

STRAWBERRY MOON



DONALD KNIGHT BEMAN

PreView

Strawberry Moon

Written By
Donald Knight Beman

Cover Art By
Emilie Léger
[<https://emilieleger.ca/>]

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While drawn from my youthful experiences growing up, recollections from my work experience in business, my years as an art dealer and faculty in academe, *Strawberry Moon* is an autobiographical novel, a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and events described, referenced or portrayed in *Strawberry Moon* are the product of my imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, places and events is coincidental.

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Chapter 1

Is it true that The Women.....

Are a man's very first enemy,
That they go laughing to the sea,
And make him follow patiently?

Pretend they are little girls,
With the kiss of their eyes they lie,
Smiling inside as they cry,
Able to drown him with a sigh?

Are in the forest like the does,
Waiting to trap the stag,
who thinks he knows,
And can kill him with a rose?

Remain our enemies,
These painted sirens from the seas?

Blame and accuse us one and all,
When the years begin to fall,
And back to their memory beds they crawl?

Are they our final enemy,
Believing only in the past,
Coquets, mistresses and wives,
Enemies to the last?

I think not, except for one of The Women in the
Strawberry Moon

#

Chapter 3

December 31, 1990

'Here Faith Died, Poisoned by This Charnel Air'

Sean sat alone in the kitchen of his second-floor apartment in the aging Victorian farm house, nursing a mug of just-brewed black coffee and watching the thin pink line of the horizon slowly etch itself into the left-over night sky.

Wondering how cold it was outside, Sean raised the sash halfway up: the bitterly cold and bone dry air flooded the kitchen, just as a pair of crows began arguing. Two more weighed in on the debate, followed by a half-dozen more, as their rowdy argument shattered the pre-dawn calm.

A sharp click from the ships clock on the wall beside the window announced it was about to add its two-cents worth to the argument, followed by the hammer slowly striking the bell six times. Sean whispered "Seven o'clock," and set his mug on the window sill. Grabbing The Old Farmer's Almanac off the kitchen table behind him, Sean started flipping through the pages of what he referred to as his 'Bible'.

He stopped at page 50, December, The Twelfth Month, and read the entry:

Two full Moons this month, giving us a rare, and some say, unlucky thirteenth Moon. The first, on December second, causes very high tides because it occurs just three hours before the Moon's closest approach to earth in many years. The Moon's center is then just two hundred twenty one thousand five hundred and forty five miles from the Earth's center.

Skipping the remaining entries for December, Sean turned the page to January, 1991, and began checking-off the remaining days for January with woodpecker-like taps of his finger on the page.....

- 7 Emperor Hirohito of Japan died, 1989
DDT banned, 1971.
- 8 'They say' is half a lie?
- 9 Snow and cold across the North.
- 10 Ethan Allen born, 1738.
- 11 No snowflake in an avalanche ever feels responsible.
- 12 Moon at apogee**
- 13 1st Sunday after Epiphany.
- 14 Propitious day for birth of women.....

Sean stopped reading, when he was snagged by the filed-away memories from January, sixteen years ago. Slowly, but steadily, the rising wind tickled then began to shake the leafless branches of the frozen trees, startling the raucous flock of crows. They exploded into the air as if shot out of a cannon, flapping, cawing and scattering every which way. Before Sean could shut the window, he was there again.....

.....stumbling out of Merrywood Hall into the colorless dark of the New Moon, punching through the crumbling surface of the melting snow, his shoes filling up with prickly beads of ice as he ran through the deep wet snow to the body. He dropped to his knees, his head and shoulders slumping down. Shallow breaths began collecting around his head in the heavy night air, a mystical halo of white, as the cardboard-thick wool of his pants began sucking up cold muddy water out of the ground.

Her arms were twisted, broken and folded over her chest, which had been ripped open like a freshly dug grave and just as empty. Her long brown hair was splayed out from her skull as if pulled by vermin, tugging and chewing on the knotted ends. The earth had begun to reclaim her.

