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MOON  
in the

James P.  
Blaylock

***The Man in the Moon***

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Summer had somehow passed along into autumn, as it will, and with October came a good bit of rain. Rain, I think you'll agree, isn't at all bad—as long, that is, as you're not caught out in it. Anyway, the blue skies and white bits of clouds had gone south like geese some weeks back and rolling grey masses had taken their place overhead.

A deep rumble, something between the bellow of a giant and the echoing crack of a rock sailing into a canyon, could be heard away up the valley. It appeared from the village as if the green slopes of the mountain merged there where the River Oriel finally fell away into the sea, but that was only because it was so far away. The river, as broad by then as the sky itself, had worked away at the mountains for an age, and although you couldn't tell it from Twombly Town, as I said, the valley opened up beyond the moun-

tains into green rolling hills which continued to roll smack into the sea.

So the leaves were falling slowly in the cool breezes, and of those left on the trees few were green. Most were brown and red and gold, and when they piled up on the ground and were rained on, they smelled awfully good although it was a sort of lonesome, musty smell.

Great grey clouds and ominous rumbles of thunder usually mean that rain isn't a long way off, and this was no exception. As Jonathan Bing sat in his old wicker chair, which had all pretty much gone to bits in the weather, he thought about all of this business that I've been writing down. He could smell the musty odor of the forest which wasn't more than a stone's throw off to his left, and he could see three lone boats on the dark river below the village all pulling along toward shore and shelter. The first drops splashed down heavily, as if warning that here was a serious rain, and were followed by a steadily thickening curtain of drops until the shingled roof above his head rattled merrily.

Jonathan nodded in approval, patted his dog, and took a long swallow of the hot punch he'd prepared against this very eventuality. Something about the simple fact that there were people on the river, soaked, no doubt, to their toes, made his punch taste punchier and his woolen coat feel more snug than it might have. It was high time, thought he, to light his pipe. And so he did, afterwards puffing away on the thing as if the rising smoke would form a misty barrier against the wind and rain.

His old dog, Ahab, named after the seventh king of The-Land-Beyond-the-River, was a fat sort of a dog. He didn't, in fact, look doggish at all. His head seemed much too big for his body and was round as a plate. His eyes, which were, if you'll not mistake my meaning, a trifle pig-like, were both off on either side a bit too much as if Ahab had been caught facing a stiff wind and had had his face pushed about. He was enormously fat and was white and

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all over speckles of odd shades of gray and brown, and he had short little legs. Don't be fooled, though, into supposing that Ahab couldn't cut capers like a staghound. His legs moved wonderfully fast, and he could have run rings around any rat in the village bakery. He was, however, on moderately good terms with rats and so probably wouldn't run rings around them anyway. Jonathan used to joke that he had come upon Ahab playing at cards with three or four rats and a crow in the barn once, just to indicate Ahab's good nature.

He and Ahab had lived in the village for a long time, as had almost everyone else there. Jonathan made cheeses. He was known about town as the Master Cheeser, or simply Cheeser which wasn't at all strange.

Beyond his house, about halfway up to the dense line of green at the edge of the forest, were the cheesehouses: one was a smokehouse and the other simply a house for curing cheeses. If Jonathan needed a smoked cheese he'd say, "I'm going to the smokehouse." If he wanted something else, a nice cheddar or a caraway seed cheese, he'd say, "I'm going for a cheese," and let it go at that.

During the months of October and November Jonathan prepared great circular white cheeses made of goatsmilk and raisins and walnuts and the essences of ripe fruit which he kept secret. The custom was to slice one of these amazing cheeses up on Christmas Eve and eat it with fruitcakes and sherried trifles and roly poly puddings and, most importantly, honey cakes. In mid-November Jonathan loaded a boat with raisin cheeses and floated down the river to Willowood Station where he sold them to traders who sailed away west to sell them in turn to the field dwarves along the coast.

The field dwarves, anxiously awaiting their cheeses, prepared honey cakes in huge quantities, some for themselves, some for the elves that lived above in the Elfin Highlands, and some to trade for the round raisin cheeses which had come downriver from Twombly Town. Honey cakes, made

with pecans and cinnamon and, of course, honey and a dozen strange grains and spices and good sorts of things that the people upriver in Jonathan's village knew nothing about, were as much a part of the holiday feast as were raisin cheeses.

