



Plate II — The Marsh Rabbits and the Hunter's Moon

The Marsh Rabbits and the Hunter's Moon

A fable from the Golden Shore · Juno Beach, Florida



Behind the dunes at Juno Beach, where the sea grape leans away from the wind and the rainwater sits in low places and will not leave, there lived a family of marsh rabbits.

They were not the rabbits of storybooks. They were small and dark and sturdy, with short ears and none of that white cotton on the tail that the cottontails up the road were so proud of. They did not bound across open meadows, because there were no open meadows and bounding is a good way to get eaten. They walked, one foot and then the other, like cats, through tunnels of palmetto they had cut for themselves. And they came out only at night.

The youngest of the litter was a doe called Pennywort, after the plant her mother liked best, and Pennywort was afraid of everything.

She was afraid of the Great Horned Owl, who asked the same question all night long and never waited for the answer. She was afraid of the bobcat's shadow, which she had never seen but could describe exactly. She was afraid of the red-tailed hawk by day and the coyote by dusk and the black racer in the grass at noon, and she was afraid of the two white eyes that roared past on the road at the top of the dune, and most of all she was afraid of the moon.

"October," said her grandmother, "is when the big moon comes. The Hunter's Moon. On that night the beach is lit like noon, and the owl can see a whisker move from the top of the tallest pine. On that night you stay in the palmetto. Everybody does."

Pennywort stayed. She stayed through the first thin moon and the half moon and the fat lopsided one. But on the night the moon came up out of the Atlantic full and orange and enormous, the way it does in October, something in her grew very tired.

"What is the use of a life," she said to her brothers, "where everything in the world is looking for you? Owls above and snakes below and lights on the road. I am the smallest thing on this whole coast. I am nothing but dinner with ears."

Her brothers, who were busy eating, said nothing useful.

So Pennywort did the one thing she had never done. She went up the dune. Not away from the moon but toward it. If she was going to be afraid for the rest of her life, she decided, she might as well see what she was afraid of.

The sea oats closed over her, and then opened, and there it was: the whole Atlantic, silver to the edge of the world, with a road of light laid down the middle of it straight to her feet. The beach was bright as noon, just as her grandmother said. There was nowhere to hide. Her heart went like a drum.

She walked down anyway, one foot and then the other, to the wet sand where the last wave had been.

And the beach exploded.

Ghost crabs — a dozen of them, pale as the sand, out doing their nighttime business — saw her coming and went sideways in every direction at once, up on their tiptoes, eyestalks high, diving into their holes with their claws over their heads. A flock of sanderlings, who had just flown in from the top of the world and had been asleep on one leg apiece, lifted off in a single terrified sheet and complained about it all the way down the beach. The coquinas at the tide line felt her shadow and dug themselves straight down, a hundred little clams vanishing into the sand like a hundred little sunsets, in a hurry.

Pennywort stood in the moonlight on the empty wet sand and looked at where everybody had been.

"They ran," she said. "From me."

She looked down at herself — the short ears, the plain brown tail, the small cat-footed feet that had never bounded anywhere — and she tried to see what the crabs had seen. Something huge. Something that came down the dune out of the dark without any warning, with a shadow that blotted out the moon.

A ghost crab put one eye up out of his hole, then the other, and considered her.

"Are you going to eat us?" he asked.

"I eat pennywort," she said. "And cattails. And the tops of the sea oats when nobody is looking."

"Well, you might have said so," said the crab, and he came up a little further, and the sanderlings landed again further down, pretending they had meant to leave all along.

Pennywort sat on the wet sand a while and watched the moon ride up. The owl was out there somewhere, asking his question. The bobcat's shadow was out there, somewhere, being exactly the shape she had always imagined. None of that had changed. But something had.

When she went back up the dune she went carefully, and when she passed the coquinas she went around.

Moral: Everybody on the beach is afraid of something — and something on the beach is afraid of you. Carry both, and walk gently.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "John M. Henry". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping "H" and a long, trailing flourish at the end.

John M. Henry · Juno Beach, Florida

Thank you for coming down to meet the tide.