

## Blue Moon Luck

Falling Waters, West Virginia. It's not a city or even a town; it's just a place. Like an old woman's hands cupped, a little bowl in the midst of craggy, tangled green hills and rocky, woody fields crisscrossed by various county roads and Interstate 81, which cuts lengthwise through the heart of this place I call home. Follow the highway north, it'll take you across the narrow part of Maryland, into Pennsylvania, and all the way to New York. Follow it south, you'll drive the length of Virginia, through the glorious old Blue Ridge Mountains. Between Virginia and Maryland, the Interstate passes through a little piece of West Virginia. There's an exit for Falling Waters, exit 23. Don't blink or you'll miss it; you'll fly right by and never know it's there.

Chicory and Queen Anne's lace grow in the fields and roadside ditches, alongside purple thistle and other weeds, like cannabis—cannabis grows really well there too, I discovered when I was thirteen.

There had once been a battle at Falling Waters, and one across the river in Williamsport, Maryland. Nobody I know can tell you much about those battles anymore, except for the Civil War reenactors. Of course everybody has heard of Antietam, which is close by, also on the Maryland side of the river. We took field trips to Antietam in school, every year. A lot of history—and a lot of animosity—is buried around here. The soil is thin and rocky, but the past is deep and fertile.

Tollie and I grew up half a mile apart in those old, wooded hills above the Potomac River, not far from where it joins the Shenandoah at Harper's Ferry. When I was a kid, I couldn't wait to grow up and get on that highway to see where it went. The layers of hills, the twisted

country roads leading you back to where you started, and the trees, a crush of trees, the souls of dead soldiers, my grandfather used to say—they all conspired to keep you safe and forever unseen. The soil is thin, but roots went down deep, grasping the rocks, refusing to budge. The highway attracted me, and the river, too, had its pull. As long as I can remember, I wanted to leave.

The trouble between Tollie and me all started the night we got our fortunes told, the summer I was twenty-two. That was the summer everybody was doing it, going down to the river to see the witch. It was one of those things that catch on and become popular. Some summers, backyard bonfire parties were big; other summers, everybody went down to DC to party on the weekends. But that year, “witchin’” was all the rage. From Hagerstown down to Martinsburg, everywhere you went people were talking about their fortunes.

She only told fortunes once a month—on the night of the full moon. That made it even better because it wasn’t some ordinary thing; it was something people looked forward to. Tollie and me bought us a Farmer’s Almanac and marked the full moon nights on our kitchen calendars. But it was the end of summer before we went. Tollie had a regular job in construction; he worked six days a week. And we had our gigs almost every Friday and Saturday night, which was a good thing since that was my only source of cash at the time, other than the occasional bag of weed I sold. So it wasn’t until late August we went. Nearly midnight at that, after sitting around with Tollie and his old lady on the back porch of their trailer all evening, smoking dope and shooting the breeze.

“Tollie Osbourne, I can’t believe you’re gonna blow five good bucks to have some toothless old hillbilly tell you your fortune.” Veronica stood right in front of him, hand on her sharp little hip, squinting those eyes of hers. Those flirty eyes.

“I can tell you your future, if you just ask me nice,” she said all seductive like. “Won’t cost you no five dollars.”

Tollie just scoffed. “The hell you can. You don’t know as much about me as you like to think.” He grabbed her arm, pulled her down on his knee, and kissed her hard. She squealed like a cat.

“Anyways,” he said into her ear. “You get what you pay for, I always found.”

I didn’t like it when they started fooling around; I went to the refrigerator for another beer.

“It’s after eleven; are we going or not?” I called from the kitchen.

We put what was left of a case of Budweiser in the back of his truck and left Veronica to clean up the dirty ashtrays, empty cans, and pizza boxes. She wasn’t happy about it, but I got him out of there.

Even though we hadn’t yet been to see the fortune-teller our own selves, we knew exactly where she lived. Everybody knew. You go a mile and a half down Potomac River Road and take the first dirt lane on the right, after passing Weimer’s apple orchard. You follow it to the end.

