It all started with a game.

In 1932, my roommate George and I began our sophomore year of college in Detroit. We also found our way into the game of stud poker. In a world new to playing cards above the table and not under it, we acquired a nice following. We bunked our two rickety metal beds in our dorm room to give us more space for visitors on the nights that we played. Most weekends, half a dozen guys sat hunched across my bunk, the top bunk, watching us play. I liked George, of course, and I liked almost all the guys. Almost.

One Saturday night we hosted our typical weekend crowd. Four of us—me, George, and a couple of other guys—were playing a few hands and passing the time when we heard a knock. The door swung open and Vincent entered, with that permanent smirk on his face. He was the “almost” guy.

“You Marys just gonna sit around all shut in and shuffle cards all night?” Vincent asked.

His smirk turned to a snarl, and the lamp’s bright light caught the sheen of the pomade in his hair. Vincent was an upperclassman who cared little about doing well in his classes. His father was some big shot on the board of trustees for the university, a fact that gave Vincent carte blanche to shirk his classes, sleep in with married women at seedy joints off campus, and stay out late sharking card tables. No one really liked him. But Vincent was the type of guy who wouldn’t take no for an answer. There was something unsettling about him.

“You got something better in mind, Vin?” George asked. One of the other fellows cleared his throat, and we all looked up expectantly.
“As a matter of fact, I do,” Vincent said. He unbuttoned his coat and produced a round, fat bottle. “No more cards tonight. I’ve got a different kind of game.”

We didn’t see a lot of hooch in a dorm like ours. Even I got excited. After a few rounds of bottle passing, we decided to pool our pennies together and head out for a night on the town. We put on our best suits and spent a few minutes pressing our collars and shining our shoes. Our pennies didn’t go very far, however. We settled for hot dogs downtown and ate them perched on the back of some benches under a department store awning as we each continued to nip at the bottle of bathtub gin. We emptied the end of the rotgut into our flasks in the bushes some time later. What didn’t make it into the flasks, which was a lot, sank into the dirt along with drunken zigzag urine trails narrated by exchanges of insults.

“Hey Jimmy,” Vin said to me as I unsteadily unbuttoned my fly, “don’t go pissing on your shoes now. We gotta get a move on or we’ll be late to The Mad Cat Club!” He brayed with laughter and turned to throw the empty hooch bottle at a passing car.

It was unseasonably warm that night as we headed towards The Mad Cat. The entry featured the outline of a small Halloween style cat with its back arched. The cat’s eyes glowed a ghostly green against the otherwise cheery marquee. I scratched at my collar, and I felt a bead of sweat roll down my back.

“I come here a bit,” Vin yelled back at us just as we entered the club.

We staggered unsteadily past the coat check. My tweed trousers clung to the backs of my legs, and I wondered if anyone else was as drunk as I was.

The Mad Cat was jumping. Several dozen tables teemed with crowds of men and women dressed to the nines. Cigarette smoke swirled in the lights like mist. The air was heavy with the smell of cologne, sweat, and desire. We sat down near the stage. I leaned back to take in the ceiling, which was washed in faded paintings of gilded filigrees and bare breasted women from some bygone era. Through the panes of the glittering skylight, ghostly beams of moonlight illuminated the dance floor below. A nine-man jazz band was in full swing. *Freddy Valentine and the Foxtrot Revue*, a sign read. The band leader, Freddy, wore a starched white dinner jacket, and smoothly juggled the roles of singer, conductor, and emcee. A line of three smiling chorus girls sparkled in their sequined costumes as they tapped and twirled on stage.
I don’t remember a lot of the conversation that took place those first few minutes at the table. George sat to my right, and I was glad he was there. Vin jabbed me on my left side, and made a lot of jokes at my expense. I couldn’t fight back verbally. All that came out of my mouth by that time was slurred nonsense. I thought I should leave to spare myself the future humiliation of depositing my dinner and drinks onto my lap. George saw me struggling. He pushed some seltzer on me and after a bit, the spinning room slowed to an almost tolerable level. I focused on the chorus girls’ legs and their perky breasts bouncing cheerfully in time to the music just a few feet above us. I felt better, steadier, so I returned to drinking.

One by one, we took turns visiting the water closet to sip on our flasks. I thought the attendant eyed me suspiciously, but he said nothing as he offered me a towel. Vin took a few extra trips long after he’d finished his liquor. We weren’t quite sure why. Later he said something to the waiter, who returned with a tray full of “coffees” for us.

“Special joe,” Vin told us. I took a solid sip, and found myself with a mouth full of coffee watered down by rank gin, worse than what we drank before. I sputtered and almost choked.

