

Under the Blue Moon

By

Joan Schweighardt

“Lovers don't finally meet somewhere. They're in each other all along.”

— Mawlana Jalal-al-Din Rumi

1

Lola

absent

The first thing Lola noticed upon impact was that she had lime green paint under her fingernails, and in that instant she couldn't remember why. The second thing was that her car was still in motion even though she was no longer driving it. Her foot was on the brake, hard, in fact, but it wasn't helping because she was moving not forward but sideways. There had been people sitting all along the curb that she was heading into—deranged looking people, she'd been thinking a split second earlier, with wild hair and wide eyes—but now they were all screaming (she assumed they were screaming; their mouths were opened, though she couldn't actually hear anything over the horrible screeching noise her car was making, over the pounding in her ears), scurrying to their feet, jumping out of the way.

Her car hit the curb and bounced once before stopping, jerking Lola forward for a second time. Her head didn't hit the steering wheel but it bobbed near it, and as her fingers were still clenched there, she noticed the paint under her nails once again. With everything else going on,

her awareness of this detail was peripheral at best, but it would come back to haunt her later; it would be there whenever she went over the particulars in her mind.

Her first *conscious* thought was the curb of course, whether everyone had gotten up off it in time or if there were still some people there, their legs crushed between it and her car. She made herself look in that direction. Her eye fell on the brick building on the other side of the sidewalk. Leaning up against it were black plastic trash bags in a row, a few grocery carts filled with more plastic bags, a cardboard sign on which someone had written *I used to be your neighbor*, and another one, on which *ANYTHING HELPS* had been printed in large black capitals in the middle of a circle of sloppy-looking happy faces, and in the midst of it all, a seriously overweight golden retriever with matted yellow hair, curled up, asleep. She assumed no one was trapped between her car and the curb because the people who were gathering around her car—closing in on her like zombies really—were looking at *her*. No one was looking down where a pinned body might have been.

Her second conscious thought was for the driver of the car that had struck her, the car that had pushed her off course. She glanced to her right to look out her passenger window, most of the glass of which was in fragments on the passenger seat. The car that had hit her was old, dirty, grayish brown, maybe an early model Ford Taurus, if she had to guess. The driver—it was a man, a dazed-looking man, she could see that much even through his filthy windshield and the steam rising up from under his now protracted hood—had to have been going mighty fast, and right through the stop sign, to have broadsided her like this.

Someone opened her door, and immediately her nose filled with the smells of burnt rubber, oil, gas, chemicals, while her ears filled with voices, male and female, the people who had been on the curb, all yelling at once over the persistent hissing coming from under her hood.

“Are you all right? Are you all right?” everyone was asking. “I’ll run in and call for help,” a man shouted. Someone else said, “Her airbag didn’t deploy. Why didn’t her airbag deploy?” Someone answered, “It don’t always happen like that. She wasn’t going fast enough.” “Yeah, but—” the previous speaker said, “shoulda. Shoulda deployed.” Some of the people had gone to the other car, the Taurus, and a few were screaming at the driver. “What the fuck wrong with you?” a man shouted. “Didn’t you see the fucking stop sign?”

Suddenly there were hands on Lola. They seemed to be everywhere at once. She looked up into the faces that went with them. They were black, white, Hispanic, Native, an Asian, their ages ranging too: a virtual poster for diversity. She saw black holes where teeth belonged, cheeks streaked with dirt and drawn with hunger, smudged eyeglasses held together with strips of red duct tape, sweat-stained baseball caps, hair, straggly and greasy. She smelled cigarette smoke and body odor. She began to swat at the hands, some of which seemed to be moving across her chest. She continued swatting even when it sunk in that they were only trying to undo her seatbelt, ease her out of her seat.

Now she heard a new sound. It took a few beats for her to realize it was her, moaning. She thought she must be badly injured, dying perhaps. It’s true she’d been unhappy, and for quite a long time now. But she knew what happiness looked like, and she wanted more years, more life, a chance, if not to attain happiness, then at least to make improvements in that direction. She wanted to go out on a high note, so that if she *did* have to come back, she wouldn’t find herself grappling with the same obstacles, the consequence of lessons gone unlearned.

She imagined she had parts missing, that which ones they were would become obvious once the shock wore off. Her heart was beating rapidly but she couldn’t find the strength to lift her hand to it. “Let’s try and get you out of the car,” a female voice said. Another voice, a man’s,

said, “You’re not supposed to move them.” “Oh, yeah, Asswipe,” said the female, her tone gone shrill. “You smell gas, Asswipe? You don’t leave the vic in the car when it’s about to blow.”

Asswipe didn’t respond.

