

JULIE PAUL

## THE PULL OF THE MOON

### *Normal kids like Reuben*

He was one of the first. The blood came from his nose in generous drops, falling like spring rain onto his desk. Had he been thinking too hard? Sometimes his teachers told him he overthought, and he had been advised by more than one person to let himself feel something once in awhile, for God's sake. For God's sake, he never did it, but for his own, Reuben decided he would try a weekly sauna. It felt hot, and that counted, didn't it? But the ordeal of undressing in a public changeroom made him feel other things, mainly the terrible sensation that he didn't belong beside the muscles and the chests and the casual flopping and drying of genitals. The weekly sauna had lasted one week.

His blood missed the pages of his chemistry book by mere millimeters. He shoved it out of the way and put his cold hands to his face and wham! His gut felt explosive, his head went swimming. He was touching his own blood. He was basically inside his own body. He fell to the floor.

### *And Noel*

The blood collecting at the base of the tree was not an offering to the earth, nor was it the product of homicide/suicide/genocide/pesticide. It was falling from the face of Noel, who'd climbed up into the tree to spy on his sister. If he lay just right he could remain undetected for hours while she sat with her ditzzy—but beautiful—friends from school. If it was a windy day he couldn't get away with it, because he'd have no leaf coverage. But if it was windy, none of the girls would dare be outside, anyway. Their pretty hair was not weatherproof.

When Noel felt the blood start pouring from his nose, he sat up, quickly. "Son of a bitch," he yelled, when he hit his head on the limb above him.

"What was that?" one girl asked.

“Oh, probably the neighbours,” another said. “The last time we were here they were having a huge fight because the man could see the lady’s grey roots.”

“Stupid.”

Then they were quiet. Noel held one hand to his face to stop the blood, and with the other, parted the leaves to get a better view.

His sister was not with the others.

No, she was right below him.

“Get. Down. Here. Now,” she said, through clenched teeth.

“I’m bleeding,” he said.

“Not enough,” she said.

But he kept on bleeding, even without her drawing blood.

#### *And Sadie*

Sadie, eleven, woke her mother with one hand while the other cupped blood.

“My nose is bleeding,” Sadie said.

Her mother sat up quickly, and grabbed the closest thing to staunch the flow—her husband’s t-shirt, the one she’d helped him out of a few hours before: it was 4 a.m.

“Press it to your face,” she said. “But don’t tilt your head.” She couldn’t remember if it was don’t tilt it back or don’t tilt it forward. They were always changing these pieces of advice. She was still naked, and reached under the duvet for her nightie.

“I was hot,” she said to her daughter, by way of explanation, as she pulled the nightgown over her head.

“Am I dying?” the girl asked.

“No, no,” her mother said. “It’s a normal thing. Part of growing. Now let’s get you cleaned up.”

Once they were in the lit-up hallway, they both stopped and stared at the floor. A trail from the girl’s bedroom to the parents’ room. “Whoa,” they both said. The white carpet was dalmatianed with blood spots.

“I don’t want to die!” Sadie wailed, and slumped against the new drywall.

#### *And even Doug*

Doug was playing basketball with Chum when his nose started spilling its guts.

“Dude,” Chum said. “You’ve got a—”

Doug threw the ball, and because Chum had stopped running, it made the basket, uncontested.

“I’ve got what?” he asked, but just as he said it he could taste blood. “Oh, shit.”

“Yeah,” Chum said.

Doug pinched his nose shut and ran to the water fountain. A little girl was filling up her sand pail. When she saw bloody, six-foot-two Doug running towards her, she ran away, the pail slipping from her hand, splashing everywhere.

Chum was right there with him. “This ever happened before?”

“Only when I’ve been hit.”

“Must be the heat,” Chum said. “I’m feeling kind of—”

“Dude, I grew up in Mexico, remember? This isn’t from the heat.”

“It’s still going.”

“I know. God, it tastes sick.” He was pinching his nose again.

“Should I call someone?” Chum asked.

Doug looked down, shook his head. “It’ll pass.”

“I gotta sit down for a sec,” Chum said. He headed for the shade by the closed concession stand.

“You alright?” Doug called.

Chum had his head between his knees.

So much for my three-point lead, he thought. Game over.

Then Chum’s nose started up, too.

### *Adolescents and Others*

There were others that day, and more the next. Soon there were people getting them all over the country, then all over the world, even though that wasn’t clear at first, not until Twitter was clogged with bloody reports. The blood was flowing from faces like it needed to be free of the body, needed to get out of there, fast as can be. Because it affected the children first, mainly the adolescents, it was put down to hormones. A natural reaction to all those fluctuations in the body. Then it was in the meat, according to some. The blood is coming out now, because we’ve killed too many beasts, they admonished. It’s the milk, others said: cattle hormones mixing with human, bound to eventually cause trouble. The gigantic glasses of milk once prescribed and enjoyed by bulking-up teens were exchanged for soda. Blogs rolled. The blood kept flowing, though, and soon it was more widespread

than the under-sixteen set: every age group started bleeding.

