



In the Arms of the Dissolute Lune

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Walking home, inky sky, no moon. She cuts a solitary figure as she walks home. The smack-smack of leather soles on the concrete pavement shatters the silence like a bullet shedding its load.

“You chose your life, you know.”

A familiar voice. From the low bushes. She hugs her Gucci handbag closer to her and wishes she had removed all her jewellery before she got off the tube. Probably just some local punk drunk.

She barely looked up to register the face belonging to the dismembered voice which sounded like it came from the bushes near the wall. Hers was a gaslight lane, a calm Zone 2, north London Street, inhabited by lovelies from the law, media and television. Quaint Victorian terraced houses, which had once been the sanctuary of servants and the lower middle class, this was now the heart of trendy north London. Something in the late September night was unsettling. Perhaps it was a little too humid, she was suddenly aware of the scent of herself, the fragrance of sweat and heavy blooms rose up as she moved, wafting, like petals of exotic flowers crushed beneath her feet with every step. Frangipani, vanilla, the seductive night time smell of jasmine, but these were the southern hemisphere fragrances of tropical nights, unleashed under a low-slung African moon. She looked overhead, just to make sure she was right here, right now.

The clouds formed a chevron pattern, like a basket holding the night. They were shadows against a hundred shades of darkness - brown, from burnished chestnut through the spectrum to a glowing bronze and inky pools of midnight velvet straight into the ashen pinpoint which lies in the heart of a diamond. The colours fell from the blackness like shards of broken glass and refracted hues burst in midnight rainbows. Some of them nestled like highlights in her hair.

High above and solemnly still, the moon lay resting, like a giant parchment peach cradled in the catchment of the sky. Instead of quickening her step, she slightly slowed her gait. She wanted to savour the sensations that tumbled through her mind, another night, another moon, another world away. She allowed her thoughts to wander back to how happy she had been with him and how, in that very moment which drew her mind back, her life appeared to fit some cosmic blueprint that felt like the map of her life. He had loved the moon too, and arm-in-arm they would swagger together, perfect lovers, minds and steps synchronised.

She thought about the way she felt when he'd loved her something frozen deep inside started to stir. But she hadn't thought about him for years. She hadn't allowed the thoughts. But in the arms of the dissolute lune, the memory of him flooded her senses. What had triggered this? She grimaced at the mischievous moon, casting her glance upwards and there she stood, shocked still. She felt rooted, something had magnetised her and she couldn't take another step.

That voice again.

“You choose your life, your love.”

Here was the face not seen but the voice heard. The voice appeared to be coming from behind a low brick wall. Now she searched in vain, slightly anxiously, looking over at the still sprouting hydrangea bush that glowed phosphorescent green, which was refusing to nestle down for a good night's sleep.

A trail of light, maybe a shooting star – forced her transfixed stare to another half of the sky. Perhaps that was what John had meant about Yoko, all those years ago, the grounded love she found when she had surrendered herself to him. That hadn't happened for a very long time. She smiled wryly at the thought of falling into something so consuming, immersing herself and her life in someone else's, again.

“The time is always now. Don't hesitate.”

Spooked, she watched where the trail of light, emblazoned across the sky, had landed by her feet, a pearl rope of a light ladder which reached up, up, seemingly endlessly, glittery, oscillating, sometimes here sometimes not, steps that lead straight

up to the moon. She slung her bag over her shoulder and reached out for the make-shift stairway, which appeared to be made of nothing more substantial than light. She held on, it felt cool and the starry substance moulded itself around her grip. It moved with her, Ginsberg's "sun and moon and tree vibrations" drifted into her mind. She took a step, gingerly at first and then another and then she was like the trapeze artist who becomes the rope, she was no longer climbing the steps, she was each step, the light propelled her, she ascended higher which must have been the whole night but was only seven seconds.

She remembered how she had held his hand, swathes of Soho and Piccadilly were theirs, pockets they had colonised in the city of time and travellers. He was the first man who brought her love to life, who showed her the bare knuckle edges of herself in experiences she never thought she would have and when he left her, she cried a waterfall. His was the love that broke her heart but when she fixed it again – with glue, fibreglass filings and seeds of something remembered called hope, she noticed how it had expanded a little. She was bigger-of-heart for having known him.

Once, she was on another continent and he was in his cupboard-like office in the magazine where he was editor, he asked her what she could see from the window. It was their goodnight ritual, before they went to sleep, both cast adrift, across opposite ends of London, like popcorn, he would always call her before she fell asleep and ask her what she could see. Inevitably, the moon. Always, unswervingly the moon.

"What can you see?"

"Oh. I'm so tired. I can see the insides of my eyelids, my darling."