He reached down, his hands shaking, and lifted the mask of ice off her face. It crumbled through his fingers. He brushed away the icy shards left behind. Snow had melted in the sunken eye sockets and frozen into frameless lenses. He pried them out to find her eyes, once as bright and warm as a summer sunrise, now dark, dead, blindly staring up into the black of heaven. He bent over, as if to kiss her cracked and swollen lips, but suddenly, violently, began jamming his hands into her icy grave, again and again and again, until his fingers were red and raw and bleeding.

Hands were reaching out behind him, gently tugging him, trying to lift him away. His sleeve caught on her splintered fingernails, as if she were pulling him down to her. He turned his head and shut his eyes, as if he were trying to hear what she was saying. But the beating of his own heart was the only sound that broke the silence of winter's clear night.

He noticed a crumpled-up wad of paper in her clenched fist. As he tenderly pried open her clenched fingers, the blood-stained ball of paper tumbled out onto the blood-stained snow. He picked it up and held it to his chest as he stood up and walked away, deaf to whispers.....

Sean angrily clapped the almanac shut and set it on the window sill. The defiant wind refused to be silenced and began turning the pages. Something blew out. Sean snatched it in mid-air. It was a sheet of old parchment paper. There was writing on one side, meticulously penned in faded blood-red ink, as if by a scribe centuries ago.....

Here Faith died, poisoned by this charnel air.
I ceased to follow, for the knot of doubt
Was severed sharply with a cruel knife:
He circled thus, for ever tracing out
The series of the fraction left of Life;
Perpetual recurrence in the scope
Of but three terms:
Dead Faith, Dead Love, Dead Hope.
Life divided by that persistent three,
LXX divided by 333 = .210210210210210 ad infinitum

"God damn you to hell! It's me you want. Why did you take her? And our son!"

Dropping the sheet of parchment, Sean slammed the window shut, knocking the coffee mug and almanac onto the floor and shattering the window pane. Jagged shards of glass exploded outside and into the kitchen, hitting him, cutting through his shirt. He just sat there, staring outside, blood staining his clothes, tears running down his cheeks.

#

Chapter 7

June 12, 1991

She Dissolved Into the Fading Dark of Night

She silently glided up to the door of Sean's office and paused, as if she were listening for something or someone. The door opened. She peered inside, her gaze raking the room, as if to be certain it was safe for her to enter. Nodding, she walked in. The door closed. As she moved about the room, her black floor-length hooded cloak rubbed against the jagged corners of the cardboard cartons, brushing away the silence.

The walls of Sean's old office were stripped bare. His heavy Victorian oak desk was wrapped in a rope-tied quilted blanket. The lined floor-to-ceiling drapes were gone, leaving the stately leaded stained-glass windows looking common without their mantle of royal blue. The hanging silk tapestry and its wall-mounted bracket had been secreted away. The oak file cabinet, empty drawers left pulled out, was topped with stacks of threadbare linen-jacketed journals. Boxes cluttered the floor, bulging at the seams. The cartons had been labeled, listing their contents, with a fat black felt-tip marker. In front of the empty bookshelves were cartons stacked in columns six and seven high. The words BOOKS and HEAVY were stenciled in black on the sides and tops of all boxes.

She noticed a sheaf of papers on the boxes and snatched them up.

Drifting over to the window, she sat on the sill and started reading in the moonlight, occasionally checking-off entries with a tap of her finger and approving nod or disapproving shake of her head.....

[1.0] As you know, Ollie, my 'theory' is based on: [1.1] rejection of the ancient belief that 'evil' is present and 'conceived', so to speak, under the dark of a new moon, but is instead propagated under the seductive light of a full moon, and only certain full moons; [1.2] propagation is realized by the 'taking' [sexually] of a mortal; [1.3] propagation is carried out by one of the devil's minions, which results in the perpetuation of evil on earth.

[2.0] Note: Logic dictates that my 'propagation hypothesis' also applies to 'good' ergo 'god'; and those who 'propagate' [evil or good] can be female or male.

