

PreView

Strawberry Moon

The Novel

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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 2

October 31, 1990

Dear Sara.....

Dear Sara.....

Congratulations!

Do we now address you as President or Dean Potter, now that the Trustees have ... finally! ... appointed (or is it elected?) you President of Hart College? Will they pay you two salaries for wearing two hats, and make the pay retroactive, since you've doing both jobs for a year?

Now, you asked me to share with you the real reason, I decided to 'go over the wall', so to speak, effective at the end of the Spring term. The reason I gave you - that I wanted to write - is the real reason. It's not a spur-of-the-moment thing; I've been toying with it for a few years.

I'm renting out the house (mortgage paid off). The rental income will cover the rent for my apartment (I'm not telling anyone where I'm moving to, until I'm settled in), and all of my personal needs (food, clothing, gin, wine, and a new computer). Having finally completed the restoration of my car (remember that original condition Austin Healy 3000 I found in a barn in Red Hook?), I will have 'wheels', as the students like to say.

What else do I need?

And contrary to the rumor mill ... fueled by the students and those colleagues of ours, who do not know that I was married and I am what they call a widower (ouch!) ... I am not gay, and I hope to start dating.

Affectionately and always respectfully,

Sean.....

#

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 ship's 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,
 $LXX \text{ divided by } 333 = .210210210210210 \text{ ad infinitum}$

"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 4

April 28, 1991

'A Dream Within a Dream'

Facing west across the Hudson River and the Catskill Mountains, Merrywood Hall, on the campus of Hart College, was the epitome of an English country manor house reborn in the New World a century-and-a-half ago. But its once rugged limestone face was now pock-marked with age. Its mountainous slate roof of peaks and valleys and vaulted gables, once encased in a necklace of hammered copper as bright and shiny as a new penny when first coined, was now a dark and crusty green.

At the foot of Merrywood Hall, one-hundred and twenty weathered sandstone steps down the hillside, was Merrywood Garden, matching the two-hundred feet wide by one-hundred feet deep foot-print of Merrywood Hall. The English ivy climbing the six-foot high brick walls surrounding the garden on three sides had succeeded in scratching out chunks of mortar holding the Kingston bricks in place.

The replacement rough-hewn cedar beams, held up by rows of wannabe Greek columns, had begun to split open again. While the regimented soldier bricks defending the pebbled foot-paths crisscrossing the garden from the persistent spread of crab grass had begun to lose their seasonal battle.

The only remnants from yesterday almost untouched by the erosive hands of time were the sculpted marble bodies of Rubenesque women, standing naked, silent and alone, tears from decades of neglect staining their cheeks and still youthful breasts.

Most of the converted faculty offices in Merrywood Hall were the same size: small and cramped. Two on the ground floor, one of which was Dr. Sean MacDonald's, were complete with kindergarten-size bathrooms hiding behind out-of-square doors fitted with painted-over brass locks that no longer worked. Sean's office also had a matching pair of west-facing leaded stained glass windows, and whenever the late afternoon sunlight slipped through the stained-glass panels it caused the silver and red crystalline specks embedded in the stone walls to sparkle like diamonds and rust.

#

"It's not locked," Sean called out in response to the familiar soft knocking on his office door. "Let yourself in, Ollie."

Sean MacDonald's once sharp angular features had been softened by time. The meticulous beard he'd taken twenty years to get just right was now brushed with gray. His face had also begun to show his age: it wasn't anything like the cracks on the wind blown faces of Kansas farmers, just soft-spoken creases crackling around his eyes.

The heavy oak and brass-hinged door glided open, as if by itself, followed by a deep baritone voice ... "Good morning!" ... and the rest of Oliver Shore, barrel chest and all. Oliver was short, stout and muscular, with a bushy-red beard that appeared to be held in place by the gold wire-rimmed glasses hooked on his over-sized ears that not even his long curly Irish-red hair could hide. With his tattered wool blazer, high-topped Oxfords and tartan tie cinching the collar of his wrinkled white shirt to his thick neck, Oliver looked like he had just walked off the stage of a Victorian play by Oscar Wilde.