We’d come late. The lane was lined with cars and pickups, a dozen at least. Tollie pulled off the gravel and into the weeds behind Buddy Lister’s brand-new ’82 Camaro. Buddy was making out with some girl in the backseat. You could see an arm or a leg fly up now and again. You could see the hump of his back.

“Shoulda come earlier,” Tollie said, lighting up a cigarette. There was excitement in the air, a feeling of adventure. We both felt it, yet neither of us could speak of it. There was no need to. It was like heat lightning, there in the background, dancing in the sky.

“Hot, ain’t it?”

“Got up to ninety-five today,” I said.

“Shit, be glad you weren’t down in DC with me, laying blacktop. Over a hundred degrees in the shade. Probably one-fifteen on top of that roller.”

“I heard on the news thirteen people in Baltimore City croaked. From the heat.”

Tollie shrugged. He was hard to impress. “My old man says what don’t kill you makes you stronger.”

“Then I guess you must be one strong son of a bitch.” I jabbed him in the stomach, and he got my head in some kind of lock and thumped me a good one. Hurt, too. Tollie always was bigger and stronger than I was.

We opened a couple of cans of beer, dripping wet, and sat on the tailgate swinging our feet. Tollie wore his work boots. I think he musta worn those things to bed. I had on my high-tops. The moon was full and high overhead, spilling light like it was milk into the woods. Bugs sang in the trees; they love the heat. You could smell the sharpness of weeds crushed under the tires. The sweet pleasure of somebody’s doobie drifted our way.

“Hey, Tollie, you got a bud on you?”

He shook his head. “Unless you want to drive back to the trailer and get into Veronica’s stash.”

“She’d shoot me dead.”

“She would. And you’d lose your place in line.”

A Chevy II station wagon pulled up behind Tollie’s truck, bright lights shining in our faces.

“Jesus H. Christ, turn your lights off,” Tollie growled, but not loud enough for anybody to hear. Doors slammed and three girls got out, squawking and giggling. You could smell their

cheap, sweet wine from here. Further ahead in the line some guy let out a hoot and somebody else cranked up Van Halen on a car stereo.

“Shut up!” came a drunken, exuberant voice two or three cars ahead of us. “You are fucking up my karma!”

Everybody laughed. Waiting our turn to see the witch was as much fun as a field kegger.

“I wonder who she is. What she looks like,” Tollie said.

“Who, the witch?” I shrugged. “We’ll find out soon enough. I wish you woulda brought your guitar; we coulda worked on that new piece. I got a good feeling about that song, Tollie. That one could be our big break.”

“That song ain’t nothing; it needs a lot more work,” he said, drawing the last of his cigarette so that it burned bright. Then he snubbed it out on the heel of his boot. “And we need a dozen more before we can even think about making a demo. You’re always jumping the gun, going off half-cocked.”

I chugged the last of my beer and opened another. Every so often a car drove out the lane, and the rest of us got back in our cars and drifted forward. Those going out would honk their horns and yell stuff like, “Go home, suckers! I took all the good luck; there ain’t nothin’ left but bad!” And everybody waiting in line would flip them off and yell something back, all in fun. Some seemed to spend a long time in the witch’s house; others were in and out in five minutes flat, peeling out and spraying gravel as they left. There was no telling.

By now we could see the trailer. It was all dark but for a yellow light coming out of one window. I thought I could make out her head, but I wasn’t sure. The smell of the river drifted up, stirring something inside me. It’s an oozy, half-rotten smell, but I like it. Smells like home.

From up near the road some guy howled at the moon, and it started a chain reaction right down the line. All those young punks barking and baying sounded like a pack of coon dogs, and I howled once myself, just for fun. Oh hell yes, this is a fine party!

Tollie and me were pretty well lit by the time we got to the front of the line.

“Go for it.” I slapped him on the shoulder.

“You go first.”

I laughed. “What, you ain’t afraid of a little old witch, are you? A great big old boy like you?”

“Shit.” Tollie laughed, embarrassed, as he stumbled up the steps and knocked on the ragged screen door.

“Good luck,” I called after him, popping the top to another beer. Oh, what a fine night. The air down here in the bottom was a little cooler. Couldn’t see the river for the trees, but I knew it was close by.