“Holy shit!” I said. Vin brayed with laughter as he sloppily clapped me on the shoulder.

“You’ll be alright soon enough, Jimmy. It’ll be good for you!” Vin yelled in my ear above the roar of the music.

“What the hell, Vin?” George asked unsteadily. “Is this horse piss?”

“Drink it down, boys,” Vin said as he retrieved a case of cigarettes from his jacket pocket. “You’ll feel great. Just you wait.” We obeyed, and soon I felt a new wave of warmth wash over me.

“We’re gonna have company soon.” Vin leaned back in his seat and shot several sloppy rings of smoke towards the ceiling.

“Who?” I asked, and felt the word echo lazily in my skull.

“Girls, you idiot,” Vin said. “It’s why we came, isn’t it?” The other boys at the table cheered.

“Those girls, the ones from the stage?” George asked. He suddenly looked about twelve years old with a kid’s grin painted across his face.

“Yeah, those girls,” Vin said as he lit a fresh cigarette with the stub of his last one. “Sound good, boys?”

We all agreed it did. We toasted to the girls with our coffees, which suddenly didn’t taste so bad to me.
“Now look,” Vin leaned in, “there’s this one gal named Lana. Hasn’t been on stage yet, but you’re going to see her soon. I’ve taken her out some. Think I’m gonna make her my girl. Alright?”

We all shrugged. “Fine by us,” said one of the fellows.

“Good.” Vin’s eyes glinted in the dimness of the room. His usual smirk turned into that odd snarl again. “Just wanted to make it crystal clear is all. So Lana makes it four girls, and there’s five of us. One of us is not gonna have a girl. My bet is on Jimmy here.” He tapped his cigarette against the ashtray and blew a puff of smoke in my direction. “But we’ll see,” he chuckled to himself.

George caught my eye, but we said nothing. Subdued, we all just nodded, bathed in a strange, awkward silence. The waiter returned and whispered in Vin’s ear.

“Okay, the girls are gonna come visit after Lana’s number. She’ll be on in a minute.”

We all broke back into goofy grins and slurped at our coffee as the stage lights began to dim. The room grew quiet, and all I could feel was the pounding rush of blood and gin across my face.

The music began, the lights begin to come up, and a girl appeared on stage poised on a wooden crescent moon. The large moon was painted a pale yellow, pulled unsteadily from stage left by two small men who I was sure doubled as dishwashers. The music almost covered the squealing of the wheels as the girl on the moon, Lana, was shuffled to a stop at center stage.

Lana looked pure and perfect bathed in the stage lights. She glittered from head to toe in a sparkling gown the color of seafoam. Her blond pin curls shone in the spotlight. Lana smiled and began to sing, and I felt my heart melt. I can’t recall the sound of her voice, but I do remember her song.

When the moon comes over the mountain
Every beam brings a dream, dear, of you...

Lana’s entire being glowed from the stage. The spotlight highlighted a beauty mark next to her pink mouth and brought out a light blush that started across her cheeks and moved down her throat. My eyes followed her every move. I was absolutely enchanted.

Once again we’ll stroll ‘neath the mountain
Through that rose-covered valley we knew...
The music swelled for an instrumental break. Lana leaned toward the microphone and cooed, “Hello everybody, this is Lana Ross.”

She giggled as she got a roar of applause. I chuckled along with her; I felt Vin's eyes on me, yet I couldn't take my eyes off Lana. She was a good head shorter than the smallest guys in the room, but she made up for it the way she filled out her costume. And good God, those legs.

*Each day is grey and dreary*
*But the night is bright and cheery*
*When the moon comes over the mountain*
*I'll be alone with my memories of you*

Lana’s number ended, and the room cheered as she took a bow with the band. Everyone at our table stood up and joined Vin in enthusiastic applause. I watched him shape his hands into exaggerated cups to make sloppy claps. I thought Lana might have caught my eye as she bowed and curtsied a final time before heading off stage, but I wasn’t sure. Freddy Valentine and his band picked up the next tune. We sat down and pulled our chairs toward the table.

I felt Vin’s elbow in my side again. “What’d I tell you boys? That’s my Lana. Ain’t she hot stuff?”

We nodded and Vin laughed a little too loudly. “Alright,” he said, “gotta go visit the can now. Any of you fellows tried the inhaler yet?”

“The what?” I asked.

“Bennies, Benzedrine,” Vin said as he produced a small tube from his pocket. “Helps me relax. Want to try it?”

We all shook our heads. “No thanks,” George said.

“Suit yourself.” Vin stood up. “I'll be back. Hold down the fort, boys.”