[3.0] A few examples are: the story in Genesis about Enoch, the father of Methuselah and the one in the Book of Enoch, which tells of fallen angels lying with mortal females and fathering mal-formed giants, which the Semites called Nephilim, who roamed the earth, signaling the increase in, or spread of, wickedness and coming of Satan's reign.

[4.0] There are, in reality, other versions and in many other cultures. All of them documenting similar events evolving from the belief in angels ... 'the bright, shining stars of heaven' ... secretly fathering children with mortal women, then 'falling from grace' when exposed for their lust and infidelity to God. Whichever god was in favor at

any given point in mankind's evolution.

[5.0] Why under the dark of a new moon? Under a new moon, the night sky is lighted only by the stars. And the brightest star in the heavens is Venus, which is both the morning and the evening star. And we both know that Venus is not a star, but a planet. Venus was given two names by the ancient Greeks, Phosphorus and Hesperus, for morning and evening respectively.

[6.0] The morning star is referred to in Isaiah, Luke, Corinthians and Revelations as Lucifer, which comes from the Latin for light-bearer. Venus is also the third brightest object in the heavens, next to the Sun and the Moon, creating the first heavenly trinity for ancient and primitive peoples. The sun ruled the light of day, the moon held sway over the night, while Venus ruled the morning and the evening, and those nights when the Moon was swallowed up by the universe. Venus was the gatekeeper, so to speak, to heaven and earth.

[7.0] Given these quasi-synonymous scenarios, the brightest and most promising of God's angels takes a mortal, rapes her ... unless she consents, which I find unlikely and which is not supported in any Christian or pre-Christian writings ... and six months later, one-hundred-ninety-two days to be exact, and beneath the light of the last full moon of the year, their illegitimate offspring is born. I found it curious that nowhere in the original scriptures were these offspring specifically referred to as male. Their gender appears to be at the translator's discretion, a function of syntax, or more likely the translator's religious, philosophical or culturally-driven gender bias.

[8.0] I did find any evidence in my research of surviving male off-spring. In the event the child conceived is a male, it for some reason dies in the womb, turning to stone and producing what for centuries had been known as a calcified fetus, which would be deadly to the host. In the event a male fetus survives to full term ... six months ... it is born a mooncalf, a hideously deformed creature forever dependent upon its host. What is unclear is the birthing of the stronger fetuses, the females. From what little evidence there is, which was pieced together from shattered figurines found in various archeological ruins, which I find suspicious, it appears they may not be delivered vaginally, but abdominally. This belief is 'supported' by, the striated markings found on the stomachs of the pieced-together figurines, which represent scars. Considering a Caesarian birth is a modern practice, one could conclude that they deliver themselves, leaving their host horribly scarred and most likely dead. The female's will to live must be ferocious!

She whispered with a bite to her words, "If it were not so, your species would not exist!" Skipping over a dozen entries, she stopped to continue reading.

[21.0] Men are afraid of women, because they unconsciously sense that women are more powerful, sexually, than they are. Women are the true givers and takers of life here on earth. The role of men in the evolution of life is insignificant in the whole

scheme of creation, but few, in particular men, refuse to accept this reality.

She nodded and gazed outside. The glow of the false morning star reflected in her eyes. She smiled, as if listening to someone, then returned the papers to where she found them. Drifting back to the window, she dissolved into the fading dark of night.

#

Chapter 11

June 23, 1991
Dr. Oliver Shore

Sean sat down on his porch steps to read Oliver's handwritten note, which had been neatly taped to one of the four large cartons sitting on the porch beside him.

Sean...

Because your phone had been disconnected, I was unable to let you know that I would be returning your files today. I copied everything. And I put all of your papers into new folders and in date order in these storage boxes.

While I'm sorry to have missed you, perhaps it's best since I have 'hundreds' of questions. However, once I have read it all and in chronological order, hopefully, many of my questions will have been answered (as I am sure you feel the same way).

Now, a few favors: (1) please prepare a summary of all milestone events in your life; (2) give serious thought to your interpretation for/of the Poe poems you received and referenced in your research.

Once I'm settled in the UK, I'll send my address.

