

Amidst the Lilies

“I went into the Garden of Love/ And saw what I never had seen”

-William Blake

My name is Alvin, and I believe the following tale may be of interest to you. It is built on the bedrock of my recollections, so do mind the altars to my idiosyncrasies as you pass through its halls, O Reader. It shall have unfurled more or less satisfactorily to you by the end, I should hope.

It was a bleak Sunday morning in September when I awoke with a rather virulent strain of cabin fever. This compounded my usual affliction, loneliness. This loneliness has dogged me since I became aware of its opposite, of the mad drama of love, by Hallmark and Shakespeare and Richard Gere. There were the days it would visit me on the linoleum, whilst I in the fetal position did my best not to cry on my blazer, and leave only in the night when I slept. Over time, I developed immunity to it, as one does to any disease. That which I could suppress, I did, with film, books, food, and drink (and drink and drink and drink). That which I could not, I suffered stoically, like a deep and persistent headache.

I suppose this is as good a time as any to tell you my thoughts on romance, if only to set up the peripatetic moment that approaches, Dear Reader (be patient!). Certainly, women have noticed me. In the farcical four-year memory game that was high school, I was fairly popular among my peers. “He’s really smart!” they’d exclaim, or “I’ve heard him play the piano, he’s amazing!”. By the time, I graduated I had developed close ties with a number of my female coevals. I’d stumbled through the awkward stages of first courtship with them; the circumlocutionary attempts at compliments, the insincere ha-has and the shy small talk, the passive-aggression and the passive-pacifism, all rendered trivial and melodramatic under the laminate of adolescence. Always I, Alvin the Terribly Timid, found myself in that quite painful area between friendship and whatever lay beyond, with only a sad smile to show for all my inner anguish. In my post-schooling years, my bulk grew substantially while my skill with women did not. I began to see women as cold and meretricious. Every tiny annoyance became feminine,

every feeble rejected advance hardened my heart, and the summer breeze of optimism turned algid. To me, the dating game was absurd, a play where none of the actors knew their lines, embarrassing themselves and their audience until the curtain called the tie, the lights faded and the players went home exhausted, an overpriced ring as consolation. Annulus and you lose. Thus, I resigned myself to a life spent as voyeur to the thousands of alluring drugstore window-models that required of lonely me only an ID and a fiver.

My apartment, No. 29, is sandwiched betwixt the hearth and home of a large family of Presbyterians and the squalid den of an indeterminate number of degenerate youths with messy hair and messy lives. Due to the contrapuntal rhythm with which each party sleeps I find myself subjected to near-constant noise. The smash of plastic on wall, the peals of shrill laughter punctuated by an occasional high-pitched scream, and the groan of failing bedsprings are known to me throughout the sunlit hours. This is tolerable, seeing as how I'm rarely at home during the day time and the little devils say their prayers at roughly ten o'clock post meridiem. The real problem is those upstairs. Be it weekend or workday, High Holiday or low winter eve, they shake loose the stucco with their unholy clamor.

Once, my eyes bleary, my tiny little chicken-shaped clock clucking its way towards witching hour, I decided enough was enough and donned my most intimidating slippers in order to confront my tormenters, who were blasting tuneless music that I doubt any one of them actually heard. Knocking on their door, I clenched my brow and steeled my jaw into my best Clint Eastwood and prepared to shoot first. The door swung open and I was assaulted with the acrid effluvia of marijuana, pizza, and something that I maintain for the purpose of decency was bleach that emanated from the dank dwelling.

"Yemen?" said the buffoon who answered the door, though I deduced that he was not inquiring about the Arabian country but rather slurring his words.

"You people have been at this for five hours now and (here, my voice rising and falling, I wrestled to the ground the baying beast of my anger, as I knew that there would be only negotiating with terrorists) I would like you to lower the music so that myself and others can sleep!"

"Say whuh?"

“The music! Down!”

“Oman. Yessir Missir Alvin. Sorryboutit. Gimmasec.” I exhaled, smiling internally and rather pleased with myself for having resolved peace for our time with so little effort.

Though I counted nearly six hundred seconds, the scruffy young man eventually culled the din and I was able to salvage a decent night of sleep from the whole thing. I suppose I should thank the tenants above me, and the dirty procession of transient young men and women who pass through their shag-lined pagoda like hedonistic ronin, for their nocturnal bacchanals, as it was one of them that began my fateful Sunday.

Anyway, back to the story. On the aforementioned morn, I was cooped up with my chicken clock, a humidifier, and three or four lusty coquettes who lay splayed out on my bed as the Playboys to which they were irretrievably frozen. For a precious minute, the whoops and hollers floated pleasantly in my hypnocompic meanderings before consciousness submitted me to the painful brunt of their magnitude. I was immediately grumpy. I surmised that the hooligans on the upper floor were either still at their saturnalia or had begun it anew at the ungodly hour of eleven twenty-three, for the cacophonous crash of electric guitars mingled jarringly with the primal screams of party animals. I, poor groggy me, rose from my bed, a scowl affixed in granite on my usually stately brow, and sat down with a *foof* on a red leather recliner to plot my next move.

