Segments from a Golden Goblet

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Serial Blondes

From the second-storey, I can see her run till she passes the delicatessen; a shadow the color of a day-old bruise follows her like a blessing.

The desks are set in rows sectioned by bamboo screens. Philodendron grow unattended in clay pots and one of them has flowered an impressive beige penis. She flips balled paper towards the wastepaper basket, complains about another dizzy spell. “Makes phone and incoming fax noise even louder,” she says. Her supervisor tells her to see someone at the 24hr clinic. There is a strange mark on one of her cheeks, like an emblem. I am at the end of my roster so I offer my company.

“My finger tips are clammy when I get an attack,” she tells the stooped man at the medical centre, in the same breath as he suggests a second opinion. I’ve been to this doctor to get certificates to cover my sick days. She promises to watch her diet.

When we set down for a drink after, I ask her to a party downtown but she claims fatigue. A few weeks later, the diagnosis is cancer; radiation treatments are suggested. There’s a tremor in her fingers. Her workmates buy incense sticks for her desk and tell her stories of parents, relatives, childhood friends. My brother is a Chinese doctor. Bro is booked out over the coming year but for me, he will squeeze her in, and if she can hotfoot it to his office, he will see her. This is my gift. She rings for a taxi to take her two blocks, does not say yes or no to my accompanying her.

Bro has a bronze plaque on a door and an expression on his face which suggests temporary absence. On his wall are my watercolors of Kali with her serpents and skulls. He boasts about my ability in this medium, the strength of the color. On his finger, a flashy cobra ring, 24 carat gold. I gave it to him after one of my India trips. He’s a quack, a good one—his treatments have a seventy percent success rate. Pretty good for someone without any training whatsoever.

After taking a pulse, and listening to her for close on two hours, he finds her chest hollow. “Please to understand,” he says in a fretful voice, “empty space is dangerous.” He prescribes running. He thinks it will help.

After she leaves, he says to me, “What do you think you are doing?”
“Even vampires have their needs.”
“Someone’s been there before you.”
“Isn’t that always the way!”
“Spendthrift.”
“Murderer.”

We go back and forth a little and then discuss money or rather my need to borrow a large amount to cover debts. Outside his window, a camel makes its way towards the supermarket. The streets have been closed off for a festival and the gongs and flutes give the staid town a lively Eastern feel.
To cover all her bases, she is taking radiation treatments as well and her head is bandaged with a succession of hats. I drop mandarin peel into her philodendron pot and when she protests about untidiness, point out the nutritional factor. “Waste not want not.” The supervisor pushes me with his walking stick, gives me a lecture on sloth.

One day, Bro sits her down and says that her heart has been hijacked, and other body parts are at stake. She is not to use elevators without someone else being there nor is she to look at the ground. As much as possible, she has to gaze at the sky and drink in the color blue. Bro looks at me in a hard fashion. And I return his stare wondering at what he has achieved from nothing. In another country, he had been jailed for murder. Now he is a good father and a decent healer.

He slides his wedding ring off and on. I tell Bro, in private, that she is my soul mate, that we were married in a past life. He thinks I could ruin his good fortune.

A work colleague lends her romance novels so she can have hope. I sit on the edge of her desk flicking rubber bands, warning her when the supervisor is coming.

“Be careful,” Bro addresses both of us.

But she ignores his advice and continues to read. I ask if she likes being a passive object of sex? That brings the Romance Readers Guild down on my head. I invite her to a party that I plan to gatecrash, a woman I used to know, a philosopher, Mavis. They get on rather well, the two bottled blondes perched on the arms of violet-patterned sofas, smoking cinnamon quills.

Her mother, she says, used phrases like he knew me about her father and he went into her about the dangers of being a woman; advised her against the reading of fiction and gave her the Bible where, in the Song of Songs, the woman wakes her lover in the night.

When she was sixteen, her parents joined a Christian sect. A fleur de lis was tattooed on her left cheek because it signified light. She read that Clovis, a Frankish king, adopted the symbol when water lilies showed him how to safely cross a river and succeed in battle. She was popular with boys because she did what it took in the pews after dark.

The women laugh at as if exchanging jokes. “Our generation turned up at the hotels en masse,” Mavis says, “crashed their cars on the same roads, got expelled from schools—then everyone grew up and had kids.” She hands over the conversation.

“Suddenly, there’s the war. I married the brother of a man I loved. The man came back for me, and when he heard the wedding bells, laughed. He accused me of giving in to suburbia.”

The women consider me invisible. Mavis says, “Tell me more.”

When her husband died of a heart attack in front of the shop’s till, she was alone again. After the funeral, she went to the pub, a familiar home. She had always been struck by the similarity between pubs and churches.

I touch the top of her beret. “That’s a lot of information.” The women look at me as if they have to jog their memory. They get up and dance.

She picks on a man, an ex-Vietnam type and follows him. She touches the chevron on his sleeve and asks if he would like to hear her moan. She says she has got the perfect moan. These are things I know only because I am sensitive after midnight but also because I question the look on her face.

She asks for a cigarette and leans unsteadily for a light. “He said he did not sleep with women he knew.”

“You know a lot of army types?”
“From memory, he used to go out with some skinny Indian who was a user. He had children with three different women, all girls, all moved to the city.

I tell her that I am student of co-incidence, and if she is desperate I am available.

