

La Bella Luna

By Nancy Butler

I gaze up into his eyes, but he focuses on the sky. Bright orange sinks beneath the horizon, casting soft shadows on the wispy clouds above our heads. Streamers of tapered light fall down as the party of a day draws to a close. Already, night creeps in behind us, a thick, suffocating black. I search instinctively for his hand, finding it at the base of his smooth leather jacket. My fingers twine with his.

The wind unfurls off the Pacific like curses off my tongue. I press into his tall frame, a protection against the blustery July night. A deep blend of mahogany, tobacco, and scotch swirls into my nose. Waves smash onto the rocks thirty feet below our dangling legs, seeking revenge. Up here, I feel safe, protected from the angry waters that claim thousands of foolish tourists each year. I'd rather sit right on the edge, teasing death as it laps hungrily at my feet.

My mother says that's why I'm attracted to him, because I feel most alive when flirting with danger. But I was dangerous before him. It's something else entirely that captivates me: his knowledge, and not just things taught at school or in the backseat of his car. It's like he's lived another life entirely. As he tells me about the world around us, I get to slowly uncover him.

Night has pushed every bit of light below the horizon, shrouding us in darkness. I can no longer see the ocean below, but I feel it pulsating, pumping in my veins, connecting us through our intertwined fingers. He leans over and kisses the top of my head.

"Wanna go swimming?" he asks.

I sit up. "Right now?"

"Sure, why not? The water's probably 50 degrees."

"Oh is that all?"

"It's basically the same temperature year-round. It's just the air temperature that makes it feel colder or warmer."

"Well, I'm not going in."

He grabs both of my arms, threatening to push me off the ledge.

I scream in protest.

Laughing, he pulls me back against his chest.

Salt spray drifts upward, tingling the tip of my tongue while we laugh. Stars pepper the black expanse above, and the moon faintly illuminates the earth below. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he produces a pack of Marlboros and a lighter I bought him on a trip to New York. He flicks the metal, the flame revealing his face for just a second. His eyes, vast and deep like the ocean. He returns the pack and Bic to his pocket.

"Did you know," he begins before taking a drag, "that the Pacific Ocean is wider than the moon?" He breathes out, and smoke stings my eyes.

"No way." I grab the cigarette. "I mean, I know it's the biggest ocean, but..." I inhale and cough up burning smoke. "How can it be bigger than the moon?"

He takes the cigarette back. "I know, but I'm serious. The moon's diameter is a little over two thousand miles. The ocean is more like twelve thousand miles across."

I search the sky for the moon, and see a faint crescent rising from the Oregon mountains behind us. Even the sliver looks huge, bigger than two thousand miles. "Wow."

I turn back to the dark expanse before me, the five-times-wider-than-the-moon stretch of gurgling water. He offers me the cigarette, but I push his hand down and lean into him, lightly pressing my lips against his.

"I love you," I whisper over the splashing waves. It's not a silvery, shimmering, two-thousand miles wide love, but a crashing, dark, uncharted type, more powerful than fifteen thousand miles and seven hundred million cubic kilometers of churning water.

"Come on, let's go in before the water feels too cold." He stubs out the cigarette.