Oliver stood perfectly still, smiling, watching Sean fight with an unruly stack of uncooperative papers in a losing effort to put them into a

neat orderly pile on his lap.

Oliver asked, "Still grading senior theses, my friend?"

Sean gave up on his struggle and let the papers slide off his lap onto the floor.

"Yes. It's like having a root canal without Novocain."

Oliver frowned. "Awfully late, aren't we?"

Sean's affection for Oliver and his curious gnome-like ways tickled his face into a relaxed smile. "Yes, I am, Doctor Shore. But I've never been on time with my grades. And after I'm done, I'm going back to my new spartan pied-à-terre and open my last bottle of Chassagne Montrachet. Which I let stand last night for the crust to settle."

Oliver glanced around the office and frowned. "I'll come back later if you wish."

Sean shook his head. "Other than commencement, Ollie, I don't have a single appointment for the rest of my life ... except for my unannounced future demise."

Oliver raised his hand. "Have you forgotten the meeting Dean Potter wants you to have with your successor, who was confirmed by the Trustees last evening?"

Sean half-laughed. "I told Sara an hour ago, and for the umpteenth time, that I would not meet with Dr. Koch. Which prompted Sara to turn beet-red, refer to me as one of my body parts, then storm out of my office and slam the door behind her."

Oliver shrugged and began shuffling around the office. He stopped and stood in front a large wall-hung tapestry and muttered to himself, "It's exquisite ... I love it."

Sean quipped, "It's yours. Take it."

Oliver replied in a startled choir-boy pitched voice. "You can't be

serious!"

He then stepped closer and began examining the tapestry. "Do you have any idea where it's from, what all of the images and medallions mean, and what it's worth?"

Oliver's questions told Sean Oliver probably knew the answers to his questions.

"All I know is that it's very old, it's silk, and it's hand-woven. And I don't care or want to know what it may be worth. It was given to me by my philosophy instructor at the University of Buffalo, Father Bollman. A house of a man! Bob showed up the night before he was scheduled to board a train to join an ecumenical enclave in a monastery somewhere in Missouri ... never to be heard from again ... and gifted me with it."

Sean pointed and took aim at Oliver.

"I'm giving it to you in the same spirit of friendship. Partly because you love antiquities, partly because you really don't care what something like this is worth, and partly because I have no place to hang it in my new apartment, which is on Molly Lane, a dozen or so miles from Greene Farms." Sean frowned. "I had student named Greene. I think her first name was Catherine. The smartest student I ever had. And tallest, too!"

Sean gestured with a sweeping wave of his hand.

"Take the tapestry the second I'm out of here."

"May I at least pay you something for it?"

Sean replied through a sinister smile, "Yes."

Oliver perked up and focused his entire being on Sean.

"Your payment will be that you must agree to pass it along the same way in which you got it." Sean laughed. "You must formally include that condition in your will."

A simultaneous nodding of their heads mimicked two ten-year-old

boys making a secret pact that would damn them forever if it were broken.

Oliver turned to face Sean, his demeanor abruptly changing from informal to formal. "About your research." Oliver paused, took a long deep breath, then continued. "I know you told me you didn't want to have anything to do with it anymore, but I would like to integrate your extensive research efforts into my quasi-related research."

"If you want twenty years of my life, Ollie, you've got to do better than that."

"Fair enough. When I was at Oxford some years back, I met a young Anglican priest assigned to the Archbishop's antiquities research staff at Canterbury. We kept bumping into each other in the rare books room, which was not open to the public, and we became good friends. He told me, and in strict confidence, he was working on a project involving ancient pre-Christian hedonistic rituals related to the phases of the moon and the practice of harvesting one's heart. While they were still alive! When he was having difficulty finding examples of these ancient religious practices, I offered to help. When he showed me copies of untranslated original texts on both linen and parchment, which were penned in various different early dialects I was not familiar with, I was hooked. Although he would not disclose where he got the texts."

