

Moon, June, Raccoon

by Renee Carter Hall

Hoping no one could see me, I placed the little package under the tree, bowed three times to the full moon, briefly pretended to be looking for something in the withered grass, just in case someone was watching, then ducked back into the house. The screen door screeched as I yanked it closed. I had three new mosquito bites on my legs.

In short, I was itchy, embarrassed, and completely desperate.

I had found the spell—complete with step-by-step color illustrations—in a book in the New Age section of the local megastore. I hated buying the book, but I was afraid I wouldn't be able to remember all the details, and who knew what would happen if you messed that sort of thing up.

So I'd followed the directions to the letter, saying the words, carving the two hearts into the apple, wrapping it up in pink paper and ribbon like a little gift. The directions said to take it to a "natural place, like a park or the woods." There weren't any woods nearby, and the closest park was a twenty-minute drive away, so I'd figured that under any tree was natural enough, and the one in my own postage-stamp backyard was going to have to do.

Try to understand, I had already been to two weddings that June, both friends from college. An engagement party was coming up, another friend just had her first baby, and another one was trying. And I was sick of being happy for everyone else, sick of blind dates and stupid matchmaking websites, sick of drinking coffee I didn't like with men I could never like, let alone love.

And anyway, they say the full moon makes people do crazy things. Of course, they say love makes people do crazy things, too, but I wouldn't know anything about that.

So I did the spell, and I tried to laugh at myself, and I geared up for another exciting evening watching stupid sitcoms and scratching my mosquito bites and eating mint chocolate chip ice cream.

And I didn't think about the spell again. At least, not until exactly twenty-four hours later.

When I heard the scratching at the screen door, I thought it was the neighbors' cat, a scruffy orange tom who sometimes forgets exactly which townhouse he belongs in.

I turned on the outside light.

It was a raccoon.

We looked at each other. I noticed it was sitting up on its haunches, holding something.

"Hi," it said.

I took a step backward. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. He, on the other hand—the voice was definitely male—kept talking.

"Nice night, huh? Not too humid. Good breeze."

I saw then what he was holding: my apple, the two carved hearts turning brown.

"Listen," he continued, "I'm, you know, flattered and everything. But... well, I just don't think it would work out in the long run. So I thought—it's really a sweet gesture, and you're not all that bad-looking for a human, but I really can't accept this." And he held out the apple with both paws.

"Raccoons don't talk," I managed, finally.

"Actually, we do. Everything does. You just don't listen."

Slowly, his words started to sink in. I looked at the apple. "That wasn't for you."

He eyed me skeptically. "You left it under my tree."

"It was..." Why was I explaining myself to a raccoon? "Never mind. It was a mistake. You can keep it if you want."

The raccoon shrugged and took a bite. "Y'know, there's a produce stand about two miles from here where you can get apples that actually taste like something."

I stared at him while he finished the apple. Was this the first sign of some kind of nervous breakdown, seeing talking animals on your back porch? Or maybe it was an early warning sign of

a stroke. Did people hallucinate with those? Should I call 911?

I considered my options. I could close the door, go back to the empty laughter on TV for another night, and try to dismiss this as some bizarre stress-induced episode.

Or...

Curiosity got the better of me, and I took a deep breath. "Would you like to come in?"

* * *

"Nice place," he said, glancing around.

"It's kind of a mess," I apologized. "I wasn't expecting... guests."

"I've seen worse." He held out a paw. "Name's Krispy Kreme, by the way."

I blinked. "Your name's *Krispy*..."

He held up his other paw to stop me. "My mother had a sweet tooth, okay? Considering that my sister is Sara Lee and my brother is Ben&Jerrys, I think I came off all right. Call me Kris."

I shook his paw. "I'm—"

"Karen Sheffield, thirty-one, bachelor's in English, works for Taylor & Bradshaw, and you write some pretty decent poetry even though you keep getting rejection slips." He paused. "You might want to think about buying a shredder." With that, he loped off to the fridge.

I followed. "Wait a minute. How do you know how to read?"

Kris sampled three different flavors of protein shake, wrinkling his nose at each one. "The Martins down the street have a kid who watches all that educational stuff. They keep their windows open a lot. I can read, count to twenty, sing 'C is for Cookie,' and figure out which thing isn't like the others. I think my education's pretty much complete."

I couldn't argue with that.

"Speaking of education," he added, tossing the shake cans into the trash and moving on to the

freezer, "we need to teach you a thing or two about eating. First off," he squinted at a frozen dinner, "disodium inosinate is not food. And neither is that third-rate Chinese takeout stuff you get twice a week."

