

Stories of Love Under a Full Moon

by J.A. Pak

Chris was head over heels in love. He'd never been in love before. There had been all his crushes, but those had been warm buzzes of joy.

"I wish—I wish you knew what it was like, Penny. I wish you'd fall in love so I could talk to you about it."

Penny thought that was a lousy reason for wishing someone in love. She didn't trust love somehow. Everything she'd heard about it made her afraid. Like Dulcey and Cal. Dulcey was still in love with Cal, and yet he'd broken her heart. At first because she'd been too much a baby, and then later, when he'd died. Heartache was love, happiness imagined later, to make sense of love. Dulcey's eyes still lit up thinking of Cal. Love twisted things around.

Chris and Penny were sitting on the opposite ends of the porch swing, where minutes before Chris had found Penny curled up fetus-fashion reading a book. She seemed so much a world within herself that he'd almost walked away.

"She's so beautiful," he said, the statement a cresting of all his newfound emotions. Love hunched him over, as if it was just too much for his body to bear. He looked up to see what Penny thought; she was smiling, not for him, but about some thought he was bound by only in its periphery.

"What are you smiling about?" he asked gently.

"Oh—" This brought her back to him. "I was just thinking—someone once told me that being in love was like having butterflies in your heart and Megan said—" Penny stopped. It was the earnestness on Chris's face. He wouldn't understand.

"I guess it's sort of like that," Chris said, trying to find a way for Penny to understand. "Only it's more like someone grabbing you from the inside. It's wonderful."

Penny listened, quieting her hesitations. They sat together twenty, thirty minutes before Chris got up to go.

"I just wanted you to know how I felt," he said, smiling enough to turn the whole world pink. Penny stared after him. She was unhappy and sat by herself thinking. When she went inside, she was glad Megan was at the breakfast nook. Spook was on her lap and she was reading a cookbook, her reading glasses slipped halfway down her nose. There was an impression of parody, of an old-fashioned storybook grandmother.

"Chris gone?" she asked, looking up. Penny nodded, sitting down next to her.

"Megan, what do you do when someone's in love and you know it's wrong?"

"Wrong? How so?"

"Wrong—wrong for them." Penny didn't want to mention Chris, but she didn't know how else to explain herself. "Chris is in love with this girl we met when we were up at Sequoia—"

"Oh—" Megan said. She closed her book. "Well—you could kidnap him and lock him away for a couple of years."

"You just have to watch, don't you?" Penny said.

"I'm afraid so, Penny. Besides, how do you know? You don't know what two people are like in private, when they're alone together. There's no place for wrong or right in a relationship."

"But sometimes you know, Megan," Penny said, holding back tears. It seemed so useless to know anything.

Megan felt suddenly dizzy, the air around her spinning. She put her head back and closed her eyes. We're all in a dance, she thought. Swirling past each other, same steps, same gestures, in and out of ancient patterns, unable to stop, unable to help, except with a quick glance of helpless compassion while the silent music makes us move.

Dulcey walked in, feeling the mood, instinctively knowing its weight.

"It is a full moon, isn't it?" she said wryly.

They looked out the window, a brilliant stone moon filling a quarter of the sky. Megan and Penny started laughing.

"I was just on the phone with Helen," Dulcey said. "Penny, your grandfather is doing just fine. Completely his old self, Helen says. Although I don't know about Helen. She sounds a little odd."

"In-lawitis. When's Helen coming back?" Megan asked.

"She wants to stay a couple of more days," Dulcey replied. "Look at that magnificent moon! Let's go outside to watch. We used to have the most marvelous moon-viewing parties—dancing to a full moon, reciting poetry, eating moon cakes, making up riddles."

The three of them sat on the porch and watched the moon crest overhead. The sky was cloudless and black, the moon capturing time. The distance between them and the moon seemed merely an imagining.

