

Serena and the White Night

“If 10,000 snakes were coming down that aisle now, and I had a door that I could shut, and in that 10,000, 1,000 meant right, 1,000 rattlesnakes didn’t want to bite me, I knew they were good... Should I let all these rattlesnakes come down, hoping that that thousand get together and form a shield? Or should I just close the door and stay safe?” - Muhammad Ali, 1971

The morning was fresh and early. It sparkled with hungover dew from the shower last night. The moon still lingered in the sky like a parma-violet, casting its lilac beams on the naked trees and languid fields beneath. It was a day that Serena had decided was perfect for a stroll around The Lake. She walked leisurely across the barren meadow, harsh yet alluring in its starkness, towards the glittering pool caught under the eye of the rising sun. Her footsteps crunched along the path as she passed over the compact earth. Each pace was carefully placed, the heel finding its footing and the toes relaxing into the tread. Serena paused to breathe in the beauty of the day: the snowy peaks merged through mist into the pastel sky, the trees cut their sharp silhouette into the softer curves of the bank. She was a stick figure encompassed in a Japanese rice paper painting. She exhaled as she followed the meandering coil along the lake shore.

Peripherally, there was a sudden flash of pink - an unnatural alert against the muted tones of the landscape. It danced on the edge of Serena’s vision before revealing itself into the daylight from behind a jumble of jagged rocks. Springing towards her across the path was a young woman - it was her neon wig that was reflecting the erratic pink light. The bob was accompanied by unicorn ear muffs and an inappropriate cropped fur jacket. This fashion mishap must have been freezing but her prancing demeanour denied the frosty atmosphere. Gleefully this fairy approached:

“Hey girl!” she said enthusiastically in an ambiguous European accent.

“Wow you are so fierce! And such amazing hair you have! I want mine to be curly and wild as yours, mine lays flat, always so down. How *do* you get it to go like that?”

Before Serena could believe it was happening, this neon pixie stretched out a pale hand to shimmy through Serena's curls. Gathering herself, Serena retreated, placing her right foot a pace staggered behind her left:

"Oh, I, um thank you, I just wash it I guess and it goes like this". Serena self-consciously smoothed her hair back, shifting so her weight rested on her back foot. Undaunted, pink-wig plundered on:

"I am Ionna, I work at the hotel on the fell side. The people here are old and always so boring but not today! Today I meet you and you are exotic and exciting and so fabulous!"

Serena was quiet while Ionna babbled on:

"I can't believe all this is your hair, the other girls like you all do their hair straight and none of it is real! It's so sad! Why it is they do that? I don't know. So tell me darling, you are not from around here?"

Serena replied simply: "no, I am from The City".

The wind rose sharply and eddied, playing its tune through Serena's tendrils. Ionna shivered, finally realising her poor wardrobe choices for this mid-morning Winter. Wrapping her arms around her sprightly body she said:

"Well darling I am so happy to meet you, you must come sometime to the hotel for hot chocolate".

Without waiting for a response, the plastic pink wig continued on and disappeared behind Serena as fast as she had arrived. Serena paused for a moment to peer back, then she trundled on around The Lake.

The gust had cleared the clouds from the sky by the time Serena had reached an ancient manor that gazed on the lake. Serena wound through quilting mosses until she passed below the belly of the house. A slate sign by the gate named the imposing building 'Thorogood Estate'. Upon the driveway posed a gleaming jaguar. It was striking white like a Hollywood tooth and Serena steadied her gait. Abruptly, a silver haired gentleman rose from the rear

edge of his car. Mr Thorogood scanned the person before his property and then levelled his inquisitive gaze at Serena.

“Isn’t she a marvel!” he exclaimed.

“Yes sir” said Serena.

The gentleman fixed his golf cap and continued:

“Indeed. I bought her at an auction while I was in The City on business last week. Say, you must be new to the area; I haven’t seen you around our woodland before, what brings you to The Lake?”

“I moved here for my job after university. I work in the water side gallery and teach children about art” replied Serena.

Mr Thorogood adjusted his tie:

“Oh how wonderful, I do adore the landscape paintings in our quaint gallery - you must have studied art at your university then and you must be a very talented young lady”

Serena blushed and looked down.

“Oh well don’t be shy now, which school did you attend?” he inquired.

“The Oxauld Institute” she hesitantly replied.

