

Happy Talk

L.S. Dickens

I look at my watch. Almost eleven, thank the Lord. I want to bang the bar like the over-enthusiastic publican in *The Waste Land*: HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME. We're supposed to close at eleven, you know. But eleven Tonga time means people don't start leaving until twelve, even if this bar is only for *palangis*. I open my compact and check my mascara. No point standing around an empty bar with panda eyes.

And tonight the bar is empty. A middle-aged Kiwi couple is curled up on the deck, watching the sea. They haven't ordered a drink for hours and I can probably count the minutes on one hand before they toddle off to bed. Inside, by the window, a girl is perched by herself. That tells me death-wish. I mean, sure, Tonga is one of the safest places in the world when it comes to stranger-danger and we certainly don't have a vast population of serial killers here. The girl's accent tells me she's Australian, so here, at least, there's no *Wolf Creek*. And yeah, I admit, this is an island resort, not exactly open to anyone. So again, marginally safer. But still, when I'm in a foreign country, no way do I frequent bars alone in the middle of the night.

Besides, there is something about her aura. She is a pretty girl, petite and well-formed like a little pearl. She looks vaguely Polynesian, or perhaps oriental. If we were in Tahiti she could pass as a *demi*. As it is here, there is something about her a little skewed, a little off-colour, that shouts her otherness to the world. But I know better than most that it's misleading to judge by physicality alone. Anyway, my point has nothing to do with her looks; my point is about her aura. It's prickly and shadowy, and grainy. It's wide, massive even, but it fluctuates and it's patchy, like an old dirty parachute with a hole in it. The last time I saw an aura like that was on my sister, a few days before she hanged herself.

The thought depresses me, and I turn away from that pretty picture of desolation.

The Kiwi couple get up and leave. To my left, at the counter, is the only other occupant of the room. The dregs of his drink stagnate at the bottom of his glass as his lean white fingers nervously pick apart the fragile coaster. I click my tongue in irritation. What a vile habit, and so like a boy! Who does he think is going to clean up this mess? The paper-ish white fragments scatter across the bar as a brisk breeze blows in off the sea. But the boy doesn't notice. All he notices is the pearl-like woman with the shadowy aura. Except, of course, the boy can't see her aura.

As for his own aura...It doesn't have the same patchy, inconsistent look as the woman's, but its glow is unstable and tremendously uncertain. It flickers, shudders, like dappled light flurried by fairies' wings and shaken by the slightest quiver amongst the trees. The aura doesn't match the man. The aura is the only reason I call him a boy. Plus there is a nervous, shaken uncertainty in his movements, in his eyes. If I really were to bang the table and holler, I wouldn't be surprised to see him flatten himself face down on the floor and fumble for an imaginary gas mask. Poor pet. I feel sad to see such taught timidity in one so tall and, yes I'll admit it, buff. Such sad eyes, you have my dear. I follow his gaze to the woman by the window. I sigh. Something tells me I won't be knocking off on time tonight.

* * *

My fist curls about the mangled remains of the cardboard coaster. I can feel its dismembered body parts skimming across my skin as they float off on the night air. But I don't look at them. I keep staring straight ahead. The girl by the window is short-ish and sharp-looking. She's surrounded by a halo of acrid cigarette smoke, like some sort of unpredictable volcano. Her eyebrows are painfully thin. I can easily imagine her pulling out weapon-like tweezers and tortuously indulging her vanity.

She is not the kind of woman I usually look at.

I like tall women with smiling faces, who have well-fleshed eyebrows and glossy auburn hair. And smoking in women has always disgusted me.

I watch the woman a little longer. I can't place her. She could be anything, anyone. I've seen similar faces on CNN. Faces wracked by poverty or death, or attached to primitive bombs or shady brothels in the far corners of the world. I've also seen similar faces on third-rate runways in the States, or, photo-shopped into phantasms, on the covers of glossy magazines.

I am not in my usual state of mind.

I have never been prone to fantasy.

No, that's a lie. When I was very young, before my grandfather died, fantasy was my sustenance.