I eyed my small room, the dusty ebony armoire which entombed my jackets, the inoffensive tourism print of Seattle (*Singing in the Rain in Washington State!*), the ochre-trimmed closet from which emitted the smell of a hospice, and decided that it would be best to simply vacate the premises. Browsing absent-mindedly through internet pages, I decided upon Huntington Gardens. In my opinion, Dear Reader, an afternoon spent among vernal green can alleviate even the deepest blues. I ambulated into the kitchen and fixed eggs benedict, rosemary toast, roasted peaches and clotted cream. The meal was exquisite, the best I'd made in days, though the audible apocalypse from No. 39 kept my disposition as sour as the grapefruit juice upon which I quenched my thirst. While eating I read a fascinating story about a C.E.O. being thrown clear from his yacht and into the Bahamian water upon which it sailed after a scuffle on the deck. Needless to say, the schaudenfreude was as delectable as my breakfast.

With fresh calories burning in my gullet and the sapor of red pepper and hollandaise still dancing on my tongue, I dressed. For this occasion, I selected a pair of cream slacks, a crimson

sweater purchased eons ago, and a utilitarian pair of Freemans that have grown on me since I was first given them.

I enjoyed the fluid Sunday afternoon traffic, speeding along in my sepulchral grey Buick Regal, warmed and quieted by the *sh!* of the heat vents. I had hoped that Helios would burst through the clouds to herald my passage to San Marino, but the weather stayed as dreary as when I awoke. Fiddling with the radio, I heard first abrasive trash that reminded me painfully of my morning, then an airwave demagogue warning me of the some invasion or other, then a promising jazzy number, and finally silence when I hit the off-switch upon realization that it was only an interlude. So many things in life are.

My change, my realization came at the Huntington, in the garden among trees and strangers, when I met the most exquisite creature to ever grace the firmament, whose beauty bound me in a spell, filled me with such a delightful, wonderful, incredible mélange of emotions that I must have breathed out pure love with every quickened exhalation. Oh, a quick recap. My apologies.

I parked, and walked up the long pathway to the entrance. The long walk, and the brisk pace at which I took it, got me fairly winded. When I reached the landing, whereupon my respiration was held briefly in abeyance by the noxious cigarette smoke of a group of urban soldiers in open defiance of their Surgeon General, I realized I'd left my wallet in the car. I returned to the Buick and retrieved my affect from its coffers, and by the time I had reached the entrance again I was sweating the silvery dry sweat that, borne of the cold, feels almost subdermal as the chill air lifts it from the brow. I entered, moseyed on through the huddled masses and into the Japanese Garden, then saw her.

She stood there on the deck of a gazebo, staring across the water at the lilies and the forest in miniature, and my smirk, one carefully set in the morning and maintained with the day, faded. It would be a cliché painful to me and to you, Reader, to say that my knees weakened. Thus, let it be said simply that I needed to take a seat. A corona overwhelmed a skimpy cloud to cinch tight my brow with its rays and narrow my vision on her.

She wore tall black boots, wing-tipped leather siege towers out of which climbed Athena's legs to join with Aphrodite's hips in a union wed by white denim. Her lustrous red hair splayed out from a girlish ponytail across a teal cardigan, the faint nubs of a bra-strap, or perhaps a second shirt, visible in the clear light.

How does one describe a face? One cannot read a sheet of music and hear a symphony in his head. Surely, to limn a face is the privilege and pleasure of the gods, and the primeval clay with which that end was achieved has dried long ago and left us mortals to ponder eternally, mouth agape, the splendor of their creation. But I shall try.

The bridge of her nose was straight and flat. It ended in a tiny little dilatation, barely noticeable, that gave her features a rather cherubic aspect. Her skin was buttery caramel, sugared almond, café-au-lait with ample cream. Almond eyes were adorned with long lashes that fanned calligraphical brows. Her irises were blue, but the left was marked by a fascinating abnormality. She had a heterochromia, a multicolored iris. A splash of rust lay across the upper-rightmost thirty degrees of the ring. I could only imagine how transfixing those eyes would be to a child or a lover. Her jaw tapered pleasantly; her rosy cheekbones rose. I had never seen a woman like her.

I wondered why she was alone. How could such a perfect thing ever be alone? The thought crossed my mind, in the twilight of our first introduction, that she was an angel. Perhaps she had a paramour nearby; in fact, I thought, this was likely. As I have laid bare to you my tendencies toward the fairer sex, what I did in that moment, in that garden, beneath that cinematic sun, should surprise. I got up, ambled along the thin path and around the bend so that I could be near the center of the universe, who smelled of lavender and leather.

I stood near her, mirroring her gaze out at the pond, and waited. She stood still, transfixed, while a war raged inside my head. A million ideas marched to the forefront of my mind—Should I say something? Should I ask her name?—only to be smothered by my own embarrassment, my own wretched timid self. And so I waited, and when she began to walk, I walked.

Following her closely, but not daring to walk behind or beside her, I moved through the tufts of people, my gaze locked on the small rectangular patch of skin visible on her back. I knew its every coffee contour like a cartographer his hometown by the time we reached the jungle garden.