Vin disappeared down the hallway. Just then the three chorus girls came bobbing out of the side door near the stage. Lana followed behind them.

“Pssst, fellows! Here they come,” George said under his breath. He and the others all took a quick slam of their coffee. I drained mine and winced.

The girls headed straight to our table and we rose to greet them. A tall, young redhead introduced herself as Alice and cozied up to George. I didn’t catch the names of the other two dancers. Both were brunette and very giggly. They might have been sisters.
They each took an arm of the other two guys from the dorm. To my surprise, Lana walked right up to me.

“Hiya handsome,” she said as she wrapped a hand around the upper sleeve of my jacket and squeezed my arm. She winked at me. “I’m Lana.”

“I’m Jimmy,” I said. I made a motion to sit and to my surprise, she bounced into my lap. Together, we half fell back into my seat. Lana laughed. “I’m Jimmy,” I said again, this time in a half slur. I felt my face stretch into a broad, wistful smile.

“Hiya Jimmy,” Lana cooed. Our noses almost touched, and I caught the smell of liquor mixed with something else. Vomit, perhaps. Up close, Lana looked beautiful, but something about her was off. It seemed like she was made of wax, her blond hair coiffed just a bit too picture perfect. I cleared my throat. The burn of the gin smarted and made my eyes misty. In that moment, I started to doubt that any of this was even real.

I looked across the table at George, who leaned in close to his new companion to sneak glances down the front of her costume whenever she looked away mid-sentence. They shared another cup of coffee. I suddenly wondered how our group must look from afar, a group of college boys with chorus girls in their laps and rancid liquor in their bellies. Then I thought of Vin and how I must look with Lana.

A new song, a fast number, started up just then.

“Oh, I love this one!” said one of the brunettes. “Let’s dance!”

My friends and their new girls jumped up and headed to the dance floor. George went last. He caught my eye with a raised eyebrow as he followed his new date.

“Careful there, Jim,” he muttered as he passed.

“You gonna ask me to dance?” Lana asked in a singsong voice. She wound a silky, gold ringlet of hair around her finger.

I said nothing, painfully aware of Vin’s imminent return.

“You like me,” she said. “I know you do, Jimmy. Saw you watching me during my number.”

“I like you,” I told her blankly. Lana’s baby blues sparkled and echoed the lights from across the room.

“Why don’t you, then?” she asked. “Know you want to. Ask me. Don’t need no permission.”

I imagined holding her in my arms, and I bucked as I felt a shiver crawl up my spine. “Yes, okay. You want to dance?”

Lana beamed at me. “You betcha, fella!” She jumped up and took my hand in hers and I followed her to the dance floor. A
waltz started as I took her into my arms and we began moving together across the floor.

“You smell nice,” she half yelled in my ear above the music. “Warm, like aftershave and tonic.”

“Ah, thanks. You, ah, you look terrific, too, Lana.” I looked out over her head and scanned the dance floor.

“Oh yeah, what do you like about me?” I could feel her big doe eyes watching me.

“Oh, I’m not so good at compliments.” I blushed as I felt the warmth of her waist against my palm.

“All you gotta do is tell me what catches your eye about me, Jimmy.” We glided across the floor with the other dancers.

“Well, I can’t say.”

“Oh? Cat got your tongue?” she teased.

I didn’t have a chance to respond before I heard my name called. We both turned to see Vin, standing alone on the edge of the dance floor and watching us. Lana stiffened in my arms. We stopped dancing, but neither of us made a move towards the table. The band played on as Vin walked out on the floor towards us.

“Hiya Lan,” Vincent said.

“Hello yourself,” Lana said and sniffed. The three of us stood on the dance floor as couples danced around us. Some turned to watch us.

Vin turned to me. “Jimmy,” he said in an oddly nasally voice, “I was watching you just now. You’re looking a little peckish. Maybe too much gin to keep cool under the collar while holding a pretty girl.”

I felt Lana’s eyes on me and I blushed.

“I’m fine, Vin,” I told him.

“You don’t look it, Jimmy,” he said. I noticed that one side of his face was twitching. “Hey, why don’t you take a break, get some air? I’ll take care of Lana here.”

“Go away, Vincent. I’m dancing with someone else right now,” Lana said in a low voice, one edged with irritation.

“What’s the matter with you, doll?” Vincent asked. His voice grew louder. “Don’t embarrass my friend here, or me.”

More eyes turned on us. The band continued to play, but now Freddy Valentine was watching us too.

“Let’s take this conversation off the dance floor.” I began to lead Lana towards our table.
Vincent yanked Lana by the shoulder. His fingers ripped the edge of her dress. “Where ya going, you little cocktease? Don’t you go embarrassing me again!”