Oliver...

Sean slipped the folder with Oliver's notes back into the carton he had left open, and wondered, *You put everything in date order? I packed everything in chronological order.* Sean shrugged. *Or did I?* Sean laughed to himself and asked, "And prepare a summary of all important milestone events in my life, complete with dates? Why don't you just ask me to write a friggin book, my friend!"

"Sean MacDonald!" Jean Murphy called out. "Watch your language, young man."

Sean jumped up and turned around, to find Jean standing on the porch in front of the entrance to her apartment, which was the entire lower half of her house.

Jean gestured to the boxes. "The man who left those said he could not wait. Something about having to meet a 'young lady'. He sounded British to me. Dressed that way, too, neat sloppy. He wanted to take them upstairs, but I said he couldn't."

Jean stood beaming, obviously pleased with herself.

Sean thought, *Young lady?*

Jean pointed to the boxes. "Let me help you," she quipped and picked up a box.

Sean couldn't keep from smiling at the thought of a seventy five-year-old woman helping him carry boxes that had to be at least twenty-five or thirty pounds each, up a flight of eighteen steps to his apartment.

#

Chapter 12

June 24, 1991
Dear Sean.....

Blocking the entrance to the strawberry fields was a sagging galvanized steel chain with a DO NOT ENTER sign almost touching the ground. The chain was held up at each end by thick rough-cut wood posts secured in overflowing puddles of hardened concrete. When Sean didn't see Cathy anywhere, he guessed he was early and picked a spot to park along the side of the road and away from the sap-dripping maple trees.

Settling back, Sean shut his eyes and listened to the lazy and curiously soothing schook-click, schook-click, schook-click of the automatic sprinklers watering the fields.

Memories of seeing Cathy began replaying the clips of their meeting ... slowly, frame-by-frame ... had become a regular replay for him. Sean held onto that precarious edge of sleep he loved: floating between light and dark, hearing and not hearing, knowing and not knowing. It was delicious when he got it just right.

The growl of a passing tractor yanked him back to reality. He glanced at his watch. *Seven-thirty? Doesn't make sense?* he thought. *She has to have been up for hours by now.* Sean looked up and down Molly Lane. Squinting his eyes half-shut to block out the glare from the morning sun, he scanned the fields. The only thing he saw was a flatbed truck in the field across the road and what appeared to be someone sitting on the bed, leaning up against the cab, arms folded, head bowed, as if asleep.

Get your eyes checked, MacDonald, he chided. Grabbing the bag of scones, Sean climbed out of his car, feeling dumb at the thought of Cathy having been there all this time and him sitting in his car day-dreaming. He crossed the road, stepped over the chain and started walking out into the field. Twenty or so yards from the truck, he took a second look and started laughing to himself as he skipped into a lazy jog.

Hopping up onto the truck bed, shaking his head in amusement, Sean snatched the paper out of the finger-less hand of the straw-stuffed scarecrow and read the note.

Sean.....

If you're reading this, you have met my stand-in for breakfast! A thermos of hot coffee and container of sliced and sugared strawberries are on the front seat. They should go nicely with the scones.

Why am I MIA? I received a call late yesterday from a caterer in the City, looking for 10,000 strawberries for an exclusive private party. When she told me it was being held in the American Wing at the Met and asked they be hand-picked, sorted and size-matched, I thought it was some sort of prank.

She asked ('demanded') that someone from the farm deliver them and prepare them. She also asked if we grew mint, and if we did, she needed 12,000 mint leaves.

Convinced the woman was a prankster, I half-seriously told her it

would cost a dollar a strawberry, which included delivery. And we had to be paid 50% up-front (read as 'before we picked anything') and 50% on delivery. And the mint would be a nickel a leaf, since we had to pull-up the plants and put them in water-packs to keep the leaves from wilting.

To my surprise, she said, 'see you at seven sharp tomorrow morning', then switched me to someone in her office to make credit card payment arrangements.

Since I couldn't reach you by phone, I called your number at the college, hoping you might be there or somewhere else in Merrywood Hall.