Jonathan had contemplated, one afternoon over his pipe, trading the secret of his raisin cheeses for the secret of the honey cakes, thereby making the November trading unnecessary. But the good thing about thinking over a pipe is that it takes some time to puff and tamp and light and puff, puff, puff again, and you can get through a problem from back to front. This idea of trading secret recipes, Jonathan decided, was a bad one. It would no doubt ruin more than it would accomplish. And besides, there was a certain feeling of pride, and not a bad pride at all, in being the only person responsible for something as wonderful as raisin cheeses.

But it was getting on into autumn, as I believe I've said, and it was a gray rainy day for the people of the valley. Jonathan drained his mug of punch and tapped out his pipe against the bottom of his shoe. It was time, decidedly time, to be about cooking supper. As far as he was concerned, all the rain in the sky could fall and he wouldn't care. He'd rather enjoy it because there was no place he had to go and there was nothing to do but eat a good meal, read a bit, and go to sleep. Nothing is better than having absolutely nothing to do when it's raining outside. Part of you might say, "weed the garden," or "Slap a coat of paint on the cheesehouse," and then another part of you can reply, "I can't. It's raining outside fit to shout," and then all of you can go back to doing nothing.

Jonathan got up, walked just to the edge of the porch—just to where the raindrops ended, and stood for a moment watching the smoke tumble up out of a dozen chimneys scattered about the hillside and down toward the center of town. Padding along beside him, Ahab straightened

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up, rolled his eyes, and growled deep in his throat as if he'd heard a suspicious but undefinable noise.

Now Ahab never growled, especially down deep in his throat, unless something was genuinely amiss—if someone were crawling in through the window of the cheesehouse or if a bear had come prowling out of the forest. So Jonathan Bing looked lively. He craned his neck to look around the corner of the house but saw nothing. To be on the safe side, he whispered, "At him, boy!" to Ahab, who simply with his peculiar looks could frighten almost anything save, perhaps, a bear. But Ahab, after sticking his nose out into the storm, lay down and pretended to sleep, opening one eye now and again to see if Jonathan was taken in.

As he stood there listening, a low humming sound gradually became audible from way off up in the grey sky. It was a drone like a bee might make who was busy at a flower, and it was a lonely and sad sound. Jonathan had the feeling for a moment that he was a young boy standing alone on just such a rainy afternoon in a grassy clearing in the woods. He didn't *think* of that, he just felt it all over and it made his heart race and his stomach seem empty. It was then, when he remembered the rain and the woods, that he recognized the sound.

He put one hand over his brow to shade his eyes (simply out of habit, of course, since there was no sun) and he squinted for a moment before being able to make out the tiny dark blurred shape against the clouds. It was a flying machine, an elfin airship, launched from the mountaintops and whirring along miles above the valley, almost in the clouds themselves if that were possible.

Jonathan watched in wonder, this being the first flying machine he'd seen since that day in the meadow many years before. And even though it was just a tiny dark spot hovering in the sky, it was the most beautiful thing he'd seen—more beautiful than the emerald globe, big as your head, in the village museum or the view through the giant

golden kaleidoscope that sat like a great cannon at the gates of the village for anyone in the world to look through. And just as it seemed as if the airship was drawing closer, just when he fancied he could see batlike wings jutting out from either side, the ship sailed silently into a cloud and was gone.

"To be able to see the inside of a cloud!" thought Jonathan. "Yoicks!" But he knew immediately that "Yoicks" didn't quite capture what he felt. He envisioned great lakes of crystal rainwater in there with rainbow colored fishes swimming through them and elfin airships sailing overhead. Then it occurred to him that such fishes would, as often as not, swim right through the bottom of the clouds like the rain did and find themselves in a predicament. And after all, he'd never seen any rainbow colored fish sailing out of the sky, so it was all fairly unlikely. But he'd like to see the inside of a cloud anyway, lakes and fishes or no.

He waited for a moment for the airship to reappear, and when it didn't, he took his mug and his book and wandered inside to cook up some sort of stew. "It's a funny day to be out sailing in the sky," Jonathan thought. "Not at all a pleasant day for that sort of thing. There must be something afoot." But the ways of the elves were always a mystery and mysteries are almost always better left unsolved. After all, the fun of a mystery is that it is one.