Oliver abruptly became very serious.

"I found indirect references to these rituals, but only by name not what actually took place. And in many of the ancient cultures in the far east and surrounding the Mediterranean. But nothing concrete. Just oblique entries alluding to violent orgiastic and deviant sexual behavior. Which had some resemblance to the rites surrounding Cybele and her consort Attis. This all changed, when I found parts of different diaries, which had been written in a number of ancient dialects. They had also

been penned in different and apparently unrelated dialects and at different times in history. However, and this is what hooked my interest, I discovered that many of the texts contained complex cryptic alpha-numerical code-like sentences. Which I am still trying to decode."

Oliver shut his eyes, stood in silence, and nodded as if recalling something.

"When I succeeded in translating random passages, in what I originally thought were unrelated texts, but proved to be related, and shared this with my colleague, an Anglican priest, he did some checking and discovered these manuscripts had been the property of an Anglican Bishop. Who like my friend, was assigned to Canterbury. When he dug into restricted church records, which he refused to tell me how he did it, he learned the Bishop's name was Reeves Knight, the personal archivist for the Archbishop of Canterbury." Oliver paused, then said softly, "Bishop Knight was found dead on his sixty-sixth birthday, brutally murdered, apparently, during some sort of Pagan ritual."

Oliver took on Sean's expectant gaze.

"He was killed in much the same way our wives were murdered!"

Oliver shut his eyes. "And very much the same way my friend was found a few weeks after we had begun to connect-the-dots, so to speak. I did not know it at the time, but he had reported back to his superiors ... telling them everything ... which we had agreed he would not do until we found the rest of Bishop Knight's papers."

Sean rejected Oliver's commentary with a cavalier sweep of his hand.

"Take the damn files, Ollie. I hope you find what you're looking for."

Surprised, but also pleased with Sean's sudden turn of heart, Oliver beamed.

Sean gestured across his office. "That oak cabinet contains most of

my research notes. There are also a few dozen books in Latin and ancient Greek, along with my notations tagged to hundreds of entries, which I collected on my journey to nowhere. The only things not there are my journals and primary research. There's a dozen file boxes in the attic of my new digs." Sean hesitated. "You can have everything. What's here and at my apartment, after I move out of this tomb of mine."

"This means a great deal to me, Sean. I will..." Oliver paused, as if he were debating whether or not to say something. He then whispered, "Thank you," and left.

#

Chapter 6

May 29, 1991

Greene Farms ... Catherine Greene

Sean took the sharp left turn onto Molly Lane far too fast. The tires on his classic Austin Healy 3000 roadster squealed in protest, then broke free. Drifting sideways, heading for the barbed wire fence guarding the pasture, Sean down-shifted, floored it, regained control and continued speeding down the narrow country road, turning everything around him into a blur of grays and greens and streaks of rusting wire.

The wind began slapping at him, as if telling him to slow down. When he saw he was doing eighty, he let off the gas, gently pumped the brakes, slowed to a crawl and pulled off the road onto the grassy shoulder. Leaning back, Sean withdrew a folded-up letter from his shirt pocket and settled down to read it for the umpteenth time.

Dear Dr. MacDonald:

When I learned of your resignation, I went to the college to see you, but every time I stopped by your office you were either with someone or not there.

That is why I decided to write.

I would like you to be my guest at the farm, perhaps, for lunch or dinner? Greene Farms in Red Hook, remember? You can't miss it, we're on both sides of the east end of Molly Lane.

The strawberries might be ready before Memorial Day this year (which is early). We're expecting a bumper crop. Please don't wait for that, to come visit. And there's no need to call ahead: at this time of year, I'm a 'prisoner' here. You can usually find me at our market. If it's really busy, you will have to go out into the fields to find me. You'll know it's busy if there are cars inching along on both sides of the road.

I'm looking forward to seeing you again after all these years.

