

Full Moon at Castle Lake

by

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It was a cool, clear, sweet smelling city night. The Sun marched through Libra, the Moon was full in Aries and activity flourished everywhere. Chuck felt the snapping of electricity in the air like a kid in the grip of puppy love. Not only could he hear and see the night but he felt it on his skin and he felt it rushing through his veins. He could taste it in his mouth and in his soul. The voice of the full Moon spoke to him loud and clear, giving him a riddle and telling him this was no ordinary night.

MOONSHINE

by waters where I lie there is a sterling studded sky
a castle up on high
diamond webbing weaves the scene
of purple blue and green
my blankets the dark I see it's so deep
it starts at a star and ends at my feet
that man in a dream we are the same
he only nods when you ask his name
come with me my friend take this road to the end
follow a fountain to the foot of a mountain
where a child plays naked with bows in her hair
the touch of silk seems to come from my dreams
while the crack of a fire sends heat through the air
roses are real love is a meal for people with velvet tongues
the heavens it seems have split at the seams
and put Moonshine deep in my lungs

It was nearing midnight on a Saturday, a beautiful, late September evening, in Nineteen Sixty-Nine. Chuck was four hours into his usual 4 day 13 hour taxi shift. After six months of continuous growth he was not too proud of his sparse mustache. But his hair was beginning to brush his shoulders and he was proud of that. Whenever possible, Chuck would roll up and down the streets of Greenwich Village looking for fares in his big Checker taxi. For anyone seeking to be overwhelmed by the Spirit of the Sixties, New York's East Village was the place to be. During the late Sixties and early Seventies, Chuck drove his cab around New York City and picked up many Rock superstars who played at the Fillmore East during those days. He loved driving his taxi and was not surprised to find himself completely lost in the merry-go-round song of the city's pounding pulse. With Bob Dylan screeching out from his cassette player, Chuck enjoyed the sights as he drove around. The streets teemed with people. Flower children

gave away flowers, tourists posed for pictures with hippies and hobos wore beads and sang songs. Everywhere he went music filled the air while the city's brew bubbled away. He joined a policeman dancing with five laughing ladies from Wisconsin while a group of Hell's Angels stood around them applauding. This night was definitely different than any other night. Since it was so lovely people wanted to be out walking and that caused business to drop off some. Of course Chuck did not care or even have a mind for business this night.

Pulling his cab over at 73rd. Street and 3rd Avenue Chuck went into his favorite coffee shop to say hello to his friend, Nick, who was proud to serve the worst coffee anywhere on Third Avenue. They chatted for a spell and then Chuck said:

"Will I get a fresh cup of coffee in the morning, Nick?"

"You get what you get every Sunday morning, Chuukee." Getting off his stool, dropping a dollar on the counter, Chuck smiled as he picked up his dinner. Already knowing Nick's response he headed for the door as he asked:

"And what's that my friend?"

"You get what's left, we never make fresh coffee here, it's against the law. Ha, ha, ha! See you in the morning, Chuukee."

Chuck got back into his chariot with his coffee and a jelly donut to kill the taste of the coffee. He kept returning to the same shop because he got a kick out of Nick. As he dined, he watched two young men in their twenties standing about thirty feet in front of his cab. They looked like they were waiting for a taxi but were in deep conversation. Several empty cabs whizzed by and they paid no attention to them, so, Chuck lost interest. Although he could not help notice they were both wearing three-piece tweed suits and had long flowing beards. If that weren't enough to get his scrutiny they also wore wire rim glasses and were puffing on two enormous white pipes. As Chuck finished his coffee the two characters walked straight towards him. The shorter one opened the back door and they both climbed in. When Chuck turned and asked:

"Where to?" he thought he was facing the Smith Brothers who had just escaped from the front of a cough drop box. The shorter one with the shorter beard began directing Chuck and calling him by his name. Chuck figured he must have seen his license with his name on it, some people will do that. Then the little one introduced himself as, Jack and his friend as, John, and said:

"Go down Fifth Avenue to Washington Square Park, lets just drive around the village for awhile. If that's all right with you, Chuck?" As Jack continued to talk, Chuck noticed they both wore bow ties. Aside from being the shorter one, the 'talker' Jack was slim and frail, had shifty eyes and made Chuck slightly uncomfortable. Jack kept talking, " Then we'll go around the park and east on 8th Street." If Jack was five-foot-five,

John was six-foot two and wiry. John's bow tie was a paisley print which seemed to go with his subdued personality, compared to his chatty friend, Jack, with the bright red bow tie.