*The Rules That Sprung Up*

It took little time for the policies to become established. No driving while bleeding. Disposal of bloody tissues in specific incinerator bags only. Spitting of blood absolutely prohibited, ditto vomiting, even though it was a common reaction. Iron supplements became taxed, when you could still find them on the shelves. Kleenex prices tripled.

The sun seemed to make things worse, so people walked around with umbrellas when they had to be outside at all. Mostly they stayed in, distraught and queasy, as immobile as possible, heads held stiffly so the movement wouldn't trigger another jag. Schools kept gym classes to a minimum, and did away with projects, chemistry, home economics and the more strenuous subjects like trigonometry and Canadian history. All seemed to tax the body too much, which brought on blood. Hospitals were nightmarish, plugged with people lining the hallways on cots, convinced they were dying, having visions of white, writing out wills, saying tearful goodbyes, but never getting worse. Eventually no one was allowed in hospital for bleeding symptoms alone, and gymnasiums became Epistaxis Management Centres, EMCs, where hastily-trained "nurses" administered basic care and comfort, ice packs and pinches to the nose.

Scientists put aside most of their research projects in exchange for focused time on the problem. Pfizer put out a pill designed to control the bleeding, which was basically a common vasoconstrictive allergy drug in a new bottle. Coagulants were sometimes called upon, and occasionally, cauterization of offending blood vessels was necessary, although bleeding rarely lasted more than a few minutes at a time. There were a few cases reported of severe bleeding, where blood actually came forth from the tear ducts; once the Ebola virus was ruled out, these people were questioned about their religious beliefs, in case they were displaying a variation on stigmata, bleeding like the suffering Christ statues in Bolivia. None of them claimed such affiliation.

*And Then there was the Call-In Show*

The bleeding continued for months, with emergency medical conferences and daily news shows about the percentages of bleeders versus non. Callers weighed in on remedies, worst case scenarios and causes. Mostly it was blamed, like cancer and asthma, on the environment. Global warming, right? Blood flows better with heat, yeah?

One particular day, a representative from an organization called Lunar Hoax called into one such a show. He, the Rep, wanted to know if anyone else had noticed that the face of the moon never changed. He wanted to know if anyone else doubted it.

“Doubted what?” the host, Brian, asked.

“The moon,” the Rep said. “We at Lunar Hoax believe it’s not what we’ve been led to believe.”

Brian laughed. “The moon. Is it a moon, or not, is what you’re asking.”

“That’s correct.”

“Well, what do you think it is? Or might be?”

“We at Lunar Hoax believe that it is a satellite-like formation, a built object. We believe it is not simply a giant chunk of rock, in orbit around the earth, but a manufactured entity.”

Brian paused. “A man-made moon,” he said.

“No. Not man-made,” the caller said. “Alien-made. We believe that it was created thousands of years ago as a means to control earthlings, and it’s a hub from which they operate to this day.”

The hundreds of thousands of listeners tuning into this national show could hear Brian trying, unsuccessfully, to suppress his laughter. “You mean, all this time, we’ve been worshipping a false moon? We walked on a satellite? And, um, wolves—they howl at some gigantic space station?”

“Yes,” the Rep said, calmly. “That’s what I’m saying.”

“And the ... the tides?”

“A means of controlling seaside populations.”

“Women’s ... cycles?”

“Yes, the aliens want to manage us in untold ways.”

“Madness,” the host said.

“I assure you, it’s not—”

“I mean, full-moon madness.”

“Oh, yes. Well. That’s what happens to those who’ve been abducted before. The full moon reminds them and they feel—a bit crazy.”

At that point Brian should have begun accepting other calls. The lines were full. But he didn’t want this one to go. It was the most outlandish explanation for the blood on his show thus far, and it could make the whole lengthy epidemic just a mite more interesting. Oh sure, electrolytes, cholesterol, food additives, sodium, allergies, enzymes, all of these were way more plausible. But not nearly as likely to drive listener numbers up.

“And are there a lot of you?” Brian asked. “This Lunar Hoax crew.”

“Yes,” the Rep said. “About seven hundred. And we’re growing every day.”

He took a moment to collect his thoughts, his questions, his urge to roar with laughter. “So, why the bleeding?” Brian could feel the pressure of the waiting world on his shoulders. “Why make us, um, earthlings, pour blood?”

“Control,” he said. “We don’t really understand their motivations, but we certainly don’t doubt their power.”

“Have you ever—,” and at this Brian hushed his voice, “encountered one?”

“Not to my knowledge,” the Rep said. “But they are here, among us. And yes, I’m sure I have seen one, even if I don’t remember. And so have you.”

“Okay,” Brian said, loudly. “Then maybe, just maybe, the ones who aren’t bleeding are in fact, not of this earth.” He laughed. It was meant to be a ridiculous statement.

“Quite possibly,” the Rep said. “We just don’t know.”

A radio silence fell. The implications of this, although so extreme, so out-there, could be catastrophic. Neighbour against non-bleeding neighbour. Fake blood recipes flying all over the Net. A quick jump to the other side, where once the blood-free were afraid to venture. Winners, suddenly the losers. Civil war, alien-begun, alien-won?

