left. Wayne had thanked him, joking that he'd thought maybe he was turning into a leopard or something.

Once Wayne felt he was steady enough he fumbled for his catheter bag clipped under the bed rail. That took some doing and he was feeling fairly puny by the time he had the bag in hand and had managed to unplug his IV machine and roll it away from the wall. He turned the alarm button off—he'd watched Nancy do that plenty of times when she was making changes to his IVs, and he'd even done it himself when the damn thing was driving him crazy with its beeping and no one would come and fix it.

It took a minute for Wayne to locate his slippers, and he considered going on without them. But the floor was cold and he knew the ground outside would be freezing. Finally he found the slippers in the bottom of his tiny closet, as well as his robe, which he wrapped about his shoulders.

Ralph shifted and moaned in his sleep and Wayne stood still a moment, willing the snores to resume behind his roomie's curtain, and at last they did. Then Wayne, wheeling his IV machine with one hand, and holding his catheter bag with the other, not quite but almost silently departed his hospital room. It was risky, he knew. Nurses and others could come flying past at any moment, and who knew how long

the code blue would distract them.

Wayne had heard that there were cameras pointed everywhere in the hospital. He didn't know if anyone would be watching them though. And, if they were, would they suspect an old man in a bathrobe and slippers and pushing an IV pole of doing anything nefarious? Escape by elevator, was that a crime? Wayne slowly made his way out into the hallway, avoiding the code blue room. Then he pushed the button for the visitor's elevator, wondering if they turned it off at night, praying to the ghost of Peggy to watch over him.

When the elevator arrived it was empty, and he managed to wheel his IV machine in without pulling it over. The ride was smooth, uninterrupted, and in no time at all he had reached the first floor.

Wayne peeked out of the elevator when the door opened. He knew from his trips to the hospital with Peggy that a security guard routinely patrolled the front lobby. Wayne hoped to be able to get off the elevator and out the exit without attracting the guard's attention.

As Wayne left the elevator he saw the security guard, back towards him, directing a young couple and their fussing toddler to the emergency room. Wayne thanked Peggy and his lucky stars as he jubilantly headed for the exit doors. He was certain he had made a clean getaway. And he almost had, except, unbeknownst to Wayne, the glass doors were equipped with a motion sensor which set off a buzzer, which caused the guard to wheel around and yell, "Hey, you, stop!" Wayne didn't stop, but in his hurry he almost tipped his IV machine over as he exited into the night.

It was cold out, late November. Wayne had lost track of the seasons, he'd been in the hospital for so long. When he'd been admitted the trees were just starting to change colors, and the air was still late summer warm. He shivered in his thin PJ bottoms and robe as he looked about for the moon. It wasn't anywhere that he could see. He couldn't even tell if there were clouds in the sky with the outside lights so bright. What he did see though were two men in hospital security uniforms coming his way. He tripled his pace, heading for the parking lot, hoping to lose them among the silent parked cars, and no longer worrying about the moon.

In between two large pickups, one of them jacked up high with big wheels, Wayne paused to catch his breath. His breath was hard to catch, like it had already fled on past him into the hills or maybe up to the heavens or wherever Peggy was waiting for him, and he wondered if he was about to follow it. As he bent over a little to wheeze and ease the cramp in his side, the window to the big truck rolled down and a gruff voice said, real soft, but very clear, "Hey old man, they're coming

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this way. Better get in.” Before Wayne could really understand what was happening, the man had opened the truck door and lifted Wayne, IV machine and all into the extended cab of the truck and covered him up with a big green coat that smelled of cigarettes and beer and a strange sweetish scent that Wayne couldn’t identify at that moment but did, later, when the man, who Wayne later learned was named Roach, offered him a hit of a marijuana cigarette.

The security men with flashlights scurried among the cars. When they saw by the light of Roach’s cigarette in his truck that it was occupied, one of them tapped on his window. Roach rolled it down and said, “What’s up, man?” real slow and sleepy like.

“We’re looking for a patient that just left the hospital, an old man pushing an IV pole? He’s confused and not dressed warm enough to be out here. You seen him?”

“No, man, sorry. I’m just sitting here waiting for my old lady to get off work. I’ll let you know if he goes by, okay?”