My grandfather was pure Celt. Half-Breton, half Scottish, he came to the States in his late thirties, like a new babe, his old life, like old Europe, obliterated by the shadow of that war. But Pop never spoke about the war. He never spoke about his life before he stepped off that ship in New York, under the protective dominion of Our Lady of Liberty. All he told me of his past were marvellous tales, echoes of the haunted Breton seas and the windswept Scottish heather.

The story I always loved the most was about Dahud. I still remember Pop's voice when he told me that story. His accent would thicken as we huddled around that Philadelphian fire in the lead-up to Thanksgiving, and I caught sight of the swirling firelight, reflected red and violet in his bright blue, sea-like eyes. I could almost see Dahud, lover of the devil, murder-victim of her father and the church, siren-like, behind my grandfather's eyes. We were almost always alone when he told me stories, except for the nanny and my parent's dog. My parents themselves are conspicuously absent from my childhood memories.

Pop told me that story when I was seven and for years I always stepped into water with a thrill of dread-like excitement. In the lake behind my dad's

property I imagined Dahud rising from its tepid waves, by the beach over summer vacation she was always there, behind a woman in a red bikini or within the eyes of a passing girl. Even in the hot bathwater, run by nanny Lisette, I felt Dahud lurking. For several years I even wondered if Lisette and Dahud were one and the same. I knew, even then, that Brittany was in France. Lisette was a French-Canadian Metis, so I guess it was the language that fooled me. But from then on, to me Dahud was always this dark-haired, unusual, semi-French-exotic being, irresistible and yet consuming, obliterating, dreadful.

It's been years since I've thought about that story. Pop died, I went to College, joined the Marines. There was no place for fantasy there. And yet, after all this time, I've found a mermaid.

I finish my beer and wander over to her. What else is Polynesia for?

* * *

I take another drag on my cigarette, savouring its dry harshness and the knowledge that it is slowly killing me, and eye the naïve looking boy in front of me. American is what the accent tells me. Too tidy for a tourist, in spite of his attempts to grow his hair and avoid ironing his clothes. The haircut and the manner and the posture tell me soldier. I know the type. I resent him already. I half enjoy indulging in my culturally-based prejudice, my tendency to classify a man based solely on his race, nationality and occupation. Hell, who am I kidding? I love indulging in it. After twenty-five years of being objectified I want to get my own back.

"Where are you from?" he asks me ingenuously. Whatever happened to 'can I get you a drink?' as a pick-up line?

"Don't you want to buy me a drink?" I parry.

He looks surprised and awkward at my forwardness. I feel a twinge of pity but ignore it. Pity is weak. He smiles slightly, like a little boy, and goes to order a drink from the sexy-cross-dressing waiter. Or waitress?

I suck on my cigarette some more, and watch the boy. He is very pretty, I acknowledge. I can't decide if I want to fuck him or if I want to torture him with slow, prolonged rejection. My mind rebels at the thought of being objectified by this ignorant, arrogant white boy. He swaggers as he walks up to the bar, I observe. He speaks English too loudly and with exaggerated slowness, as if the waiter's deaf because of the tint of his complexion. It's as if brownness equals deafness or mental retardation. It appears my skin is white enough to save me from such patronization. Oh how thankful I should be! My sarcasm tastes like vomit. As usual I avoid spewing it out, and maintain my restless restraint on my own cynical nausea. No wonder I always feel so ill. If I could have but one day to truly elaborate on my anger and disgust to the world, then perhaps I would be free. I always understood why my grandmother believed that young women who died from childbirth, suicide or murder would return from the grave to stalk out their haunting vengeance. They would not afflict just anyone, of course. Only unmarried men, pregnant women and children. When I first heard about their unearthly beauty and tragicomic antics I was a borderline child and a semi-woman who was utterly un-pregnant. Maybe that's why I have never feared them. I felt, queerly, that they were more akin to me than my own flesh and blood, for although I walk and eat and speak there is a creeping shadow in my belly and my heart that is Death. Not Death the Angel, nor the bony, oddly fragile Reaper, but Death the desired, the pearl-skinned black-haired Athenas who haunt the lonely roads pungent with frangipani and rotting bananas. Like sylphs, undines or nymphs they shimmer in the tropical darkness and hover in the dusk. Now you see her, hair and breasts and lips and hips, now you see her, tawny wings, taloned, beaked and owl-eyed ever watching, waiting, watching. She is utter Annihilation. And yet, and yet, I cannot despise her nor shrink from her touch. She is not indiscriminate, like the Angel, nor repulsive, like the Reaper. She chooses each dish with the delicacy that befits her. Men, pregnant women, children;