"I'm supposed to take culinary advice from an animal who eats out of dumpsters?"

"Hey, *I* don't have much of a choice. And don't turn this around. We're talking about you here, not me." He left the kitchen and settled himself on the couch in the living room. "You don't have company over very much."

"How can you tell?"

He gestured to the couch. "Just your scent. Nothing male—or mingled," he added with a wink.

"Don't tell me you learned *that* on educational TV."

"Yeah, well, the Robinsons never close their blinds." He stretched. "So why not?"

"Why not what?"

"Why aren't you out with somebody tonight instead of leaving lousy apples in your yard?"

I started to give some kind of glib answer, but then I stopped and actually tried to think of the best way to explain it. "I'm tired of being with people and still being lonely."

Kris studied me a moment. "Hm. Well, being lonely with people still seems better than being lonely by yourself. At least it has more potential."

"Maybe." I shrugged.

"So what are you looking for?"

I had used up all my energy for introspective answers. "I don't know. The same things everybody's looking for."

"Honest, caring, loyal, sensitive, good sense of humor?"

I cringed. Those were the qualities I'd written on the pink paper used to wrap the apple. "Yeah. So?"

"The perfect guy."

"I guess."

Kris shook his head. "Listen, when you spend as much time as I do going through people's garbage, you find out more about them than you really want to know. And the first thing you learn is, nobody's perfect. I can tell you, everybody's just as messed up and scared and unsure as you are, just in their own way."

"You must have watched Mister Rogers, too," I said dryly, and turned on the TV.

"I'm just saying," he replied with a shrug, then settled down to watch. "You got any popcorn?"

I sighed.

* * *

A few nights later he was at the back porch again, dragging some wrinkled bundle of paper behind him.

"This is your idea of a hostess gift?" I asked as he handed it to me.

"Just take a look."

We went inside. It was a sketchbook, the spiral kind. About half the pages had been torn out, and the rest were wavy and stained with things I didn't want to think about.

I opened it to the first page, and my jaw literally dropped. It was a portrait, precisely rendered in pencil, of a man roughly my age, with a thoughtful expression and bright, childlike eyes that defied the lines beginning to form around them. The subject was not entirely what most people would call handsome, but he had an interesting face that welcomed closer study. The page was half torn out, but otherwise intact.

"Where did you get this?" I asked.

Kris shrugged. "Ran across it. I figured, you know, you were into the arts and all, so..."

The next page was a quick sketch of a dog, probably no more than ten lines and a bit of rough shading. But it looked so alive I expected to see it breathe.

There were other drawings, some simple, some more elaborate, even a study in ink that had turned into more of a watercolor thanks to what looked like a coffee spill. All were sensitive and *real*, as if the graphite lines were trembling with life, itching to release the form into the world. Even a still life—two pears, a vase, and what looked like a dog toy—had personality.

Then the drawings became sketchier, the paper scrubbed raw from erasing. One half-completed drawing had a dark scribble of charcoal over it, as if the artist had gotten frustrated with the attempt. The next page was a ragged scrap of paper clinging to the spiral wire.

The rest of the pages were blank, but I looked at every one, pausing, as if something would appear there if I willed it. I felt disappointed, even angry. The person had incredible talent; how did this end up in the trash?

I looked for any identification, hoping for at least a name, but there was nothing. Then I looked back at the portrait and saw the tiny scribbles in the corners.

"Self-portrait," I read on the left, and on the right, "SJR."

"Not bad, huh?" Kris said when I looked up.

"Not bad? This is incredible. Why would somebody throw this away?"

Kris rummaged in the fridge for a soda. "Jeez, what d'you need diet for? You're what, a size five?" He cracked open a can, sipped, and winced.

"You didn't answer my question."

"I'm a raccoon, not a mind reader. Maybe it's the same reason why there are so many poems of yours that wind up covered in teabags and takeout cartons."

"Yeah, but... this is different. These are," I fumbled for words and couldn't find any, "*good*."

"One man's trash, I guess. So what's on TV?"

I handed him the remote and sat down on the couch. While Kris flipped from a game show to a documentary about elephants to a rap video, I sat with the sketchbook in my lap, turning the pages slowly, over and over, consumed by wonder.

The doorbell rang on my day off, in the middle of the afternoon. And, like a complete idiot, I opened the door, never mind that the guy on the other side wasn't anybody I was expecting and could very well have spent the rest of the day raping and torturing and killing me.