As soon as the men were out of sight Roach turned to look at Wayne, huddled like a pile of laundry in the cab of the truck. Wayne was starting to feel warm at last, although catching his breath had not really happened due to the thick cloud of smoke inside the truck. He dared a little cough, trying to be polite about it, not wanting to offend his savior by implying that he shouldn’t be smoking here inside his very own pickup.

“Oh, sorry,” Roach said, noticing and grinding his cigarette out in the truck’s overflowing ashtray. “Smoke bother you?”

Wayne replied with a spasm of coughing. The coughing hurt all over, and Wayne realized that with his IV pump turned off his pain medicine wouldn’t be running either and pretty soon he was going to be in a whole lot of agony.

“So, those guys say you’re confused. Are you?”

“No, I just want to see the moon,” Wayne managed to wheeze out.

“Oh yeah? How come?”

“It’s full tonight. It’s my thousandth full moon.”

“Thousandth? Like, a thousand? Far fucking out, man. That’s a helluva lot of moons.”

“I was born on the full moon, so I always try to see it. But this time, I just HAVE to see it.”

“Wouldn’t they let you out for that?”

“I didn’t think they would understand,” Wayne’s voice quavered, and he felt like he was going to cry.

“Well, hell fire and damnation, let’s go see the moon then!”

Roach turned on the ignition and the truck revved up with a loud roar. Wayne had always hated driving among big trucks like this one, but

now he felt invigorated with its power.

“What about your wife?” Wayne managed to make himself heard over the noise as Roach began to back out.

“What about her?”

“Don’t you have to pick her up?”

“No, that’s just a story to throw those guys off. My old lady left me, a couple years back. She used to work here. And I used to come pick her up. Parked right there, night after fucking night, for all the good that did me. Guess it’s a hard habit to break.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” And Wayne was sorry. Peggy had left him too. He knew how bad that felt. “What was her name?”

“My old lady?”

“Yes.”

“Wendy.”

“What did she do here?”

“She was a nurse’s aide. Night shift on the cancer ward.”

“That’s where I live!” Wayne exclaimed. “Maybe I know her.”

“She don’t work there no more. She moved out of state, lives with her new husband in Ohio now. Hell, she’s got it made. Don’t even have to work or nothing. I hear she’s getting a fat ass.”

Wayne didn’t know what to say so he didn’t say anything. By then the truck had pulled out of the parking lot and onto the four lane headed south.

“Once we get out of the city, I’ll pull off and you can move up front. You doing okay?”

“Yes,” Wayne said, trying to look out the small side window. All he could see were shifting lights and buildings and other vehicles.

About ten minutes later, Roach pulled into a convenience store parking lot and lifted Wayne, like he weighed no more than a child’s doll, out of the back seat and tucked him into the front. Both the useless IV, which had been connected to the port in Wayne’s chest, and the catheter bag, got pulled out in the transfer. After he adjusted the bag some, it didn’t hurt anymore.

Roach went into the store and came out shortly afterwards with two twelve packs of Budweiser, a fist full of beef jerky sticks, a bag of hot nuts, four slices of pizza, a dozen donuts, and a two-liter bottle of Pepsi.

“Here,” he said, handing the bags to Wayne and stowing the beer behind his seat. “I thought you might be hungry.”

Wayne, who’d been subsisting on hospital food, mostly of the liquid variety, for weeks and had had quite a lot of trouble with nausea, found that he was famished. As he shoved a huge bite of dried out but very hot pepperoni pizza into his mouth, he mumbled, “Thanks,” to

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Roach. He thought he'd never tasted anything so delicious.

They kept to the highway south of town and pretty soon were driving along the river, where the road ran straight for awhile, then began to dip and curve as it climbed up into the mountains. Wayne had no idea where they were going and didn't particularly care, as long as it wasn't right back to the hospital. He felt sort of bad about the extra work he was going to cause his nurses, especially with them having to deal with that code blue in 952. He felt bad about the worry he might cause his roommate. At least, Wayne thought, it would give Ralph something new to talk about.

Wayne and Roach rode along quietly for awhile, the only sound the roar of the big truck and the staticky crackle of the radio, set to a country station. Wayne watched out the window but all he saw was the rise and fall of dark hills and bare trees and the occasional sparkle of river water. The moon itself was nowhere to be seen, but the night was lit up in a way that let him know it was out there, somewhere, lurking maybe between the trees or hiding behind a cloud.

"So what's the matter with you?" Wayne couldn't understand Roach's question at first and asked him to repeat it.

"What's wrong with you?"