Lola allowed herself to be lifted. Simultaneously, she watched her bag, also being lifted, by a young man wearing the kind of shirt Lola knew was called a wifebeater. She wondered if that was Asswipe, if Asswipe intended to steal her purse. *Don’t judge, don’t judge*, she told herself. It was her mantra of late, devised to deal with what she believed to be her greatest character flaw. She forced herself to look away from Asswipe, to trust that he would hold onto her bag until the ambulance came, that he wouldn’t fumble inside for her wallet.

Every bit of her was shaking; she was shaking from the inside out. All her organs were vibrating; she could feel them. She was dragged up onto the sidewalk, supported by two strong women, one holding each arm, and she was glad for that because she didn’t think she could have stood on her own. She dared to look down, and she was relieved to see that both her legs were still there, both feet attached.

The man who hit her was out of his car too now. He had gotten his mojo back, apparently, and he was screaming at the people who had surrounded him, and they were screaming back. When he shoved one man out of his way, his face came into view, and Lola shuddered to find him looking right at her, scowling, like the accident had been *her* fault. He appeared to be Hispanic—short but solid, maybe in his mid-forties. His face and neck were covered with tattoos, ornate Roman numerals on his forehead, a teardrop to the side of one eye—she knew what that meant, that he had killed someone—and what looked like random designs on his neck. *Don’t judge*, she told herself. *Don’t judge, don’t judge, don’t judge, don’t judge*. “Yeah, take a good

look,” one of the women who was holding her yelled. “You see what you did, dumb fuck, motherfucker? You coulda killed this nice woman.”

The sound of a siren, at last, recognizable even over all the yelling and screaming going on. The perp heard it too. He stiffened, and then all at once he bolted. The people in the crowd that had been surrounding him began yelling at the top of their lungs. *Scumbag. Asshole. Fucking gangbanger. Coward. Run, you coward, run.* A police car came around the corner so fast its tires screeched. The crowd hollered and pointed to the perp, halfway down the street already, about to run into someone’s yard. The police car went screaming after him. Then the car stopped and two officers jumped out, leaving the car doors wide open behind them. With their weapons drawn, they ran into the yard where the perp had disappeared.

Except for the hissing sounds both cars were making, there was silence then. The crowd seemed to be holding its collective breath as it waited to see what would happen next. All at once there was a popping sound, which Lola would not have recognized as a gunshot if someone near her had not mumbled, “Fucker deserved that.”

Lola looked at the faces around her in wonder. Could all this really be happening? Only moments ago she had been driving slowly down Second Avenue, thinking about the house she’d just come from. She’d met with the family there for the first time two weeks earlier, a husband and wife and a teenage son, and the wife’s mother, who had Alzheimer’s. The dog was for her, the old lady, Mary. Lola had brought three dogs along that first visit, a spaniel mix, a border collie mix, and a pug, and Mary went wild for Susie Q, the pug, a well-mannered five-year-old that Lola had trained herself. The family seemed fine, so Lola had agreed to present her board of directors with the paperwork—a formality really—recommending that Susie Q become Mary’s companion. But when she went today to drop off the dog, there was a situation going on. The

wife, who opened the door a good three minutes after Lola's third ring of the bell, had puffy red eyes, and upon seeing Lola standing there, the son, who had come up behind his mother, glowered, turned, and ran upstairs and slammed a door. Only the father, who came to the door next, seemed the same. But whereas he had given Lola a good impression during her first visit, this time his cheerful demeanor seemed blatantly contrived. Nobody invited her in. The wife, her arms folded around herself, backed away from the door, and the husband took Susie Q's leash and records folder from Lola out on the stoop. He smiled a thank you and shut the door in her face.

And that was that. It made Lola sick inside to see that that man was able to grin like that when his wife had been crying and his son was acting out. And where was the old lady? Lola had looked forward to meeting with her again, just to ensure that her enthusiasm for Susie Q was still evident. Alzheimer's patients could be unpredictable in their preferences.

As soon as she got in her car and pulled out of the driveway she regretted leaving Susie Q behind. That's what she had been thinking about, that, and, more abstractedly, that the people on the curb she was passing were a motley crew—and then *bang!* Everything changed. And now here she was, standing, by the grace of the two strong but rather stinky strangers holding her up, out on the curb, her car cratered, and the police down the street pursuing the man who had hit her.

Everyone was still focused on the cop car, waiting for the cops and the perp to come back into view. Lola felt calmer now; the quaking of her organs had abated, but now she thought she felt too calm, like maybe some of her parts were in the process of shutting down. She was three years short of sixty, after all. How much would it take for some essential organs to quit on her? She glanced to the side, beyond the curb where the people had been sitting just before she'd

almost killed them all. She looked at the building, the sign over the door, one of the city's homeless shelters. Of course. She should have realized. She would have if she'd been thinking clearly.