She strode past the waterfall, as Athena in her dominion, and I a slobbering and devoted hound. The sound of water trickling and the peculiar scent of lush wetted green and tropical wood that one so seldom smells in Los Angeles mingled with the heady aroma of infatuation. I watched her bend down and sniff some beautiful fragrant flower with a plaque below it bearing

its long Latin name. Then, she turned, and promptly passed through the shimmering cascade of the waterfall, and disappeared.

For half a minute, I was paralyzed, though what I thought is not important.

Slowly, I bent my head out of instinct and waded through the waterfall, which felt not wet but soft, ephemeral, without weight or mass. I emerged on the other side in a garden, but a very different one indeed.

I was on a path of dense, matted blue grass sunk low between raised ledges of purple dirt, in which lay irregular rocky objects that looked painted quartz, in all manner of colors. Not one degree in three hundred and sixty yielded to my sight anything but a dense, hallucinatory forest. The trees were tall, hundreds of feet, and branches sprang from all levels of their tessellated trunks, which in turn were made of a spongy, sarcoid wood, and bore odd fruit, like children's candied models of cells and planets and eyeballs and other mysteries. The sky was a miasma of wispy orange and blue, a nebulous cotton candy dream, which lay under a saturated canvas of bright stars, brighter even than the North Star above Nod to which Eve, on the honeymoon of sin, turned up her tearful eyes.

Around me, the familiar whisper of leaves and trickle of water snapped instantly into a delirious mix of sounds, all alien to me, all incredible, as the changing of a record. Sounds of baritone chimes, gently smashing chandeliers, pitter patters and knocks and thumps, colluded in a euphonic arrangement, all backed and made full by a distant bass hum, the voice of a teeming virgin world.

I walked along the path. Here, Reader, I was beyond amazement, beyond incredulity, more distant still from shame and despondency. The air sang and from the earth rose a palpable warmth. Running my hand along the white pelage that grew on a row of close-cropped bushes at my knees, I ambled down the glittering path towards a steep declivity overlooking a glowing red lake that was not unlike a massive glass of strawberry daquiri. Beyond that lay mountains, jagged, crystalline behemoths whose columnal offshoots pierced a canopy of clouds.

At the end of the path stood the woman from the Huntington, only now she was nude, divinely, intemperately nude, her body calling to some primeval part of me that would bay at the moon and smile at the sun and seek refuge in the sultry recesses of the nocturnal world. Clean perspiration shone on her thighs and belly, and its cloying odor intoxicated me when she drew near.

This woman, this Amazonian goddess of the ancient world, approached me. She was my height, if not taller. She took my hand and, with the corners of her mouth tugging playfully up and away, said in a vivacious Caribbean accent,

“Hello! I’m glad you came. You know, you really aren’t as bad as you think.”

“I’m not?” I said quite stupidly. Tears welled up in my eyes, and she squeezed tighter my limp hand.

“No Alvin. Who wouldn’t love a big softie like you?” She patted my cheek and grinned.

I stammered and cried and looked away.

“You’re going to do fine,” she said soothingly, “and perhaps we’ll meet again”. Then, she strode gracefully down the hill, a crunch emitting from beneath each footstep until I could hear he no longer, and waded into the opaque cerise water. The little crawling waves atop its neon surface lapped at her before swallowing her whole, and she was gone from me forever.

I wept, softly, without sadness. I realized that there is no such thing as women, just as there is no such thing as men, or teachers, or bureaucrats, or plumbers or soldiers or murders or parents. There are only individual people, of whom we can know only so many.

I stood there amidst the Technicolor dreamworld and it became a mirage. The rainbow grasses and trees and sands undulated and faded from my view. I closed my eyes until the still small voice told me to open them again. I looked at the trees anew, and the plants, and all the little things that we take so sadly for granted, the small wonders and the grand mysteries that are held as plaintive prisoners in the great grey prison of modern life. I felt as Siddartha along the river, cured suddenly and miraculously of an ancient dull ache, and renewed of spirit with the precious understanding that I could face whatever lay uncertainly ahead. It’s difficult to convey such a moment. I had come to the garden out of boredom, irritation. I had followed a goddess out of fascination and lust. Now, in a moment of unreality, my mind was set aflame.

For a moment, I sat alone in the theater of my mind, viewing a rather peculiar film called “The Life of Alvin ____”. The main character was an unlikeable pessimist; he seemed to act only for himself and his. I cringed earnestly when he spoke of his disdain for womankind, and I found the unusual lack of supporting characters an ingenious thematic device. When the credits rolled, I finished my popcorn and returned to the jungle garden.

You, my Reader, who have been so patient as to follow this strange balmy tale to its end, are most likely wondering where I am now. I am in my flat, currently preparing to enjoy a

sumptuous Friday feast of pork shoulder in apple chutney and potato salad with my stout and stalwart old friend Guinness. I am also in life, and in love. I am in the future and the present. I am a note in a chord of rustling trees, rumbling motors, the echoes of footsteps on tiles in a spacious room, the roar of a crowd and an airplane and the soft sound of another's breathing.