Who is that woman who answered the phone in your old office?
Not very nice!

I'll tell you all about 'Cathy's Day in the Big Apple', when I get back.
Cathy.....

#

Chapter 13

June 24, 1991

'Hell Hath No Fury Like a Woman Scorned'

The double doors for the main entrance to Merrywood Hall had been pulled wide open and braced with cut-down broom handles. The larger-than-life size bronze lions resting on either side of the steps appeared to be sleeping in the hazy heat of the day.

Sean walked in and headed down the darkened hall. The only sounds disturbing the cloistered quiet were the ceiling fans in some of the offices, whispering, shhhhhhh.

The first office was Dean Potter's. He stepped up to the door, sniffed, then again, and nodded when he found the subtle scent of licorice, real licorice, which Sara kept in a Waterford crystal jar on her desk.

Slipping off his shoes, Sean ran up the stairs to the second floor. Skating over the just-polished floor, he slid to a stop in front of Bruce Fanning's office. "Shit!" He slapped at the padlock Bruce always put on his office door when he went out of town.

Sean slipped his loafers back on, bolted downstairs, and made a bee-line for the sunlight falling out of Oliver's doorway. The walls were covered with bookshelves, floor-to-ceiling and corner-to-corner: old books; skinny books; fat books; and books with cracked and peeling backs. Small antique electrified brass lamps were set out like flowerpots on his spindly end tables, matching credenza and his massive roll-top desk.

The seat cushion of Oliver's threadbare upholstered wing chair was buried beneath outdated sections of The London Times. The crocheted antimacassars on the armrests and pinned to the headrest were stained dark with oil and sweat.

Disappointed Oliver wasn't there, Sean scurried down the hall, intent upon leaving, but stopped when he spied a thin blade of light knifing out into the hall from his old office. Peeking inside, he was surprised to find a dozen or so framed period paintings waiting to be hung up. One caught his attention. Slipping into the office, he gently picked up the painting and took it to the window. "George Inness!" he whispered. The overcast sky was soft and blond, with rouge brushed across the horizon. A hundred shades of brown and green had been scumbled over the canvas, creating the illusion of mountains in the background, fields covered with hay ready for harvesting and a figure gathering twigs.

Returning the Inness to where he found it, Sean turned and scanned the other paintings: looking first at a distance, enjoying them, trying to name each artist ... as if Bruce was there with him, testing him like he always did ... then moving in close to confirm his hits and misses. Each one was signed and dated, which surprised him.

On the wall over the desk was a painting filled with the serenity of an early summer morning, soft diffused light radiating from inside and far away. It was a harbor scene, with sailing ships asleep at anchor and a solitary vessel under way, sailing into the morning mist as if manned by a ghostly crew. He scurried over for a closer look.

"That's mine!" he squeaked comically and snatched up the bronze sculpture on the table beneath the Frederic Church painting. The bronze, barely eight-inches tall,

depicted a fox, a spindly legged stork and a raven all gathered around an empty well, eyeing a tiny cluster of grapes hanging from a vine wrapped around a dying tree. The empty well was threaded for a glass reservoir that had been lost somewhere in time.

"Recognize it?" a woman asked.

Startled, Sean spun around.

Patricia Koch was standing in the doorway, arms folded, leaning against the jamb, smiling. She seemed taller than he remembered. Her white silk dress pressed against her taut body, revealing she had added a few womanly pounds. Her body was still soft and cool on his eyes, making him feel just the opposite.

Patricia stepped into the office. "You left it at my apartment, remember?"

She stopped no more than a foot from Sean and placed her hand on his arm ever so gently. "I'm sorry," she said in a soothing voice. "I didn't mean to startle you."

Sean said nervously, avoiding her gaze, "I shouldn't have let myself in." He then noted with a sweeping wave of his hand, "Especially in light of everything that's here."

Patricia said proudly, "These are some of my favorite paintings, like that small Inness you were admiring. My favorite paintings are too large for this little office."

"Little?" Sean let slip out.