Lana squealed and her hands tightened on mine. “Go, Jimmy,” she said. “Run!”

I didn’t listen to her. I should have. I felt a roar escape from me as I whirled around to face Vincent. My fists were raised, but I hesitated and shoved him hard. Vin staggered back a few feet, but then he charged me. Through my haze, I watched his fist connect with my face and sock me squarely in my left eye.

“No!” Lana screamed. Vin hit me again and smashed my nose. I heard, and then felt, a crunch ripple from my sinuses into my skull.

Lana’s scream was the last thing I remember.

*****

I woke sometime later. George mopped at my face with a soggy rag to bring me around.

“Hey pal, how you feeling?” he asked me.

“Where are we?” My vision swam, clouded by a thick throbbing in my head and across my face.

“Home,” George said. “The dorm.” I was lying on his bed. I folded my legs down onto the cold floor. The room, filtered in an early morning haze, slowly came into focus in one eye. The other eye made me wince when I gingerly dabbed at it with my thumb. It was swollen shut.

“Take it easy, Jimmy,” George said. “That’s some shiner you got there.”

I ignored him and stood up a little too fast. My vision darkened for a moment until I steadied myself. I found myself still dressed in a wrinkled version of last night’s clothes. Dried blood dotted my shirt. I sniffed and realized that Vin had broken my nose.

“What happened?” My voice sounded muddled and thick, as if I’d swallowed a peach whole.

George dropped the rag on the floor. “Vin saw you and Lana dancing together and he just sort of lost his mind. He’s bad on those bennies and...”

“Did he hurt her?” I interrupted. I saw more stars as I breathed slowly against the crushing throb in my sinuses.
George sighed, losing a little patience. “I don’t know, pal. You two made quite the scene. After Vincent beat on your face, the girls rushed Lana backstage, and we put you in a cab and brought you back here. I don’t know after that. I think the place just kept on going without us.”

“What about Vin?” I asked.

“We left him alone, Jimmy. You were beat up pretty bad. Tried to see him this morning, but he didn’t answer his door.”

I spun around and fought a pang of nausea as I looked for my coat.

“Hey, hey, hey, Jimmy, take it easy. What are you doing? Where ya going?”

I found my coat and threw it on. “The club. Let’s go.”

*****

It was after seven that morning when we arrived at The Mad Cat. The place was shut up tight, but after I pounded on the door for a few moments, the janitor came and opened it. I lied and said I’d lost my watch and that we wanted to look for it.

“Come on in then,” he said gruffly.

George and I spilled into the club, and I found myself back in the ballroom. Only this time it was empty. For a moment, I couldn’t quite believe it was the same place. The tables were bare of lamps and clandestine vessels of booze. Without the colors and warmth from the stage lights and candle lamps, the place looked dingy and desolate. I saw that the walls were badly in need of a fresh coat of paint. The curtains framing the stage were torn and hung limply in the light of the day. The streams of sunlight that made it through the dirty skylight above only served to illuminate a dismal layer of dust. It caked everything in a way that I hadn’t noticed the night before. I didn’t recognize this place. The only thing still recognizable was the smell of cigarette smoke and spilled alcohol.

The janitor, an old black man with a face riddled with pockmarks and the start of wiry whiskers even in the early morning, followed behind us. “Find what you were looking for?” he asked as he leaned against his broom. He didn’t seem to notice my face.

“We were here last night,” I said forgetting my lie about the watch. “There was a girl. She sang a little. Short, blonde, real pretty.”
“Yeah, I know the one,” the old man said then. “Left early, before they closed it down for the night.”

“Do you know where she lives?” George asked.

“I don’t, but I’m sure the fella she left with will take care of her.”

I went still. “What did he look like?”

The old man had gone back to his sweeping. “Oh, young fella like you two, well dressed. Comes here a lot. They’ll probably be back tonight.”

“Then so will I,” I said.

****

I went back to the club that night with George. By then my face was a real mess, inhuman, more purple and bruised than anything else. We definitely garnered a few stares from the floor. Freddy Valentine clearly remembered us and watched us suspiciously as we entered the hall. We chose a table in the far back corner out of sight of most of the crowd. George found the chorus girl he’d danced with the night before. She came out and sat with us for a bit, and we ordered her a special coffee.

“Yeah, Lana left with Vincent this morning,” she said.

“But she’ll be back?” I asked.

The girl shrugged one shoulder and sipped her coffee.

“Maybe.”

But Lana didn’t come back that night. The chorus girl with the coffee sang her number instead, rolling hurriedly through the ballad with an air of boredom. Before we left, George and I gave the girl the telephone number for the phone booth in the dorm and asked her to call when she heard from Lana. She never did.