The sun went down and it was a terribly dark night with thunder cracking and clouds whirling overhead caught in a frantic wind that couldn't seem to make up its mind which way to blow next. Jonathan piled the fireplace with oak logs, and, full from supper, slumped back in a great fat armchair and put his feet up onto a footstool. He looked at Ahab who was curled up before the hearth and considered the possibility of teaching him to smoke a pipe. But the idea, he quickly saw, wasn't a good one, and dogs might not go for pipes anyway, being dogs, and so the whole plan was a washout. He puffed away thinking about what

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a grand thing it was to enjoy a good book and to be warm and dry and full of good food and have the finest fire and armchair in the village. "Better than being a thousand kings," he thought, but he didn't entirely know what he meant by it.

He'd dozed off after having barely begun *The Tale of the Goblin Wood* by G. Smithers of Brompton Village, when someone began pounding away at his door, causing Ahab to leap about, awake but still embroiled in a strange dream involving toads. Jonathan swung open the door and there, shaking the water from his coat, stood Gilroy Bastable, Jonathan's nearest neighbor and mayor of Twombly Town.

He had a look about him that seemed to indicate annoyance, an attitude that was not surprising, for he was splashed with mud, and his hair, which grew mostly on the sides of his head, spiraled away in either direction like two curly mountain peaks turned sideways. He wore a heavy greatcoat and a pair of immense woolen gloves which smelled a bit gamey as wool does when it gets wet. Mayor Bastable, clearly, had been in the thick of the storm.

Jonathan waved him in and shut the door against the cold wind. First it was airships, then Gilroy Bastables, all out under peculiar circumstances. "H'lo there Gilroy! Quite a night out, wouldn't you say? Could be described as a wet one if it came to descriptions, don't you think?"

Gilroy Bastable seemed to say something but his meaning was unclear; his teeth, somehow, got in the way. Ahab, having realized that there was no threat from toads, wandered over and laid his head on Bastable's shoe intending to sleep. He discovered, however, that it was too wet and muddy to be altogether comfortable so he padded back to his spot before the fire.

"Filthy night out; that's what I call it. Full of mud holes and hurricanes. Blew my hat into the river. I saw it with my own eyes right here in my head. Hat sails off spinning like the widow's windmill, turns round the church steeple

twice, then lands smack and gone in the river. Brand new hat. Hideous night.”

“It does make you feel a bit snug though when you’re in out of it,” said Jonathan.

“Snug!” the Mayor shouted, mainly through his nose. “My hat’s gone downriver!”

“Unfortunate. Very bad business indeed,” said Jonathan, who was sympathetic. But it was as much his night as it was the Mayor’s and he was determined that nothing should spoil it. He hung Bastable’s coat and muffler near the fire to dry, and with a good deal of struggling between the two of them, they managed to pry his boots off and set them beneath the coat and muffler. Ahab awoke momentarily and, mistaking the lumps of boots for something else, considered eating them but thought better of it and nodded off again.

Bastable sat across from Jonathan’s chair, calming down due to the effects of the fire. A good fire, as you know, is second only to hot punch in the way of soothing. Jonathan came out of the kitchen with a platter and two steaming mugs. He set the works down next to the Mayor and popped out and back in again with the most amazing cheese, all red and orange and yellow swirls and round like Ahab’s head. Gilroy Bastable, already wading into the punch, was astounded.

“Aye!” he bubbled, “What’s this! A cheese, I believe, or my hat’s not downriver.” He looked at it closely and poked an inquisitive finger at it as it lay there. Jonathan cut a slice or two and the Mayor, raising his mug and nodding his head, tied into it manfully. “Why, I’m a codfish!” he said through a mouthful of cheese, his manners having gone out the window due to the heartiness of the thing. “There’s a taste here I know. Port wine, I believe it is. Am I mistaken, or what?”

“No, sir,” said Jonathan. “Port wine it is, and not your dog-faced port from Beezle’s market either. I made this with Autumn Auburn from the delta.”

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"No!"

"Yes, sir," said Jonathan. "And with a little of this and a thimbleful of that, I think you'll agree, it's just the thing on a night such as this."