The first time, Chuck stopped for a light he turned and took a long look at his two passengers. John sat smiling, puffing away on his large pyramid-shaped pipe. Jack suddenly shoved his own pipe in front of Chuck's face while pointing out directions. The bowl of his pipe had a hand carved devil with wings sitting on the front of it. The likeness was so real it startled Chuck as he gasped for air and jerked his head back. In a soft but deep rolling voice, John told him they were given the pipes by a man from the ancient, sunken continent of Lemuria, which was called, The Land of MU, and they were made from the wood of magical trees.

They explained to Chuck that Jack was having marital problems after only two years of marriage. With a furtive look in his eyes, Jack said:

"I believe my wife is having an affair and I am very angry and, at the least, intend to leave her." John was doing his utmost to convince Jack to try and work things out. Then with a smile John said:

"Jack should not be so rapid in his conclusions, right Chuck?" Nodding, Chuck watched the meter tick away as he barreled all around the city while listening to his strange passengers. Three to four hours passed before, Chuck began to feel like he was inside of a cartoon. What were these guys smoking in their wooden pipes made from magical trees in the land of MU? Who was the guy who gifted them with these pipes? Chuck told them he was beginning to feel disoriented and was worried about his driving. John, observing Chuck's uneasiness remarked:

"Some food would do us all well. Lets stop by the deli at 4th Street and 6th Ave." Chuck pulled over, Jack jumped out and in a flash returned with sandwiches and assorted soft drinks. Then they drove up 6th Avenue and entered Central Park. They parked in the parking lot near the confection stand by Rowboat Lake, shut the cab down and walked to Castle Lake, all the while eating and discussing marriage.

There, high above the lake, looking as though it had been carved out of the rocks, stood Belvedere Castle. It seemed all the stars in the Universe were on this side of the hemisphere that night. The immensity of the full Moon, the castle hanging above the lake and all this beauty reflecting back off the water. As he soaked it all in, he thought: *magic in its purest form*. Then Jack handed Chuck his pipe while he stretched out and studied the sky. After a moment Jack sat up with a twisted smile on his face and pointed at Chuck and asked:

"Do you know the riddle?" Chuck was stunned by a powerful feeling of melancholia that swept over him. Through the years Castle Lake had always been a special place he found comforting yet unsettling. Quite often he would find himself under one of the trees that border the banks of the lake, arrested by the beauty of the entire scene. Even as a young boy after playing baseball in the park, he and some of his friends

would come here to rest before returning home. Whenever he seemed to have an unsolvable problem, this is where he would come to work things out. Now here he was with these two bizarre gents beneath a full moon, and for some reason he felt as though he were losing control, as if he were on some sort of drug. The one thing Chuck never did was drugs. He loved life and felt he could get as high as anyone just by looking at a flower, seeing a child play, or watching the rising and setting of the Sun.

While these thoughts ran through Chuck's mind he felt a terrible pain in his left thumb. He looked down at his hand which held Jack's pipe and the devil on the bowl had turned its head and was biting his thumb. Screaming in pain and fright the pipe flew into the air.

On making contact with the ground the pipe exploded in a maze of purple and blue smoke. When the cloud cleared there were about twenty people spread out on 3 blankets. There was food, wine and all the makings for a picnic including two guys playing guitars, a girl playing a harmonica and a little girl running around with ribbons in her hair.

John was playing one of the guitars. He wore dungarees, sandals, a flowered shirt and beads circled his neck. Jack was on another blanket with a tall, beautiful black girl who had, what looked to be, the largest Afro in the world. They were into some serious necking, while John led everyone in singing LUCY IN THE SKY WITH DIAMONDS. As Chuck struggled to comprehend what was real and what was not, he felt a hand begin to rub his calf as he stood up and stared at all the activity. The hand slowly inched its way up his leg. He tried to see who was at the end of the hand but an unseen force prevented him from looking down.