Patricia took his hand and said affectionately, "You know what I meant."

#

.....Sean suddenly found himself falling backwards in time, unable to stop. Patricia cupped his face in her hands. He didn't reject her touch as she began smoothing away time with the tips of her fingers, gently pushing his eyes shut. He didn't want her to stop. A bouquet of fragrances evaporated into his senses from her warm, moist hands, pulling him deeper into her touch. 'You're blushing', she whispered and kissed him. He drew the protective curtain of faculty down over himself and walked away to join his colleagues, without saying anything more. Patricia left, too, walking through Merrywood Garden and up the wall of sandstone steps. It didn't look like she was running away from what had just happened, rather that she had somewhere else to go. She returned after dark, having changed into a shear ankle-length dress that revealed she wasn't wearing anything between the dress and her olive skin. She had showered, and without soap, leaving the natural scent of her body to find him.....

#

Patricia asked, "Have you been avoiding me?" and sat in the leather chair in front of her desk. She then spun around to face him and gestured for him to have a seat. He found a space on the sofa, which he widened by moving books to either side of him.

"Avoiding you? Of course not," he lied and watched Patricia frown discreetly.

Patricia clasped her hands together as if in prayer. "Can you ever forgive me?"

Sean replied cautiously, "Let's put it in the past, shall we?" avoiding her question.

In the quiet of the office, they began talking, first about nothing, then ever-so-cautiously about old things and old feelings. Feelings that were still tender to the touch

for Sean, even after five-years. For Patricia, it apparently never ended, in spite of what she had done. It was as if Patricia was determined not to let him forget her, not that he ever could. If nothing else, the finger-thick scars on his sides were a sobering reminder.

Patricia stood up. "Care to have dinner with me this evening?"

She offered Sean her hand.

No! Don't do this, he told himself and stood up.

"Anyone still in the building?" a man called out in the hallway.

Sean and Patricia turned and stepped away from each other.

The night watchman, Andy Jensen, appeared in the doorway.

"Hello, Doctor Koch, still moving-in?" He nodded to Sean. "You helping out, Doctor MacDonald?"

"Hi, Andy," Sean said with a lazy wave of his hand.

Andy stepped back and stood just outside the doorway.

"Miss your old office?"

Sean shrugged and half-smiled.

"We miss you. Especially Dean Potter. You're all she talks about lately."

Andy appeared to sense he shouldn't be there.

"The front door will be locked in ten minutes, so unless you two want to spend the night here, you best be on your way."

Andy turned and started down the hall, jangling keys as he locked the doors.

Patricia pulled the leaded stained glass windows shut and latched them with a soft pat of her hand. Sean watched as she walked around the office as if she were mentally taking inventory. Slipping her key into the door, Patricia looked back at him.

"Dinner?" she asked, then stepped out into the hall and turned to face him.

"Coming?"

Get out of here! Sean told himself and took on Patricia's expectant, gaze.

"Thank you for the thought, but I have another commitment."

Sean stepped out into the darkened hallway.

Patricia pulled the door shut, locked it, pocketed the key and waved for Sean to follow her. "Better hurray, before Andy locks us in here." As Patricia quickened her pace, moving ahead of Sean, she called back, "I wouldn't want you to spend the night in here with me against your will."

Sean thought, *Worry not, Patricia ... once bitten, twice shy*, and was certain he noticed Patricia subtly turn her head, as if she had read his thoughts.

#

Chapter 15

Midnight ... June 27, 1991
Strawberry Moon

After turning onto Molly Lane, Sean sped up, switched-off the headlights, slipped into neutral, and let the car coast in silence as he searched for the cut in the road Karen told him about. Whispering, "There it is!" he gently shifted into second, slowed to a crawl, down-shifted into first and cautiously pulled off the road and stopped to let his eyes adjust to the dark. He then inched his way down the overgrown dirt road. Light from the rising full moon was slicing through the leafy branches overhead, cutting-up the narrow road into jagged slices of yellow, gray and black. At the end of the road, Sean stopped and killed the engine. He felt a hand on his shoulder, startling him.