“Well,” said Brian. “I think we’ve got time for one more caller. Thank you, Mr. —?”

“Just call me Jones,” the Rep said.

“Thank you, Mr. Jones. Our next caller is Bob from Utah. Hello, Bob.”

“Howdy.”

“So, Bob. What do you believe, about the source of this bleeding?”

“He’s right.”

“Beg your pardon?”

“Jonesy, there. He’s right. They’re out to keep us under their thumbs. Or whatever is it they’ve got dangling from their arms.”

Brian rolled his eyes, swallowed a sigh. “I see,” he said. “And—have you seen one, yourself?”

“Well, now, I’m not sure, like Jones said. They’re here, and in good disguises. I don’t think it’s the non-bleeders, though. But I know they’re here.”

“So,” Brian said. “What do we do?”

“Well,” said Bob from Utah. “If y’all see a spacecraft, run the other way. If they can convince a whole planet to believe in the moon, they’ve got a lot more they want to do to us.”

“Thank you, Bob, from Utah. This has been quite the afternoon. That concludes our show for today, earthlings. And what a show it was. We may not know yet why a whole lot of us are suffering, or even if we can trust that beautiful old golf ball in the sky, but we’re still here. Love your neighbour, whether they bleed or not.”

Brian turned off the mic and rubbed his head to try and bring himself back to reality. God, the world was becoming messed up, faster than ever. He was worried, though, in case he’d let it slip that he wasn’t a bleeder. He hoped he hadn’t been so candid. Neither Jones nor Bob had revealed their status, either.

Would an alien even know if he was an alien? He felt normal, all in all, other than a mild headache coming on.

Before he left the sound booth, though, Brian’s nose started pouring. Even as he saw it ruining his best sweater, he felt relief crash over him. He was just like the others. Safe for now.

### *The Fallout*

The idea went viral after the radio show. The Lunar Hoax website got twenty thousand hits in one hour. In one day, nearly half the world suddenly knew about the Spaceship Moon theory, and the space shuttle programme, recently shut down, was brought back to life. Astronauts were hastily prepared for the voyage to once again bring back the truth.

But then, just days before the scheduled launch of the Lunar Pilgrim shuttle, the bleeding stopped.

No one knew why, just as they hadn’t known its reason for beginning. But that wave of speculation about aliens being responsible, once that had swept the globe, then, no more blood.

Oh, the odd child, nose-picker, hockey player still had a nosebleed of the normal kind, and every time it happened, people around the blood looked skyward.

The Lunar Pilgrim went forth as planned, and reports came back from lengthy searches on the lunar surface—still a moon, still 4 and a half billion years old, still orbiting the earth, showing only its one side because of synchronous rotation ...

When the Lunar Hoaxers heard, they just laughed. They’re crafty, we told you, they said. No doubt those astronauts were taken inside and made to believe what the aliens planted in their heads.

What can be done? people asked.

If y'all see a spacecraft, run, they said. It became somewhat of a joke, with a "So You Think You Can Write Songs" contest spreading throughout the world, where contestants had to write a song using that lyric in the chorus: *If y'all see a spacecraft, run*. The winner got to make a video in Hollywood, complete with green Martians and Drew Barrymore happily sailing into outer space.

*But then, one day*

Jacob could not get up from his desk, despite his fifteen-minute alarm beeping to remind him to stand up, move around, stretch his lumbar spine. His head felt heavy, like it was going to topple from his neck like a cement ball from a pillar.

Maureen hit a new kind of wall just a few inches from the finish line and fell right over, allowing Jean to stumble past for the win. Her feet had simply stopped moving, as if they were being held to the ground with wads of bubble gum.

A stronger gravitational pull had begun to affect people. To move took sweat-inducing amounts of effort, and no one knew where to point the finger because gravity was still a mystery, even though scientists said they were closer to measuring gravitons than ever before.

Just before it hit her, Celine was the first to start spreading the word about the Groupon that had been posted a few days before gravity went into hyperdrive. She'd bought an acre of moon surface for only \$19.99, complete with an official, notarized deed from the Lunar Embassy Corporation. The deal had tipped into action at 49 buyers, and the cap of 500 was reached in minutes once it got retweeted by the national radio broadcasters. A man named Dennis Hope owned the moon, after all. He wasn't an alien, either. He was just a businessman from Nevada, out to colonize a bit more of this solar system, and even at the regular price of \$29.99, he sold off all the acreage on the moon in a matter of a week.

Celine and the others still not afflicted knew that the only sensible thing was to take a lunar vacation, and they desperately began to make their way to the launching site of the Lunar Pilgrim, at the Kennedy Space Centre in Florida, in hopes that it would take them all away.

Then, one afternoon, it hit every earthling. No one could get out of bed, or pack a bag, let alone board a spaceship. The strain of movement brought on headaches, ruptured tendons, pulled groins, made noses bleed, again.

All anyone could think of was rising, and all they did was fall. Their heads were heavy with both gravity and worry, afraid of what might come for them in the flesh that kept them down. Only in their dreams were they light and dazzling, floating in the moonlight as they glided away from the beautiful, magnetic, uninhabitable Earth.