Sincerely,

Catherine (Cathy) Greene

Shutting his eyes, Sean had Catherine Greene in front of him: taller than all of the other young women; wind-blown shoulder-length natural blond hair; cerulean blue eyes; and unforgettable warm smile, which came to life whenever she spoke to him. He also remembered he often found himself wishing Cathy wasn't a student.

As with all of the students who completed the Writers in Residence masters program after graduation, Sean had made an effort to keep up with what Cathy was doing, but gave up. Not because he didn't want to, because he couldn't: Cathy had joined the Marines. Fifteen years later an article in the local newspaper reported that Captain Catherine Greene had retired, due to combat-related injuries, and returned home to Red Hook to take over the ownership and management of the family business.

Except for the dated photograph accompanying the article, Sean had no idea what Cathy looked like now, almost twenty years older.

Sean slipped Cathy's letter into the pocket in the door, retrieved a folded-up letter from his shirt pocket, and read the most recent letter from Cathy.

Dear Dr. MacDonald:

Thank you for your kind reply to my recent letter. I admit that I was not sure you would remember me, let alone answer my letter. In case you haven't been to Greene Farms, the following directions will.....

Sean stopped reading. He had memorized what Cathy had written. It was a letter he was surprised to receive, since he thought her first note to have been nothing more than a lark. And his reply no more than a courtesy. But he wasn't so sure now, at least as far as he was concerned. Adding this letter to one in the door pocket, Sean pulled back onto the road, listening to the crisp crackle and crunch of the gravel beneath the tires, which called up long ago forgotten childhood memories: the balloon

tires on his repainted, candy-apple-red second-hand bicycle, and hot gooey patches of tar, bubbling up from the road into shiny black blisters, asking to be driven over or stomped on.

#

Sean took his place in the line of cars jerking their way along the side of the road. When he turned into the entrance and pulled to a stop at the make-shift gate house, a young woman announced with a smile, "Good morning! How may I help you?" she asked, playfully drumming her hands on the wooden shelf serving as a counter.

"I'm going to pick strawberries," Sean replied, trying his best to sound like he knew what he was doing. "And string beans, too."

"String beans aren't in season yet, sir."

You should know that, MacDonald, you idiot.

Smiling, she handed Sean a stack of green plastic baskets, nesting one inside the other and still wet with fleshy chunks of strawberries. She then held up a clear plastic bag with a pinch of her fingers and let it go. Sean jumped up and grabbed it, fumbling the baskets off his lap and onto the floor in front of the passenger seat.

Before he could pull away, a tall woman working the opposite side of the stand, stepped around and held out the bottom of a cut-down cardboard box.

"Here," she instructed, tossing the box over his head onto the passenger seat. "Use this for the baskets when they're full."

Sean spun around at the sound of the distinctive voice.

"Catherine?"

"I wasn't sure you'd come."

"I almost didn't," Sean admitted and instantly wished he hadn't said that.

The car behind him beeped. Others joined in, adding their two-cents worth.

"Better move," Cathy suggested and added a gentle pat of his shoulder. When she stepped away from the car, her fingers brushed up his neck, grazing his ear. Goose bumps raced down in inside his shirt, making him shiver.

With Cathy's attention diverted, Sean was able to look at her more closely. To his surprise, he saw a tall full-figured woman, not the gangly girl etched into his memory.

With a wave of her hand for him to pull-away, Cathy added, "I'll find you in the fields a little later."

#

Homemade signs with large stenciled-on letters announced STRAWBERRIES in fire-engine-red paint, with a cardboard cut-out arrow nailed to a wooden stake as if it were an afterthought. Sean turned, as instructed, to find another sign shouting PEAS in matching color, which called-up still more long-ago forgotten childhood memories.