“He asked me about you—whether you were in an advertisement for a vampire movie.”

I laugh. I ask for a mercy fuck. I offer to flip a coin. She loses. She has another drink and follows me. The door opens to shocking sunlight. The world has turned around the moon yet again. I reach for shades.

There are earthmovers in the petrol station on the corner, clearing the ground for residential rezoning. There are postage stamp lawns and picket fences and toddlers who could come out of any of those houses with their warmed milk bottles in hand. I flip the corner of my moustache to clear it of whisky, saying, “Are you ready?”

“I dreamt about you while you were gone,” she tells me.

“Hey, I am not the other guy.”

“Yes.”

I say that it has been a long period of abstinence and now the drought is breaking. The perfect moan—I haven’t heard that one before.

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Later Bro asks what happened to make her so sick. She asks if he is a therapist and he tells her that life is therapy. He puts her on the couch.

She sees herself entering my second-story flat, the dead laundry scattered over the carpet, syringes, a music poster of a beheaded goat for a long-gone event.

He tells her that some part of her psyche already knows itself as diseased. Bro asks me if I would like to wait outside and I decline the invitation. She has paused a moment for us and then goes on with her story, where I undress and fashion her on the bed in an appealing pose.

She does not recall the exact journey except that the terrain is familiar; a high bridge, porcelain lakes, and reflections of a tie-dye blue-green sky.

The moment she jumps, I found that she told the truth, her moan was perfect.

In the morning, we wrapped frayed towels around ourselves to get the mail or to answer the door. We filled in crossword puzzles in the local paper. We ate bacon and eggs on cheap white plates.

At the end of a fortnight, however much we tried, it was not quite the same, the experience was imperfect. I brought a knife to slice a few rounds from her heart, wrapped the rest and placed it in deep freeze; tilted the cast iron frypan to evenly coat with olive oil; placed the slices side by side in the pan and turned the element up to medium heat, before I went away whistling.

When she was made right, and I was good and ready, I set her free to float away.

Bro is looking at her with a translucent gaze. “Your heart cannot be given or stolen.” And she asks how this applies to her particular case. he tells her to look up at the sky often and struggle against the dark force of herself. After she is gone, he calls me a psychopath.
The streets are flanked by Housing Commission homes and as she runs, she can see the track as it leads through deserted building and lonely corner. Her sneakers leave suckered echoes in the pavement.

The shadow corners her on the ground floor of her childhood home. The wall is behind, cold and straight. Her strength oozes through her feet. She turns, her palms against the wall. The shadow reaches a polyp hand.

She runs straight up the wall. This is a dream, she thinks in relief, in real life, one does not run up walls. She turns around, her limbs plastered to the surface behind and finds herself looking into: the blue of my pupil, the cold eye of her father, the summer of first love, the winter of unreturned phone calls. The sky beneath is a membrane that passes her through a spiral of stars into a relentless void. In the emptiness, she sees her heart pulsing. She is the shadow upon it. I am there like a mirror.
I was working on an online forum with a few friends supposedly posting little microfictions each day but ending up with every third day. Always took way more time than I expected. And I would delete and delete. Revise over a few days. Sometimes over the week. Some of these microfictions would arrive whole and complete like magic—unlike “Serial Hearts.”

The story could have begun from a memory of a woman in my first year at university. I had just arrived in Australia from Ghana and was eager to conform. I was starved for human connection since I came from a family where academia was valued highly. I had been failed at the University of Ghana medical school and required to show cause. I was depressed and didn’t know what was wrong with me. Robyn took my overtures of friendship in stride and I met all her jailbait friends and ex-criminals. She had long black hair and matt-white doll-like skin. I felt strangely safe when I was with her. The “atmosphere” from this part of my life generates an emotional context, a thread, that pops up from time to time in my work.

“Serial Hearts” was not an easy piece for me to work with. It felt to me that the story’s darkness had no valid purpose. Each time, I tried to lengthen the piece, it fell apart. I kept feeling into the story and judged it to be shallow, shelved it. Often, at this point, I will dream up a clue for a story.

I dreamt that I was undressing in a room without shutters on its wall-sized windows. A man who was a soldier but also somehow, my brother, would look in and make heavy judgments. The story’s third person narrator became a soldier. But this did not allow me enough distance to comment on the woman (who remained nameless).

Clothes as onion layers of disease? Interesting, but it felt like an awkward story. I fell in love with some research I was doing and added that in heavy doses. A magazine was very interested in this version but said they had trouble understanding what it was about. Sad to say, I didn’t know what it was about either.

On a day when another story was failing, I picked this one back up and did a flippant trial of a first person narrator. The end result felt too self-referential. To fix this, I turned the narrator into a vampire. I found a way for the “victim” to tell some part of the story by putting her on the couch.

Oh…I almost failed to say…one of the things I was proud of was the way I wrote the ending confrontation and pulled in omniscient as well as other points of view, and still have the prose move smoothly, plus contain elements of surreal and real.

Finally, I located the story more strongly within its own landscape and all the parts seemed to become a smooth whole. The piece tested me on the level of structure and content. My way forward was to edit for balance and to allow the work to sit around in the same folder with all my gleaming stories (so that I would remember to check on it from time to time).

In surreal pieces, I find the biggest challenge is to be sure that the genre serves the telling the story. I ask a lot more from these kind of pieces. I junk a lot more of them from the total output of my work.
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