He was cross now, "Please. Just look out of the window. What can you see?"

She could see the Gateway of India, on Apollo Bunder from her usual seventh floor hotel room, the regular room she always booked, with the silk bed cover the colour of moss with high ceilings. She preferred the old part of the hotel to the haute fangled, white marbled newness of the recently completed annexe. She could see the strange angle at which the arch jutted out and didn't quite meet the road. In that typical

Indian fashion, the project had run out of funding, so the approach was never finished.

"I can see people...the sea, traffic."

"Look up."

"I can see the moon, swollen as a bee sting, glaring at me from a big sweep of sky."

He sighed, was it relief, she wondered.

"I can see the moon too, same moon. Wherever you are and when we're not together remember I'll always be there, with you and look at the moon." The same way he insisted his was the last voice that she should hear every night, this comforted her.

She bid him goodnight and just as the last scenes of this memory, some seven years distant unfurled in the movie images of her mind, her boot clad foot landed on something firm, not quite concrete, more crumbly like sandstone and she found herself, in the spinning mind-movie, on one side of the moon, standing on the spot she always stared up at. Earth was a spinning gemstone, faraway, beyond comprehension and out of arms' length. But still the ladder remained.

"As above, so below." That voice. It had followed her.

No time for Crowley now, she thought as looked down and watched the sandstone change into a shiny hard polished pearl like surface. The moon didn't look, or feel how she thought it might. How many times, since the end of their affair had she gazed at it and wondered where he was, and wondered if he was gazing into the missingness too and if the shared account in the memory bank of their once-complete love could break the barriers and create a tremor in time's linear passage so they could re-enter the space when they had been like magic. She felt the moon wobble a little and realised that although she wasn't holding on, there was nothing to fear, There was nowhere to fall, but up.

Looking down on the tiny earth, as it spun madly on its axis, swirling and whirling like a dervish, she longed to be back in the heart of the familiar, she caught sight of a single flower on the bustle of the hydrangea bloom. It had turned milky green,

more subtle and less piercing now, it was just like staring into his eyes. His eyes like cats eyes, behind which lay his fierceness like a lion. And then it was him, standing on the front porch steps of his maisonette in Belsize Park, next to the Dominican friary. He had to put the recycling out for collection by the council the next day. Something drew his gaze up to the sky, the moon seemed bigger, hollow.

He looked up, wondering at the sultriness of the late September evening and there he saw the face of the woman he had loved. Once again, he was showered by her presence, all her complex moods, the lies and the love they had shared, for theirs was a spider web story of deceit and hurting other people who were set aside like outsmarted chess pieces. In the split second it took for her eyes to meet his, from where she stood on the stillness of the moon and where his world whirled, he teetered a little from alcohol and regret. The moon wobbled again and both of them, propelled by the motions of a universe whose order they didn't understand, both let go of the unspoken within their hearts. Words and sorrow, peals of laughter and sadness in streaks like tears collided on the same parallel plane and years of disappointment and love left hanging and stillborn emotions flooded out into the gap, the safe space created by light years of distance and the closeness of two atoms.

She shook her head, the cords that had gripped her, the tension in her shoulders loosened and she was freed from whatever had restricted her. The vice on her heart was gone. But how would she return to the arms of the world which had embraced her and all the things which had been familiar and which had lost their colour after him? Life had been divided into two parts, before him, and after him. Events, places, people belonged to either one or the other and between the two there had been a chasm as wide as an earthquake and as dangerous as crossing a fault line.

He sighed as he put down the bag of recycled food waste, remnants of produce he had grown in his allotment. He thought about how much he hated decaying flowers and new seedlings and how his wife, curled asleep in their bed, represented the staid and the stable. His sleeping wife was that place of beauty faded, when the bloom has left the rose but it isn't quite dying. He thought about how alive she had made him feel, this other woman with the moon in her eyes, so intricately governed by the caprice of its waxing and waning. He remembered how right it had felt when he shook out the memories and he folded them away, in the same way his wife folded up the tee shirts after their summer holidays, at the end of the season, and put them carefully into a bottom drawer. For another time.

How on earth? She remembered another moonlight walk, snaking along the Embankment, in a hurry to go nowhere as they talked about the impossibility of their future together. How had she escaped him that night? Did she dive into the underground station or hail a cab? She remembered his last words to her, it was that same familiar dismembered voice that seemed to come from nowhere and the hydrangea bush, that resonated all around her,

"If we want it badly enough, it can happen."

She sighed and looked one last time at the vast expanse of white beauty around her. She wanted to swallow the perfection and completion in that moment so it could reside within her. She closed her eyes tightly and clicked her heels together three times and then she was...