Wayne had to think about it a minute, to figure out what Roach meant. There'd been all kinds of things wrong with him his whole life. He'd been too short, too skinny, too shy, too weird, and Wayne could hear his brothers taunting him, chanting "Wayno the weirdo," over and over again. Peggy had liked Wayne just the way he was, she'd said, and after all those years together Wayne had nearly forgotten about there being anything wrong with him, except, with Peggy gone, now there was.

"I got the cancer," Wayne replied.

"Are you dying, or just getting medicine for it or what?"

Wayne had to think about that question too. He really didn't know and hadn't actually thought about it. He'd been in the hospital a long time but it was always the one thing or the other they were treating him for and not the overall thing, Wayne's dying, that he or anyone else was ever focused on.

"Why yes, I believe I am, dying, I mean," Wayne said. He was surprised at how easy it was to say that.

"Hmmm," Roach replied. Then they were quiet awhile. Roach started to light up a cigarette, then looked over at Wayne and put it right out. "I'll wait til we get out of the truck," he said. Wayne said thanks. He wanted to say more, that he didn't mind Roach's smoking, but it would just make him cough, minding or not. Instead he ate a second piece of pizza and then a donut and was starting to doze off a

little when he felt the truck slow down and then turn off onto a very rutted dirt road. The bouncing of the truck jarred Wayne's various aches and pains awake, especially his sore tail bone, but he kept his groans to himself and watched out the window as the night slowed down and they drove through dark stands of hemlock and past huge boulders. At last, after a long climb, they arrived at a clearing. The night was bright, almost as bright as day, and while Wayne could not actually see the moon he knew it was there, somewhere close by, and he understood that they had arrived.

Roach killed the engine and they sat a moment, looking out into the night and thinking their own thoughts. "Well, you ready?" Roach asked finally, and Wayne said, "Sure," although he really didn't know for what.

Roach kind of pointed with his head over to the right and Wayne saw a tall wooden structure rising up into the sky, high above the tallest trees, higher even than the surrounding mountains. Steps wound up and around it, clear to the top.

"Ready to climb the fire tower?"

Wayne agreed that he was ready, although actually he had some major doubts about his ability to do so. But he didn't say anything and Roach came around to his side of the truck and helped Wayne into the oversized green coat, which, Wayne saw, had "Walter" stenciled on the breast pocket. "This yours?" he asked Roach, but Roach just shrugged, and in the pockets of the green coat packed some of the snacks and four cans of the Budweiser. Wayne wondered how he was going to carry the weight of himself, let alone four additional cans of beer plus snacks all the way up the tower stairs. But, he realized he was wearing Roach's only coat, Roach was wearing just a flannel shirt, a thin one at that, and the least Wayne could do to show his gratitude was to carry the beer.

Roach seemed to be satisfied with the packing of the coat pockets and turned around, his back to Wayne.

"Climb on," Roach commanded.

"What, on you? Like piggy back?"

"Yeah."

"You mean you're going to carry me?"

"Naw, I'm just going to give you a horsey ride. Of course I'm going to carry you. You want to see the moon, don't you?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Let's go then. Don't worry. I won't drop you. Believe me, I carried plenty of guys piggy back in 'Nam. And that's with Charlie shooting at us. Never dropped one of 'em. And none of 'em was ever as little as you."

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Wayne climbed onto Roach's back, and Roach appeared to bear him easily. Wayne felt strangely soothed by the warmth and contact with Roach's body. It had been a very long time since he had been touched, he realized, or physically close to another human, if you didn't count cold nurses' hands sticking needles in his body or doctors poking at him. Since just before Peggy died actually. What he was feeling for Roach was nothing sexual. Not like that at all. It was just warm, and comforting.

Roach approached the fire tower and kind of garrumphed as he took the first big step up. "Hold on," he called back to Wayne, as if Wayne needed any such warning. After the first step the climb was smoother, and steadier, and Wayne wondered at the strength of the man, probably only a decade or so younger than himself. Then, instead of wondering, Wayne relaxed and enjoyed the ride. Up and up and up they went, Roach breathing harder and harder but keeping on, until at last the last turn around the square spiral was completed and they reached an enclosed platform at the very top.

"Here, I'm going to let you down now," Roach wheezed as he slid Wayne down his back and onto his own two feet. "Man, this used to be easier. I reckon I oughta quit smoking one of these days."