As it tugged at his pants he fell to his knees and was able to see it, finally. The hand in its movement, so slow and sexy, so feminine and delicate. Chuck began to breathe heavily. Mustering every bit of strength he could draw from within himself he managed to turn his head slightly. Just enough to see the thin wrist and slim arm that belonged with the hand. Now it pulled him closer. So sensual was the hand when he looked that his heart began to pound uncontrollably. There were rings on four fingers some fingers wore two rings. The hand slid up his arm, over his shoulder and behind his neck. At last, turning, he found himself looking into the most beautiful eyes he had ever seen surrounded by the face of an angel. She was the girl of his most wildest fantasies and he knew her face well. Chuck tried desperately to gain control over what was happening but to no avail. He was lost in the powerful whirlwind of her being.

Then she pulled him down on top of her, instantly her breath was all around his mouth. He tasted her in every cell of his body. She slid her hands under his shirt, rubbed his bare back with them and squeezed him tightly against her warmth. He was on the edge of insanity. All he could feel was her, all he could see were explosions. He wanted to scream and tell her he loved her. Now she was kissing him down along his neck. He pulled back taking her head in his hands and looked into her eyes. Two black whirlpools began to carry him away but why did he feel as if he had come home? Why did he feel he knew this black-eyed beauty yet knew her not? and why did it all feel so

comfortable? There was one thing Chuck did know and that was, wherever she was going, he was going.

In a wink, Chuck was standing by the edge of the lake. Except for the fat moon and Belvedere Castle staring down at him--he was all alone. All he could think was: *WHERE IS SHE?*

As he was winding his way back to his taxi his thoughts were of Jack and John. He wondered how they could have slipped him LSD without him knowing. Then again the girl with the whirlpool eyes was very real. He reached his taxi, slid onto the driver's seat and rested his head on the steering wheel. Suddenly he was hit on the side of his head by a large cloud of smoke. Nearly jumping out of his skin he almost broke his neck as he spun around. There they were in the back seat with their three piece suits and magical pipes. John intoned:

"Jack would like you to meet his wife. He feels it is vital if he is to salvage his marriage. Since you, Chuck, have been married and divorced we feel that you have much to offer in experience and knowledge. You have listened to us discuss Jack's problem openly and have offered some excellent advise."

Chuck was lost and could not remember any of this only that Jack and his wife were having problems. He also knew that he was in no condition to give advise on anything, especially something as important as marriage. Chuck also wondered how they knew he had been married and divorced because he never spoke of it to anyone. He was about to tell them that they were both crazy as he put the key in the ignition to start the motor. As he did the whole scene changed and he found himself walking up a second flight of stairs in a brownstone somewhere in the West Eighties. As he arrived at the top floor apartment the door was wide open and he knew he had to go in. Smoke and music poured from the room and it was New Year's Eve, Nineteen Twenty-Eight. Inside the apartment all the men were wearing tuxedos and some of the women wore flapper outfits. The dancing was frenzied as people danced and drank bathtub gin. A few men had taken their jackets off and several of them wore shoulder holsters with guns. Jack was sitting on a couch and was clean shaven. His hair was parted down the middle and slicked back like most of the other men, only in a slightly different variation. Then Chuck saw the black girl from the park was sitting next to Jack. She wore short hair in an ironed down fashion. Chuck perused the scene carefully and perceived all the people at the party were the same ones who were at the park by the lake. Bessie Smith began to moan from the Victrola about Careless Love. Everyone began to move in slow motion, Chuck looked at his watch and it was one-twenty-two a.m. When he looked up again he saw John's face filling his view. Big John looked cold blooded and indifferent with his pencil line mustache. Like a record moving at slow speed John began to resonate and point across the room saying:

"This is Lilith, Jack's wife." Her head was lowered as she cranked up the Victrola to start "Careless Love Blues" all over again. When she heard her name spoken by