We got back to the dorm a little before midnight. It was stuffy again that night, and George propped open our window with a couple of books in the hope of getting a little breeze. Mostly, we got a few sticky sheets of rain on the floor.

Vin never came back to his own room. I went to the registrar a few days later and learned that he’d dropped his classes. “Said he was eloping,” the clerk told me as she worked a wad of chewing gum between her teeth. I was stunned.

For the rest of that semester, I focused on three things: healing my face before I went home for Christmas, doing my best to prepare for finals, and trying to find Lana and Vin. I went back to The Mad Cat every night for several days, but I never saw either
of them there. George tried for me. He really did try for my sake, at least for a while.

“What is it about her, Jimmy? Why do you even care?” he asked after that first week.

I realized I didn’t have an answer. He stopped going with me after that, but we returned to our poker nights with the other guys in the dorm.

Winter break came and went, and I returned to Detroit. I still went to The Mad Cat every other night. No Lana, no Vincent. After a while, I started only going once a week. Eventually, I stopped going completely. George and I both drank a lot less and smoked a lot more. With the anticipation of the repeal of Prohibition looming near, bathtub gin lost some of its mystery. My nose healed with a distinctive new crook to it. The night at The Mad Cat faded into a vague, confused memory.

Eventually, I started to wonder whether the girl on the wooden moon ever really existed. More and more I came to believe that I’d conjured it all up while riding high on gin and coffee. I started to forget little details from that evening, and then bigger ones. The color on Lana’s cheeks. The sound of her voice. The way she felt in my arms. Little by little, all these things started to slip away from me. My confusion about the events of that autumn night gradually faded into anger at myself, perhaps bitterness. And then one day, I forgot about Lana completely. I didn’t think of her at all.

* * * * *

The years after that passed quickly. I finished college, moved back home to upstate New York, started working, and found a wife. George got engaged a couple of years later. Helen and I took the train from Rochester to Detroit and arrived at our hotel at sunset. After we dropped our bags and she powdered her nose, we made our way down Adams Street to meet George and his bride-to-be for dinner.

We stopped at a crosswalk and waited for cars to pass. There were more and more of them on the road, especially in cities. Helen nosed at a piece of trash with her heel as it scuttled past, caught by a swirl of biting wind.

“Not as clean as I remember it,” I told her as I motioned around us.
She smiled at me and squeezed my hand. She was pregnant with our first child, and we still had a couple more months before we’d meet him. I could tell Helen was tired, but she looked beautiful even there in the grey street. I watched her watching me for a moment until a passing shadow over her shoulder caught my attention. And then I saw a woman with blond hair approaching.

She wore a long trench coat. It was far too large for her gaunt figure, and she’d cinched it around her sickly waist to keep it from skirting the ground. Her blonde curls were lost somewhere in the loose, soggy tendrils that clung to her face and her neck. Her listless footsteps echoed against the dull, wet pavement.

“Honey?” Helen’s voice was distant.

It was Lana. It had to be her. Who else could it be?

“…you alright, dear?”

I didn’t answer Helen. My eyes followed the woman in the coat. She was already ten paces past us.

“Sweetheart, we have to go.”

Part of me wanted to go after her. Unable to move, I held my breath as I watched the woman disappear around the corner.

“Jimmy…” Helen was irritated now. I felt her tug at my hand.

I looked down at my wife, at her frown and her confusion.


Helen never asked me about that night on the sidewalk. I never told George about it either. Since then he’s mentioned how oddly quiet I was that evening. There’s always a question in his eyes, one that I’ve never answered.

There’s not much I remember from our dinner that evening. I didn’t taste the food and I didn’t hear the music. I laughed but I didn’t hear the jokes. I couldn’t repeat anything that anyone said. What I do remember are the flashes of moments from my time in Detroit that still haunt me today. The way George’s eyes lit up when he toasted his future wife. The way she rolled her eyes when he teased her.

I wished for a different life during George’s toast, one far away from that table and those people and their civilities. A lump formed in my throat as George’s gin rickey glittered in his hand. I gritted my teeth as this fellow man of mischief spoke of love and fate. I thought of the ghost that tricked me into holding her close. I raged against the realization that perhaps she had still been with me all along.
Other memories still find me from that night. My wife, so poised and so alive, laughing with our friends at the table. The pearl stud earrings she wore, the ones she’d asked me to give her for our anniversary.

The way I saw right through my wife, and beyond her I saw Lana in my mind’s eye. The girl on the wooden moon from so long ago, a creature now, lost and alone and buried in the ash.