The Mayor, finally, had to say that it was, and if all had gone along those lines much longer, he would have forgotten about his escapade and been convinced, as was Jonathan, that the storm outside was one of the finest he'd encountered.

He pushed down a last mouthful, however, and his eyes clouded over like the skies outside. The corners of his mouth turned downwards and stuck there, and Jonathan feared that part of his cheese had gone bad and that the Mayor had wandered into it. Such was not the case though. Gilroy Bastable had suddenly remembered why he had braved the storm and lost his hat and slopped mud up and down his trouser legs and over his greatcoat. He had come with some grim sorts of news.

"See here, Jonathan," he began in a tone so filled with authority that it woke Ahab from a deep sleep. "I haven't just come slogging over here for a lark, you know. No indeed."

"Oh?" said Jonathan, rather disappointed. He much preferred larks to serious business.

"No, sir! I've come about the traders."

"Which traders are these now?" asked Jonathan, not really concerned yet but being polite out of regard for the Mayor who seemed about to pop from the importance of his mission.

Old Bastable looked at Jonathan bug-eyed. "Why which traders do ye suppose, Master Cheeser? Do we have such a crowd of 'em that we can pick and choose which ones we'd wade knee-deep through a hurricane to chat about?"

Jonathan had to admit that the Mayor was right, although he could see no reason to bluster about it. "That would be the traders of Willowood then," said he, putting on a serious look. "Have they been caught dipping into the

cargo again? Trading to the link men for brandy and hen's teeth?"

"Worse than that," said old Bastable, leaning forward in his chair and squinting like a schoolteacher. "They've absconded—disappeared!"

"They've what!" cried Jonathan, interested finally in the Mayor's story. "How?"

"Why walked away, I suppose. Or, more likely, sailed away downriver. Willowood is deserted. No one's there."

In truth, Jonathan was only a week or so away from his own meager journey from Hightower to the trading station at Willowood Village where the traders would give him a note for the Christmas cheese, transport it downriver to the edge of the sea, and return with honey cakes. He'd accomplish all of that, that is, if there *were* traders at Willowood. But why, one might ask, would anyone suppose otherwise? And it was just such a question which Jonathan posed to Gilroy Bastable.

"Because word's come up from Hightower," said Gilroy. "They found the Willowood Station looted and smacked up. Deserted, it is, and the wharf is gone. Or at least half of it is. All off down the river. Whole place gone to smash. Now, Wurzle says it's pirates and Beezle says it's flood, and the bunch from Hightower say the traders went downriver to the sea just out of lunacy."

"Like lemmings," offered Jonathan.

"Just so," said Bastable. "And me, well I don't pretend to know, but they've gone, and that's sure."

"I don't like the sound of this," Jonathan said ominously. "Something's afoot. I saw an airship today."

"In a storm like this? Very odd, an airship in a storm like this."

"Just what I said myself. And then here you come, out in the rainy night like a duck."

Bastable was at a loss for words. He could see that, as he'd hoped, his news would startle Jonathan, but he wasn't

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sure of all this duck business. "See here," he began in a mildly questioning tone, "I'm not sure that ducks—"

But Jonathan cut him off short, although under normal circumstances he wouldn't consider doing so. "My cheeses!" he cried, and Ahab, noting the perilous tone in his master's voice, was up and racing toward the kitchen at a gallop, toppling a chair, setting the rest of the ball of cheese into flight, and careening off a stout wooden bread cupboard before becoming sensible again. He wandered back across the wooden floorboards of the kitchen and peered around the sideboard at the two men who sat astounded, gaping at him.

"The news has rather upset your hound, Jonathan," said Gilroy Bastable, retrieving the cheese and gouging out a hunk the size of his nose. "And well it should. Do you know, Jonathan, what the word about town is?"

"Not a bit," said the Cheeser.

"The cry goes round, my man, that you're a stout enough lad to sail downriver yourself, all the way to sea-side with your cheeses and back again with cakes and elfin gifts."

"Stout lads, is it!" shouted Jonathan, astounded at the suggestion and calculating the time it would take to make such a journey—weeks, surely. "It's a fool's idea; that's what it is."

"But the people will have no cakes!" protested Gilroy Bastable.