John, she lifted her head, looked across the room into Chuck's eyes. *'My God, it's her!'* Chuck thought. Her hair was curly and she wore a headband, she was perfect and absolutely beautiful. Chuck knew every inch of her: her lips, her neck, her breasts, the way she stood, the angle of her head and the hypnotic stare from the depths of her eyes. Yes, those eyes made Chuck forget everything, he saw nothing but Lilith. He had the sensation of falling into a bottomless abyss as his stomach climbed up into his mouth. He started towards her, slow-footed and thought he would never reach her across the twenty-foot room. She was smiling, waiting for him. Her arms reached out as he heard his name being called out behind him. He turned and the first thing he saw was his reflection in a large mirror above the couch where Jack was sitting. *Look at me!* he mumbled, shiny hair and tuxedo I look like George Raft. For the first time Chuck felt the weight of his own gun beneath his jacket. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted a little girl in the next room with pig-tails and two little red bows at their ends. Instantly he wanted to pick her up. This little girl, he knew, was his and Lilith's! Now he remembered their dark secret. He and Lilith are deeply in love and no one knows this is their child, they believe she is Jack's little girl. Suddenly Jack is furious about something. He is trying to get up from the couch but the black girl keeps pulling him back down telling him:

"No, Jack. No!" Jack pulls his gun out and slaps the girl across the face with it. She falls back onto the couch unconscious. Jack turned his face to Chuck and screamed:

"CHARLIE!" Then the gun exploded in a blast of fire and Chuck felt the heat from the discharge hit him in the face. He could see the bullet coming in slow motion as it passed just below his right ear. Frantically he spun around to see it rip through Lilith's shoulder and crash into the wall behind her. Chuck rushed toward Lilith reaching out to her as Jack screamed a second time:

"CHAAARRRLIEEE!" Another loud explosion and Chuck thought someone had hit him with a baseball bat across his back as he flew forward from the force of the bullet. Falling into Lilith's arms as she was sliding down the wall, he saw the bullet come out of his own chest and pass into Lilith's throat. All became silent and black as the two crumbled to the floor in a tangled heap.

Somewhere off in the distance, through a foggy haze, he heard his name being called. John was speaking:

"I hope he'll be alright." He must have inhaled too much of the opium we were smoking and got himself a contact high." Chuck was sitting with his back against a tree staring out over Castle Lake when he heard Jack say: "Snap out of it Chuck!" John and Jack took Chuck under each of his arms and lifted him to his feet. The first thing Chuck saw was the daylight. It was very early morning and the birds were trying to wake up the world. While they helped Chuck back to the taxi John said: "Why did you run

away?” Last night when you were about to drive us to Jack’s to meet his wife you suddenly bounded from the cab and ran off into the night.”

John explained how he and Jack had searched for him for hours only to find him a few minutes ago sitting under that tree. Then Jack responded:

“It is time for us to go now, Charlie.” They both thanked him for the evening and paid him handsomely. Chuck stood and watched them as they disappeared into the park. Chuck wondered if he had heard correctly. Did Jack call him, Charlie?

Now 7:00 a.m. on a Sunday morning in New York City, at times, can be as quiet as any small town in the country. The difference is you might not find a coffee shop with the assortment of weirdos like you’d find at Nick’s all night diner. Chuck was very hungry after his night with the Smith Brothers and he needed someone from this planet to speak to before he went insane. When he walked in Nick grinned at him, exposing two upper gold teeth and said:

“Why you drive all night with no license? You leave it here when you stop for dinner.” Nick dropped the license on the counter next to the stale donut and the bad coffee. Chuck stared at the license and mumbled:

“How the hell did those guys know my name if my license wasn’t in the cab? Answering his own question he looked at Nick and said: “Because none of this ever happened.” Chuck laid money on the counter, still mumbling to himself: “That’s right. Those guys do not exist.” Then Nick, gesticulating wildly, quickly added:

“When I see your license on the counter I run out to catch you but you were already driving away with those guys with the beards.”

Chuck was freezing and sweating at the same time as he sped around Manhattan Island. Down the East River Drive and up the Westside Highway, not searching for passengers but answers to questions that unhinged and terrorized him.

The next thing Chuck knew he was sitting under his favorite tree gawking at Castle Lake, trying to make sense out of the past 8 hours. Slowly an overwhelming sadness came over him. A tear wended its way down his cheek. Anger began to build inside of him and he began to sweat profusely. He became enraged as turbulence rose up from his stomach. He clenched his left hand and hit the soft ground with it and a severe pain shot straight up his arm. He looked down in irritation at a swollen aching thumb which was turning black and blue and showing signs of an infection setting in. In the center of his nail he could see what looked like two little teeth marks.

A wave of understanding washed through his consciousness and he knew that Lilith and Charlie were somewhere under Castle Lake.⁸

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