There were even more people gathered around her now than there had been at first. Apparently people who had been inside the shelter had come out to see what was happening. Some of them were not homeless; some of them worked at the shelter. You could tell because some were nicely dressed, with shiny hair and bright eyes and perky expressions and bodies that looked well fed, a few of them a little too much so.

Lola was taking it all in when she happened to see something suspicious, a man moving stealthily just beyond the crowd—tall, with a salt and pepper beard and longish wavy dark hair sticking out the back of his baseball cap—wearing a bulky asparagus-green baseball jacket with an embroidered P patch sewn over the front pocket. This was Albuquerque in the summer, probably close to one hundred degrees in the shade on this particular day. And it wasn't only that: the man had something *under* his jacket. He was supporting its weight with both arms, trying to look like he wasn't, trying to look like he had a stomachache, maybe. He glanced at the crowd, furtively, she thought, and pulled open the door to the shelter. Just before he entered, he looked back once more and his eye fell on Lola and their gazes locked. It was only a split second, but in that instant she saw his face freeze and she knew for certain that he was up to no good and that he knew that she knew that. Lola turned to the woman on her right, whose grip was still tight on her arm. "That man," she whimpered. The woman, who had a dirty blue bandana tied around her head, patted Lola's arm with her free hand. "Don't you worry, sweetie," she said. "The Five-0s are handling it."

“But, but...,” she tried again. She had to let someone know that something bad was happening, that someone had used this unfolding drama as an excuse to sneak into the building with a gun—or a bomb! “But, but...,” she went on, but then there was another siren, getting louder every second, drowning out not only her plea but also her apprehension concerning the man in the asparagus jacket.

The ambulance turned the corner and the siren stopped shrieking abruptly. Finally, Lola thought, finally. She glanced down the street. One of the police officers was standing near the car, talking on his cell phone. The perp and the other officer had still not reappeared. The woman beside her said, to no one in particular, “That was quick.” Quick? Lola wondered. Really? This, she thought, is what it feels like when time stands still.

But everything did happen fast thereafter. The EMTs, two men in their twenties, one thin and reedy and the other short and muscular, jumped out as fast as the police had jumped out of their vehicle, and marched right up to Lola and started asking her questions. She found her tongue, her voice. She told them her name, the date, the name of the current president and then the name of the previous one (though she had promised herself she would never say that one’s name out loud again, unless she used it as a verb), the month of the year, everything they wanted to know. They asked her what happened, and she would have told them that too, but it was the question everyone had been waiting for, apparently; the entire crowd pressed forward, all of them talking at once, offering slightly different versions of the same story. Meanwhile, the thin EMT touched Lola’s neck. “That hurt?”

“A little.”

He placed the flat of his hand on her upper back. “What about that?”

“A little. Everything hurts a little.”

“Can you move your legs for me? Let me see you move your legs.”

Lola kicked one leg out straight, then the other. She chuckled a little. She looked up from her feet to see a second ambulance rounding the corner, this one sans siren. It blasted past the accident scene and zoomed down the road and came to a screeching halt just behind the police car.

“Ma’am,” the thin EMT said, “please.” He had removed a gurney from the vehicle and was pointing down at it. The women who had been supporting Lola held on to her as she bent to sit on the gurney. The EMT had to physically detach their fingers so that he could guide Lola into a horizontal position. In a few seconds flat, she was strapped in and being slid into the back of the ambulance. As he secured the gurney, the muscular EMT explained that she looked to be perfectly fine, but it made good sense for her to get checked out over at the hospital, just in case.

Lola lifted her head to take one last look at the people who had gathered around her on this momentous occasion. She found herself full of love for each and every one of them. They had stood by her, on this day of days that she would never forget; they had been witnesses to this small fragment of her life, which was nothing if not a microcosm of the greater whole. Some of them stared back at her, their expressions equally loving, or at least pensive; others scrutinized the equipment inside the back of the ambulance: monitors, medical kits, splints, an oxygen tank. The EMTs shooed them back so they could jump down.

They were about to shut the double doors when a man’s voice yelled, “Wait, wait, don’t forget her bag.” The thin EMT took it from him and tossed it on the floor near Lola’s head. Lola could tell just by the *thunk* it made that it was as heavy as it had ever been, that her wallet, which was always loaded with loose change—because she was one of those few people who preferred to pay in cash when she had the option—remained intact. Holding her head up as high as she

could with the gurney straps cutting into her chest and arms, she took a deep breath, so as to be able to project her voice, and just before the doors finally did close she managed to say, “Thank you, Asswipe. Thank you for everything.”