Karen whispered, "I was afraid you wouldn't come."

She tousled his hair. "Follow me."

Grabbing a rolled-up blanket off the ground, Karen started down the path.

Sean snatched a canvas tote bag off the passenger seat, hopped out, and scurried after her as she melted into the night, forcing him to hurry and catch up just as she darted out into the field and disappeared between the rows of young corn stalks.

"Hurry up slow-poke," Karen called back.

Sean sprinted past her and turned around.

Karen raised her hand, shielding her eyes from the bright glow of the full moon.

Sean brushed the tips of his fingers over Karen's face.

"You look different."

"How so?" she asked.

"You look ... younger ... much younger!"

Karen laughed and said ever-so-softly, "Maybe I am." She then slipped past him, darted to the end of the rows of corn, and stepped out into a small clearing. Before Sean could catch up, Karen snapped the blanket she was carrying into a billowing wave that hung in the air then settled down onto the ground.

Stepping onto the blanket, Sean kicked off his shoes and knelt down. Karen followed his lead and watched with curiosity as he withdrew a bottle of champagne from his tote bag and unwrapped the wire cage holding the cork prisoner in the bottle. When he twisted-off the cork, the pop echoed across the field like a gun shot.

Karen's unguarded laughter chased after it, which quickly infected Sean.

He offered Karen the bottle. Grasping the large bottle with both hands, Karen took a long slow sip. "This is heavenly! What is it," she asked and lifted the bottle into the air, turning it slowly in the one-sided light of the moon. "I can't read the label?"

Sean announced proudly, "Piper Heidsick, Flouren Louis, nineteen fifty-five." He then reached into his tote bag and retrieved a plastic container filled with strawberries. Handing it to Karen, he then blindly felt around inside the tote and produced a paring knife. Grinning, Karen twisted the champagne bottle into the soft earth beside her, snatched the knife away from Sean, and handed him the strawberries.

"You pluck off the leaves and stems, I will halve the strawberries."

Karen started laughing, a soft relaxed laugh, sounding every bit a woman. Sean was instantly infected by the soothing sound of her voice. Their tasks quickly became a competition, which Karen easily won. Retrieving the champagne bottle, Karen trickled champagne over her fingers, then wiped them off on the blanket. Sean did the same.

As if they rehearsed it, Karen and Sean simultaneously plucked a halved strawberry out of the plastic container and offered it to each other. They did it again, without speaking. Karen added a sip of champagne to their mimed game. Sean raised his hand, as if to press pause. He then felt around in the tote bag, held up a plastic container, opened it, snatched up a strawberry and dabbed it in the container.

"Here, try this," he suggested, and offered Karen the strawberry.

Karen asked cautiously, "What's that white stuff on it?"

Sean replied proudly, "Superfine sugar laced with natural crystalline vanillin."

Hesitating, Karen replied, "You go first."

Sean popped the strawberry into his mouth, chewed and swallowed it, made a hideous face, grabbed his throat, and fell back onto the blanket as if he were dead.

Grabbing the champagne, Karen snapped, "That was not funny," and began drizzling the champagne all over Sean's chest. Laughing, Sean stood up, gently wrestled the bottle away from Karen, and returned the favor, which started them both laughing.

"Shhh ... not so loud," Karen cautioned as she stood up, a mischievous smile on her face. She then gently gathered up fistfuls of her caftan, pulled it up over her head, nonchalantly dropped it onto the blanket, and stood naked in the moonlight.

Following her cue, Sean discarded his shirt and stepped out of his pants and briefs. They knelt down facing each other, and almost in rehearsed unison began to tenderly explore each other's body with the soft tips of their fingers. Karen smiled when she saw Sean's response to her touch and leaned back, pulling Sean with her.

Sean halved her swollen flesh with his tongue.

Karen cried out ever-so-softly, then whispered, "Come in me...now." There was a painful sense of urgency thinning her words. When Sean responded, Karen wrapped her legs around his waist, startling him with her strength, taking his breath away.