And then, like even more of an idiot, I stopped and stared at the guy for what felt like two days.

Because it was the guy from the sketchbook.

He was wearing a white polo shirt with "Scott" embroidered over a line of marching ants. "Hi," he said awkwardly, "um... Mrs. Sheffield? I'm Scott, from Pestbusters. Your husband called about the raccoon problem."

My husband?

Scott consulted his clipboard. "Kris?"

"Oh." I thought fast. "That's... my brother, actually. Technically he owns the house, so he... takes care of things like that."

Scott nodded. "No problem. Let's take a look and see what we can do."

He advised the usual: tight-fitting lids on the trash cans, bungee cords, closely-spaced lattice work under the porch to keep them from getting underneath. "I can try setting a trap," he finished, "but some of these guys are just way too smart for it."

What was I supposed to say? "Um... okay."

"I've got one in the truck; I'll go get it."

"Wait." He stopped. "It won't... hurt him, will it?"

Scott smiled. "Only his pride. If we can catch him, we'll give him a dose of rabies vaccine and take him down to the wooded areas by the park. There's plenty of real food to forage for there. Raccoon paradise. I'll be right back."

As soon as he was gone, I grabbed the sketchbook from its place on the coffee table and stuffed it under the couch cushions. I was dying to ask him about it, but I couldn't think of any way to bring it up without sounding psychic—or possibly psychotic. Anyway, it seemed so... so *personal*, like asking somebody about a prescription bottle you saw in their medicine cabinet.

Scott set up the trap and baited it with a handful of peanuts, then handed me his card and said to call if anything showed up. If my fingers tingled a bit when they brushed his as I took the card, and if our eyes met a bit longer than was strictly necessary... well, I told myself that was just my imagination.

The next morning, the trap was empty, the peanuts untouched. I didn't see Kris that night, either.

Scott called me at work the next day. "Nothing yet," I told him.

A pause. "Well, if it's all right, I'd like to stop by and make sure everything's still set up. Is around seven okay?"

I could feel my heart pounding. "I thought you guys closed down at five."

"Well, officially, yeah. But my apartment's just two blocks over from your place, so it's not really out of my way." He sounded almost embarrassed. I loved that.

"Oh. Well, okay. That'd be fine," I said, hurriedly. "I mean, if it's not too much trouble." I was babbling like a teenager.

I hung up and stared at the gray wall of my cubicle, then opened the manilla folder on my desk. I tried to look like I was reviewing paperwork, which was difficult, seeing as the folder held the self-portrait from the sketchbook. I'd felt a little strange bringing something so personal and true into the mundane surroundings of work, but at least I'd gotten over my first insane impulse to tack the sketch up where anyone could see it. Instead, I was sneaking glances at it like a girl with a pop-star pinup hidden in her algebra book.

Stuffing the folder back in my bag, I reminded myself that love at first sight was a ridiculous myth based on physical attraction, or concocted after the fact to give the relationship some feeling of destiny. I had always said that, and I had always believed it.

And I still did.

I thought.

* * *

I offered Scott a soda, which he accepted (at Kris' urging, I had stocked up on a wider variety of

beverages). I made small talk about the weather, as well as the cleverness of raccoons in general and our suspect in particular. (If he only knew.) I laughed at his genuinely funny jokes and was flattered when he laughed at my halfhearted ones.

But I still couldn't find a way to bring up the sketchbook, or anything even close to it.

On my way home from work the next night, I bought a sketchpad, an assortment of pencils, and a few sticks of charcoal. Then I cleared off my coffee table and arranged the supplies so they looked as if they'd been casually scattered there. I tried to do a drawing or two to complete the effect, but they ended up so hopeless that I crumpled the paper into balls, and, after a moment's thought, left them on the floor. Certainly anyone who had thrown away a sketchbook would be able to relate.

And it worked. "You're an artist?" Scott asked lightly when he came by a few nights later to check the trap.

I shrugged. "Not really. I thought I'd give it a try, but I think I'd better stick to writing poems."

"Poems, huh?" His voice took on that tone of slight awe, the one people who don't write get sometimes, as if I were having my verses chiseled into polished marble instead of published on obscure websites and in photocopied literary zines that no one's ever even heard of unless they've been published in them.

"Yeah," I said finally. "I mean, it's nothing major. What about you? Do you do anything... you know, creative?"

He glanced back at the coffee table and ran his hand through his hair. "I used to draw," he said slowly. "Painted a little. Mostly watercolors and inks. I... haven't for a while."