Wayne wobbled a bit as he got his bearings and shivered, separated now from the solid warmth of Roach's body.

"Well, what do you think?" Wayne looked over in the direction Roach was facing and gasped, audibly, because, there it was! Huge, and round and hanging like a giant pumpkin over a range of endless mountains, was the moon, his moon, his thousandth moon.

"Oh," was all he could manage to say. "Oh."

Roach's grin was easily visible in the moonlight.

"Quite a view from up here, ain't it?"

Wayne didn't reply but stood staring, mesmerized and silent.

Roach reached down to pull two of the beers out of the pocket of the coat Wayne was wearing and cracked one open. Then he left Wayne and went to stand downwind from him while he smoked a cigarette.

Wayne just kept on gazing at the moon. He felt so happy, so moon rich and happy. He'd been happy the day Peggy had agreed to marry him, and on many days during their life together, but this was different. This was, Wayne searched his mind to find a word for it, something like completion. This was the fullest and finest and truest moment of his small life. This was what he had been born away from, and would soon die and return to, this feeling of oneness, wholeness, completeness. Wayne understood then that he was dying, truly dying, perhaps not yet, not for days or weeks or months, but dying, sooner than later, and he didn't mind. He didn't mind at all, because this night,

fully, he was alive.

“I see the moon and the moon sees me. God bless the moon and God bless me,” Wayne chanted from a long buried childhood memory of being held and rocked and sung to by his mother.

“What’s that you say?” Roach’s husky voice asked from across the platform.

Wayne turned to beam at him, filled with blessings, filled with moonlight glowing from within his dying man’s body. But then he wobbled, and his legs got tangled up in his catheter tubing and the overlarge coat, and Wayne fell down, hard, moonlight smashing on the platform floor.

“Whoa there, buddy. You all right?” Roach knelt beside him, feeling for his pulse, checking for his breathing. “Don’t you be going out on me up here, man. I used to be a medic but it’s been a long time. And I could get in a whole lot of trouble if you went and croaked on me.”

Roach gathered Wayne up and carried him to where he could lean against the platform rail. Then he opened a beer and gave it to Wayne, and opened another for himself. Wayne took a long drink, thirsty all of a sudden. He hadn’t had a beer in a very long time. It tasted so good. He took another big swallow, and then he began to shiver. He was freezing all of a sudden, deep down into the bones of him cold. He did that sometimes, when the fever was coming on him. But maybe, he hoped, it was just the night and the cold beer setting him off. Roach, who was sitting several feet away while he smoked a joint, heard Wayne’s teeth chattering and scooted close to him, put his arm around him and pulled him in close, like he was a little kid.

“I’m not getting fresh or nothing. Just trying to keep you warm. Here, you want a hit?” He handed the pot to Wayne, and Wayne put the moist end of the joint to his lips and tried to suck the smoke through it, as he’d seen Roach do. He’d never been a smoker, only tried it some as a boy and then only because his brothers bullied him into it. It took a few tries and a bit of hard coughing before he got the hang of it, but he did, and found that even his usual cough was soothed by the marijuana, and soon his shivers subsided. The moon, however, shone even more brightly and Wayne and Roach sat a long time, silent and mesmerized by it.

It was nearly morning, with the moon fallen down behind the trees but the sun not yet come to light the sky, when Wayne and Roach, who’d both fallen asleep, woke up, snuggled together against the platform railing.

“Well, you reckon you’re ready to go back now?” Roach asked Wayne, yawning. Wayne agreed that he was. Pain was coming on him,

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hard and fast and furiously. For the first time ever the thought of his hospital bed, and the nurses with their eager needles, and the noisy pump loaded with pain relief filled him with anticipation.

Roach carried Wayne back down the fire tower steps and tucked him into the truck. He handed him some donuts and they both ate silently as Roach drove back to the hospital. When he pulled up in front of the wide glass doors, where so recently Wayne had made his escape, he called out to a security guard who was standing watch.

“Hey man, this the guy you all were looking for last night? I found him wandering around on the highway. He’s looking pretty peaked.”

Almost at once Wayne was pulled out of the truck, yanked out of Roach’s green coat, covered with blankets, placed on a gurney and wheeled back into the white world of bright lights. “Don’t forget this machine thing,” he heard Roach call out to someone, and then, to Wayne, “Hey man, I’ll be up to see you later, maybe bring you a little more moonshine. How ’bout it?”