"Be still," she pleaded. "I want to feel your heart beating inside me." She guided Sean to where she wanted him and in a single graceful move, rolled him over onto his back and sat up, straddling him and gazing into the face of the moon, as if in a trance. She began moving her hips in small circles, squeezing him, pleasing him, and her, again and again, as she gracefully rose up and down as if she were floating on a calm sea.

"No!" Karen suddenly screeched.

Startled, Sean opened his eyes to find the shadowy image of Karen, with broad white feathered wings spread wide, silhouetted against the face of the full moon.

Karen whispered through her teeth, "No. It is not his time. He has been falsely claimed. I will return." She then bent down, gently wrapped her wings around them, no longer two, but one, touching each other to sleep as the Strawberry Moon fell to earth.

The first strokes of early morning light painted the sky awake with streaks of orange and pink. Standing, naked, their bodies bathed in the cool pre-dawn light, they embraced, feeling each other still warm from sleep. The distant choking of a tractor's engine startled them apart. They dressed quickly, laughing like truant school children.

Sean scurried about, collecting everything lying on the ground and tossed it into the blanket. Grabbing the corners, he hoisted the make-shift bag over his shoulder.

As they slipped back into the wooded path, Karen whispered, "Thank you."

Confused, Sean asked, "For what?"

"You made me feel beautiful, loved, and young again. You asked for nothing, yet you gave me everything I demanded of you and more than you thought you could."

Karen turned to go.

Sean blocked her path.

"No!" she ordered, then pushed him aside and dissolved into the dark of dawn.

#

Chapter 17

June 29, 1991

BODY FOUND

George Kraft
Staff Reporter

While plowing one of her fields yesterday morning, Catherine Greene, CPT, USMC, retired, owner of Greene Farms in Red Hook, made a grisly discovery: the naked mutilated body of a man authorities say had been dead for only a 'few hours'.

Police Chief Peter Kratz reported that the cause of death is yet to be determined. However, reliable sources have told this reporter the man was found with his 'chest ripped open' and his 'heart ripped out and taken'.

The police report the face and hands of the victim had been burned beyond recognition by some sort of chemical, forcing identification to be made using dental records and DNA. Which Chief Kratz noted 'could take weeks'.

Chief Kratz also stated: "At this point, we believe the body was brought to this location and the murder" (it is Chief Kratz's opinion that this is a homicide) "took place elsewhere and the body was dumped in the field sometime just before dawn."

At this point, the police have no leads, not even footprints around the body, since investigators at the scene reported everything appeared to have been 'blown clean by a strong gust of wind'. However, when contacted by this reporter, three regional weather services advised there were no high winds detected in the immediate area, and that in fact 'the air was calm due to a stationary column of high pressure air, which moved in late yesterday afternoon, accounting for the hot and muggy air in the valley'.

While Ms. Greene was requested by the police not to comment on what she found, she wanted the public to know: "I sincerely hope that everyone will feel perfectly safe visiting our farm for the fresh vegetables, corn and fruit, when in season, we have become famous for in the Hudson Valley."

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Author's Notes

For readers who wish to learn more about numerology, goddess worship, ancient religions, the works of Edgar Allan Poe, the cycles of the moon, and the folklore found in my story, I suggest the below-noted resources. Which are but a few of the many texts I drew upon for Strawberry Moon.

Numerology
E. T. Bell, Ph.D.

The Mystery of Numbers
Anne Marie Schimmel

City of Dreadful Night
James Thomson

The Holy Bible
King James Version

The Oxford Companion to the Bible

The Oxford Classical Dictionary

The Encyclopedia of Religion

Plots and Characters in the Fiction and Poetry of Edgar Allan Poe
Robert L. Gale

Moon Tables for Times Past, Present and Future
Rolf Brahde

New and Full Moons - 1001 B.C. to A.D. 1651
Herman H. Goldstine

The Old Farmer's Almanac
1943 through 1993

The Women
Glen Yarbrough

The Lonely Things: The Love Songs of Rod McKuen
[<https://bit.ly/2QUVySI>]

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