"Why not?" My mouth was dry.

"Mostly time, I guess."

Liar. People who say they don't have time for art usually mean that it isn't enough of a priority for them to make time for. These are the same people who will then spend two hours in front of the TV every night, because that isn't as demanding—or terrifying—as facing a blank page. I know, because I've been one of them.

"And I guess I just got frustrated," he added. "Nothing ever seemed to come out right."

Good God. What had he been envisioning, that drawings so good could still fall short?

"Do you, um..." I tried to swallow. "Still have any of your stuff?"

A shadow passed over his expression. Regret? "I threw most of it away. But... maybe I'll get back into it." He smiled. "If you'll show me some of your poems."

"Uh, sure." He might as well have asked me to take my clothes off. The thought of him reading my poems made me feel about as exposed. And yet, there was also that odd little flutter of excitement somewhere between my chest and my stomach, and already I was mentally rummaging through my files, trying to decide which ones to give him.

The trap was still empty, though there were some peanut shells inside, carefully arranged in a little pile, the raccoon equivalent of an obscene gesture.

Scott chuckled and shook his head. "I think this guy's worth a limerick or two." He cleaned out the shells and added another handful, then stood and turned back to me. "So... same time tomorrow?"

* * *

I spent so much time re-reading and shuffling through my poems that I had to print out fresh copies by the time I decided which ones I was least embarrassed by. I wondered if he was sketching away furiously at home, trying to draw something worth showing me.

The next night, he came in carrying a new sketchbook. He glanced at the trap, then sat down next to me on the couch, and I handed him the six poems I'd picked out, nothing too long or complicated, nothing too simplistic or silly.

I never know what to do while someone's reading my work. Part of me wants to stare at them, so I can pounce on every little nuance of facial expression. And part wants to leave the room, or possibly the country, to get away from the suspense.

He was on the last page now. And then it came—the little intake of breath, the pause, the slight sigh. When you're at a reading and the audience pauses and sighs that way, it's better than the applause. It means they're not just being polite, not even just being appreciative. It means they got it.

"These," he said softly, "are really good."

Then he handed me the sketchbook.

The first page was a softly shaded sketch of a robin, his eyes bright and feathers glossy. He'd added a pale red-orange wash to its breast. It was, of course, perfect in every detail. I felt as if I'd never seen a robin until that moment, as if it were some fantastic creature from an ancient bestiary.

Then I turned the page, and I saw my own face looking back at me.

I must have appeared surprised, because he said hurriedly, "Some of the details might not be quite right. I usually work from photographs..."

I remembered hearing once that the point of art wasn't to portray what the artist saw, but how the artist *felt* about what he saw. And it was all here: the uncertain but thoughtful expression in my eyes, the faint lines here and there that I'd only recently begun to notice in the mirror, the hairstyle I'd had for the past eight years.

And through his eyes, it was beautiful. All of it. All of me.

I looked up. I had no idea what to say. He looked at me, and the silence warmed between us.

Snap!

A harsh metallic sound from outside. The trap had shut.

When we reluctantly went to look, I recognized Kris. And I could have sworn the raccoon winked at me as Scott loaded the cage into the truck.

* * *

I wrapped the last of the dishes carefully in newspaper and laid them in the box. My whole life sat around me, packed in cardboard, taped and labeled.

No, I corrected myself. Not my whole life. My old life. In just a few days—this with yet another admiring glance at my engagement ring—a new one would start.

I went out to the back porch, watching the summer's first fireflies winking in the grass. The moon was full and golden, and I laughed to myself, remembering the night almost a year before, when I'd tried to cast a spell, tried to summon love as if it were something I could give orders to. I had never told Scott anything about it. Maybe someday.

I almost tripped over the little package.

It was an apple, small and dusky red, wrapped in one of those lined pieces of newsprint that kids use in school when they're first learning how to write. The front side was some kid's story about his grandparents, with a gold star stuck at the top. On the back, I found a note written in wobbly crayon.

Just to prove there's more to apples than those grocery store things. Nice place your fellow took me to. Nice little stream with great seafood. And I met someone, too. I think being able to count to twenty really did it for her.

Keep a light on for me at the new place. Maybe I'll bring the kids by sometime. Braeburn, Jonagold, and Nittany. Cute little furballs.

Kris.

I polished the apple on my nightshirt and took a bite. The tangy sweetness sparkled on my tongue, familiar and new at once, and I ate the rest standing in moonlight, the June night warm and sweet around me, a poem I was living instead of writing down.

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