but men are her favourite. For every Pontianak dead of childbirth, suicide or murder, are not men more often the cause? I laugh a little to myself, almost choking on the desert-drag of my cigarette. It is the same all the world over, I reflect.

My boy sits down next to me once more. In spite of myself, I smile at him and the puppy-like gratitude on his face winds me a little, bemusing me. The sexy waiter-waitress brings two drinks over. My American has brought me a syrupy little drink with an umbrella. Evidently he has some degree of perception. I smile at the waiter-waitress, admiring his/her long lean gazelle-like legs and his/her unambiguous ambiguity. He/she grins back at me, then pauses minutely, scanning my face and the area directly above my head. My smile crumples and I will him/her away. I do not like the assessing look in his/her eyes. Leave us, lady-boy, my mind commands, as the gazelle-legs strut away. Ambiguity is my domain.

*

*

*

My heels reverberate on the floor dully in the empty night as I strut back to the bar. Yes, I admit it, I strut. What else are stilettos for? Humour aside, an empty, unsettled coldness swills about in my innards. Her Venus-fly-trap smile and kitten-ish eyes disturb me. I used to be so good at reading auras and I can't bring myself to believe that she has fooled me. How has she fooled me? I don't even know. But my entire torso has been whittled hollow by some shadowy seed of foreboding. I stand still and listen to the night. The wind has gone to sleep and the waves on the shore are all but silent. It is such a chilly night. Tongan winters are always cool, but the stillness is unusual, unnatural. The lone couple in the bar has moved closer. I can see the woman's hand on the man's arm as she leans forward, into his space, to talk to him. They present a cold, bleak picture, punctuated by the soft, brittle laughter of a thousand shallow socialites.

I shake myself a little, like a dog having a bad dream. It is unlike me to be so vividly morbid. Nothing thrills me more than love, and, trust me, holiday romances are always the best. Nothing loosens inhibitions more than the knowledge that you'll never see someone again. I repress a giggle at some distant memory, and vigorously begin cleaning the bar to mask my mirth.

Chairs scrape across the wooden floors. I look up as the untidy American and the pearlescent woman rise, arms entwined, and wander towards the exit, cooing to each other. The American's aura flickers spasmodically with blinding brightness, like a high beam spluttering its last battery breaths. But her ghostly aura, ever-patchy and grainy, seems to warble like some obscure bird. I watch them go, and as they leave she sends me an ambivalent look of incredible, starved longing that makes me cross my arms protectively.

They walk into the dark wasteland beyond the resort. My mind flurried, I rush outside. Poor, beautiful boy. I want to see him, one last time. I run to the doorway, then out into the darkness.

It is silent and bleak but for the endless rhythm of the waves. The path is deserted. I stare around, gaping like a fool at the vista's inexplicable vacancy and desolation. Trees rustle and I look up. White and pearly in the faint moonlight, an owl gazes back at me through the fragrant frangipani flowers. I can see something writhing and dark in its beak. It is an untidy looking mouse. The owl smiles at me. I swear I never saw an owl smile before. Slowly and precisely, the owl swallows. Down go the wriggling paws in one all-consuming gulp. From the edges of her blade-like beak, the thin tail flickers weakly, a dying light bulb. Then, in one almighty suck, it too is gone.

We watch each other, the owl and I, for a full three minutes, and I am indescribably thankful for my unequivocal hybridity that shields me from the deathly consumption of this particularly binary experience.

Suddenly, the true impact of the cold air hits me and I shudder. I wrap my arms around myself and bolt, like a frightened hare, back into the warmth and the light and the safety of the bar. Behind me, I hear wings take flight. I look at my watch: it's midnight. Finally, I think. Closing time.