Pretty soon the screen door banged open, and there was Tollie, dragging down the steps, his head hanging.

“Well, what?”

He didn’t answer. Just leaned against the truck and lit up a cigarette.

“What did she say, Tollie?”

“Nothing much.”

“Are we going to be famous? We going to be rubbing noses with Eddie and Ozzie?” My voice sounded too loud; it bounced off the trees.

“Your turn, Chance. Go on and blow your five bucks. Go on.”

“Fuck you, Tollie, I will.” He was always falling into a funk without any provocation. I blew him off. Me, I was excited to see the witch. My heart was beating like a moth in a lampshade, in spite of the fact that I don’t believe in the supernatural. I climbed up the rickety steps and knocked on her door.

“Come on in; don’t be shy.”

I stepped into the kitchen. It smelled of cigarette smoke and cat piss. The witch had her back to me; she was pouring a glass of iced tea. The sink was stacked high with dishes. A window fan hummed and rattled.

Cats, everywhere. One was sleeping under the table; one sprawled out under the window. A fat orange cat wound itself around the witch’s bare legs, her tail making a question mark.

“Have a seat, son. You want some ice tea?” She turned to face me with a warm smile. Didn’t look nearly as old as I had imagined, about the age of my own mother, I guessed. Her hair was strawberry blond, gone gray at the temples. Wiry, like a terrier’s. She wore a pink chenille bathrobe.

“You thirsty?”

“No, ma’am. Thanks.”

“My name is Seraphina. What’s yours?”

“Chancellor Lee. Some call me Chancey. Or just Chance.”

She sat down at the kitchen table and pointed at the other chair. There was another cat on it that jumped down when I pulled it out. So I sat down across from her, wondering if she was going to look at my palm or read the Tarot cards or maybe ask me when I was born. But she didn’t do any of that. She lit up a cigarette and puffed away. Asked me a few general questions,



all the while studying my face like she was reading a book. I tried to meet her gaze without wavering, but it was hard. Every now and then I had to glance away, just for a breather.

“You’re a lucky one, now ain’t you Chancellor Lee? You was born under a bright star.”

“Who me? Lucky?” I was taken aback. Was she confusing me with someone else? “Well, I guess I’m what you’d call fortunate. I got my health and all.”

Seraphina shook her head. “Fortune is something you make or have bestowed upon you. Yes, you’ll have plenty of fortune in this life, but fortune is a hawthorn in the gap.”

“Huh?”

“That’s an old saying. What I mean is that fortune is a mediocre substitute for luck. I’m talking about luck, Chancellor. You hear me?” She leaned across the table like she was going to whisper a secret. I could see the moist upper crease, between her boobs. Her wrinkled, freckled skin. It crossed my mind she might be crazy. Maybe I should just humor her.

“Luck is what falls out of the blue and into your lap. The clear blue. You know what I’m saying?” She tapped her ashes into a tray already piled high with butts. “You have no control over luck. Like pennies from heaven or bird shit, it can be good or bad. Luck.” She looked at me, and I looked at the floor.

“Now everybody has a little of both; they just don’t always realize it. Some people think they ain’t lucky, but usually they just ain’t taking advantage of what little bit of luck has come their way. True, some folks have more good luck than bad, and some poor devils have more bad than good. But everybody’s a little lucky, you understand?”

I shrugged and made a noise in my throat. Feeling embarrassed. Thinking, this is lame.

“But some folks, like you, are terribly lucky. Do you know what that means, Chancellor?”

The fortune-teller paused and took a long drink of tea. Ice rattled in her glass. Outside I heard a car horn and a girl's laughter. I didn't know what to say. I supposed it was true enough, but I wanted her to be a little more specific. Like, how long would it take me and Tollie to be discovered? Should we go on the road? Would we make it big with our first recording, or was it going to be a long haul for us? I didn't really care either way, but it would be nice to know. So I could keep Tollie's hopes up.

She rapped her knuckles on the table to get my attention.

"Listen to me. A long time ago in the land of the pyramids a dog was struck and killed by a meteor." Her eyes lit up and she laughed. "Now that's what I call luck. Just think of the odds! True, you wouldn't want it to happen to you or to a dog, but in this life you got to take the good with the bad, even if it kills you. Because in the end it does."