He continued on, passing row after mounded row, until he found that made-to-order patch of ground that let him park upwind of the dust blowing across the open fields. Hopping out of the Healy, baskets in hand, Sean stepped over the first few dozen rows, moving further out into the field. Looking up-and-down one row, he dropped the baskets onto the ground, knelt down, and started feeling his way through the leaves, plucking off strawberries with a pinch of his fingers, filling his hand, then depositing them into the basket. Popping a fat strawberry into his mouth, crushing it with his tongue, Sean sucked the strawberry dry, then devoured the pulp.

Ours were sweeter, he thought. But that's probably because we raised sheep and didn't have to buy fertilizer. Just the thought of that made Sean smile. He shut his eyes, faced the sun, laid back onto the ground and let himself drift back in time.

..... It's all right, son, I'm right here with you. Are you sure it wasn't just the shadows from the moonlight?

Yes.

Okay ... now calm down and tell me exactly what you saw. And remember, you're safe here with me

#

"Pass out from the shock of manual labor?" Cathy teased as she stepped out of the flat-bed truck, which did not have doors on the cab or fenders over any of the tires.

Sean sat up like a wind-up toy and shielded his eyes from the glare of the sun.

Cathy was standing beside the truck, finger-combing the wind-blown tangles out of her hair. Climbing to his feet, Sean dusted himself off, slowly and methodically, and ended with playful slaps of his backside and started for the truck, grinning sheepishly. Cathy braced her hands on the heavy wooden planks of the truck bed and hopped up backwards with amazing ease and equal grace.

Sean came to a stop directly in front of her. "Room for two up there?" he asked.

Before he could join her, Cathy braced her hands on his shoulders and vaulted off the truck, knocking him off balance. Sean started stumbling backwards and reached out to catch himself, only to momentarily grab hold of Cathy's shirt, pulling her off balance and tugging her shirt open at the same time. He landed flat on his back and got the wind knocked out of

him, but he didn't for one second take his eyes off Cathy as she followed him down, landing on top of him, straddling him on her knees and jamming her hands into the dirt, bracing herself, and stopping inches from Sean's face.

Cathy pushed herself up and came to rest with her hands braced on Sean's chest, looking down at him, smiling, waiting.

"Miss Greene!" He gasped for air. "What if someone sees us?"

"What is there to see?" Cathy asked, an angelic smile lighting up her face. "And please call me Cathy. I'm only 'Miss Greene' to my suppliers." Seeing Sean glancing down, up, and back down, Cathy asked, "What are you staring at?" and looked down.

Laughing, she buttoned her shirt, stood-up and stepped on the running board.

"When we didn't see you moving about anywhere out here, I decided to drive out to make sure you were okay." Cathy was stifling a private laugh. "But I guess I should have remembered those stories you told us in class about growing up on a farm and known better." Cathy slipped behind the wheel, started the truck, spun the tires in the dirt, kicking up dust, as she circled around and came to a stop no more than a foot from Sean's toes. Holding the steering wheel with both hands, she leaned out of the door-less cab and kissed Sean on his cheek, rendering him speechless.

"It's nice to see you again, Sean," Cathy said with the calm self-assurance of a woman, not the girl he once knew as one of his students. She reached out and set her hand on his shoulder. "I don't know why it's taken me so long to invite you out here?"

"How about dinner tonight?" Sean asked, surprising himself, and felt his face and ears warming up to a blush.

Cathy said with a sigh, "I wish I could. I really do. But we're busy

earlier than usual this year. Good busy! What about Sunday? I have a double crew on Sundays."

"I can't," Sean replied with a discouraged shake of his head.

"Graduation."

Cathy said half seriously, "I guess it's just not meant to be." She then scrunched her face into a made-up pout, winked, smiled, and pulled away.

#

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.....

.....As you know, Ollie, my 'theory' is based on: [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; [2] propagation is realized by the 'taking' [sexually] of a mortal, which results in the perpetuation of evil on earth.....

.....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.....

.....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 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 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 sheer 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.....

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>]

PreView

WordShop Publications
[www.Dream-Writing.com]
Physics of Writing Inc.
[www.PhysicsofWriting.com]