"Then let them eat bread," Jonathan almost replied before wisely considering that it wouldn't be a good idea. And it *would* be a sad holiday without honey cakes, not to mention elfin gifts for the children. But then again, the very idea of sailing down the Oriel through the dark Hemlock forests to the sea frightened him.

Bastable could see that Jonathan was in a turmoil and knew that turmoils are bad things to go butting into, so he let the matter stand. "Well," said he, "I'm not one to make

such statements, for a man has to do what he has to do. I think you'll agree to that."

Jonathan gurgled a reply and poked his forefinger meditatively into the cheese, stabbing little craters into its surface until it sat on its plate like a moon plucked from a miniature sky—half a moon, that is to say, for Gilroy Bastable had eaten the other half and, until he saw that Jonathan had fingered it so completely, he was prepared to shove down the remaining half.

"I say," said Gilroy, "you've gone and ruined the cheese."

"What? Me?" Jonathan said, lost in thought. "Oh, yes. I suppose I have. Poked it full of holes, haven't I?" He picked up the punctured lump of yellow, tore off a sizeable hunk and rolled it toward Ahab who, it seemed, could smell it approaching even though he was again deeply lost in sleep, dreaming this time about finding a great treasure made of beef bones and ice cream, the two great passions of a dog's life. Somehow the ball of cheese became connected to the idea of ice cream in his dream, and Ahab scooped it up and, still asleep, mashed it about in his mouth for a moment before the odd flavor and weird texture of the cheese made him lurch awake, fearful that he'd been poisoned. There are few things more unpleasant than innocently eating or drinking one thing when you mistakenly suppose you've gotten hold of something else.

Once awake, however, Ahab forgot about the treasure dream and, being a Cheeser's dog, quickly determined the nature of that which he ate. He swallowed heartily and, as his master and Gilroy Bastable were clumping across toward the door, Ahab thought it a first rate idea to have another go at the last chunk of wrecked cheese on the plate. And the good thing about cheeses is that you can stab at them and pound on them as much as you like, and they will be every bit as much a cheese afterward as when they were new.

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Outside, the wind was still blowing in fits and gusts that sailed right down the center of the valley between the mountains. The forest was a black line against the wild sky. When there was a break in the clouds, the moonlight would creep out across patches of the valley and, as if by enchantment, the dark fringe of the woods would cast wavering shadows along the hillsides, and rocks and bushes and clumps of raspberry vine that were familiar and friendly in the light of day became strange and forbidding night shapes, weirdly lit and twisted beneath the moon. Jonathan was glad that it was Gilroy Bastable and not himself who had to go trudging away through the nighttime. At least the rain had stopped, and if the wind continued to howl, it would pursue the last of the clouds to the ocean by morning, and the day would dawn clear beneath a cool autumn sun.

The Mayor assured Jonathan that this business about river travel would arise in the morning, for the next day was market day and a meeting was planned at the Guildhall to discuss the Willowood doings and the fate of the holiday celebrations.

After returning to his chair by the fire, Jonathan picked up *The Goblin Wood* and tried to read. He pretended that the issue of sailing to sea was closed and that his unconcerned reading proved it. But he merely looked at words on the page and found that after working through a page or two, he hadn't any idea of what he had read. "A stout enough lad," he said aloud to himself, and Ahab, who was sitting in the chair opposite, naturally thought it was he who was being spoken to and was half afraid that Jonathan would scold him over the disappeared cheese.

"Stout lad is it? Surely," thought Jonathan, "I *am* the Master Cheeser, and I *do* have a fine little boat, and I am, I suppose, the man in the village best suited for adventures such as this. Still, weeks of travel through the long miles of empty river..." It was all a bit much for the Cheeser and was, I suppose, a question best pondered by the light of

day. Late at night sometimes, things seem deeper and smokier than they are, and our thoughts wander along paths that would be invisible to us in the sunlight. And although those paths are no less real than the familiar ones of day, they too often resemble the night shapes that Jonathan saw silhouetted on the hillside in the glow of a moon that peeped out from between lakes of clouds.

It was time, I think you'll agree, for Jonathan Bing to turn the lamp down, bolt the door, and crawl into bed. Ahab elected to spend the night on his pillow by the embers of the fire and was lost immediately in his dreams.