I nodded, just to be polite. I was convinced she was a loon. Best not to argue with a crazy person. Just play along.

"Don't you be afraid of your luck, Chancellor Lee. Good or bad, keep your eyes open so you'll recognize it. Most people don't even see a thing when it slaps them in the face. I want you to grab on to luck when it comes around. I want you to hang on tight and see where it takes you." She puffed on her cigarette for long seconds, not saying a word, but looking at me like she was reading my heart.

"Ma, how many more is out there? I'd like to get some sleep." A squeaky voice startled me. A girl appeared in the doorway.

A thin girl she was—maybe eighteen or nineteen—with hair that stood out from her head like a bush on fire. She smelled like a ripe peach and her skin had the same pink fuzziness. A big white T-shirt came just to the place where her legs started. I stared. Couldn't help it. I could see

the shape and shadow of her tits, like hard, sour little lemons. Cat eyes. She flashed me an annoyed look.

“Maybe you know each other? That’s Brigit, my daughter. Brigit, this here’s a customer. Chancellor Lee. He’s a lucky one.” Her laugh turned into a cough.

Brigit huffed a sigh, spun around on her bare heel, and disappeared into the darkness of the adjoining room without saying a word. “Pleased to meet you,” I said.

The witch winked her eye at me, or maybe it was a tic or a twitch.

\*\*\*

“What do you mean you don’t remember what the witch told you?” Tollie said as we were driving out the lane.

“When her daughter came into the room, I forgot everything. Except that I’m one lucky son of a bitch.” I laughed like a fool, my voice reckless and too loud. “That’s what she said. Well, in a manner of speaking.”

Tollie grunted. I knew what that grunt meant. Actually, I didn’t know what it meant, but it was a dismissive sound, a sound of exasperation. That grunt meant my comment didn’t even warrant a response.

“Don’t be so morose, Tollie. If I’m lucky, you’re lucky too. It means we’re going to be discovered, don’t you see? We’re going to make it. Least that’s the way I interpret it. We’re going to be rock stars, just like we always planned.” I was always trying to cheer him up.

“And you actually believe that bullshit?” He sped up, spraying stones and dirt. “When are you gonna pull your head out of your ass and grow up?”

“When did you get so goddamn mature? Just because you got you an old lady and a kid and all, don’t make you a wise old man of the world. Jesus, we’re twenty-two years old, Tollie.

You make it sound like we've already lived half our life and got one foot each in the grave." I stuck my head out the window and let my hair whip back in the hot night wind. Refused to let his foul humor spoil my high. "What's wrong with being a rock star?"

"It's stupid." He shook the hair out of his eyes with a vicious jerk. "A kid's dream."

"So you don't want to be a famous guitarist anymore? Well, what do you want to be? What was your fortune, anyway? What did the witch predict for you? Fess up."

"Forget it. Veronica was right; it was a waste of a five-dollar bill."

"Couldn't have been that bad, could it? What, did she say you were going to die young? Is Veronica going to leave you for Buddy Lister?"

"I didn't say it was bad; did I say it was bad? No, she ain't leavin' me." He reached across the seat and slapped at me, but I ducked. "Why would she leave me?"

"Hey man, it's a joke. But admit it, wasn't it fun getting our fortunes told? Kind of exciting."

"What, sitting in that stinking kitchen listening to a crazy woman rant? We'd'a been better off staying home. To think I missed *The Dukes of Hazzard* for this." He jerked the gearshift again, and we pulled out onto the highway, flying through the thick, milky night.

\*\*\*

I swear to God he was never the same after that. Shit, who can blame him with all that went down? Maybe the witch knew his destiny; maybe she actually told him his future. Or maybe Tollie just thought he saw doom in her eyes. I don't know, but at the time I shrugged it off because Tollie had a perverse and skeptical nature. He could, on occasion, be as bitchy as a chick. But up until then nothing serious had ever come between us. We were like brothers, Tollie and me. And I thought he believed in our dream to become famous musicians. If not actually

famous, at least highly successful. As far back as I can remember, that had been our plan. To live on music. To play guitar and make music the livelong day.