“Oh yes fantastic school of art indeed, my own late father was a generous patron - it’s just a shame about this witch hunt malarkey they have suffered lately”

Serena bristled: “what do you mean by that, *sir*?”

“Oh well you know what I’m saying, it’s ancient history - all these statues of great men, they’ve made great contributions to the pursuit of pure creativity, my kin included, it is abominable that they would attempt to sully their great work and blacken their name in this manner. Coloured people have benefited from that investment too. You’re a smart girl, you obviously have middle class aspirations, you cannot think that all of this rigmarole is good news for the school” he replied indignantly.

Serena was stunned, *surely* he wasn't saying what she thought he was? Her face sculpted in different contortions while she grappled with Mr Thorogood's slurs. After a beat of silence he spoke again:

"Well I best be off, the skies are solemn" he said.

That moment, a sole icy drop landed on Serena's cheek. Automatically, she looked up and wiped it off. Strangely the brightness from earlier seemed to have shrunk away. When she looked back the man was in his car, rolling surely away from 'Thorogood Estate'. The rain began to drip in a steady staccato.

Serena pulled up her hood, tucking her hair into its shelter. She continued a little swifter on her journey. There was enveloping greyness as she reached the far side of the stony lake shore. The pebbles that descended into the bitter water were alabaster, veined with metallic marbling. The land had been flat but now it rose up to join the woodland trail once more. As Serena reached the shelter of the trees she heard a curious speech:

"P-Paul will not, you will not let them t-trample *our* earthhh. No Pan will not, he-he will not let it happen. He will not let them do that. I am Paul but he is Pan. He is a god, I am the great god Pan - Paul you must not! I will let no foreigner pass. That is my job now, they-they took my job those damn dirty dogs. They shall not! They must not...."

Serena reached an unexpected clearing and found the source of the voice. Leaning with one arm against a tree, his back to her, was a short, stooped man. His green parka was draped on him, the sleeves a little too long, absconding his hands. He wore torn jogging bottoms, again too large, and one old walking shoe.

Disturbed by Serena's entrance, the chanting halted and Paul's hunched back stiffened. He whipped his body around. This man must have been only mid forties but he had a weathered face with dirt rubbed into the lines of his feathered wrinkles. There was a grey palor in his fraught expression. His cloudy eyes darted about as if trying to shift cataracts. He regarded Serena:

“Y-y-ou! This is all youuu and your kiiiind!” he slurred from his tree. Stepping forward he carried on,

“ You thugs, THUGS, and those false-prophet worshippers. You don’t belong here, little girl, this *our* town, *our* sacred earthhh. Me Paul, me PAN. PAN - I AM THE GOD OF THE MOUNTAIN AND YOU SHALL NOT PASS. THEY WILL NOT TRAMPLE THIS EARTH HH. YOU FOREIGNER. GET OFF OUR LAND. GET OUTTTT”.

Serena ran. She left the footpath and twisted through the wood - each tree branch an obstacle, each raised root a test. She ran and didn’t look back, clamouring to find the road. She ran until her lungs split her ribs in cold condemnation. The navy blue sky distorted the fringes of her vision where shapes morphed.

Serena paused at a rock. She darted her gaze every angle, snapping her head around: black earth, black canopy of trees, black shadows. *What had she just seen? Who was that man? The Lake was supposed to be the safest place in the land, where had he appeared from?* Terrified, Serena forced herself to be calm. She breathed out through her mouth and in through her nose. She detected an unfamiliar smell. It was a sweet, thick perfume, an incense. Her nostrils flared as her face was overwhelmed by the smell and she relaxed into the euphoric sensation that spread like melted chocolate through her body. Of their own accord, her feet began to move, drawing her closer to the source of this enchanting aroma. Her vision blurred and the sensation in her heavy body carried her forward blindly. Bodiless blackbirds flew across her path dissuading her steps, but it was no use. She couldn’t swat them because her arms were dead pinned to her sides. She barely registered kicking a forgotten walking boot. Doe-like, she stumbled on, totally under the smoky spell. She staggered into a white Jaguar - upturned in a wrinkle of metal, glass and dirt like a discarded packet of crisps. Blood dripped down from her arm. Righting herself, she carried on unflinchingly, until she tripped and fell. Pulling her face from the earth she looked down; a

pink clump of hair coiled around her ankle had caused her downfall. Serena hauled herself to her knees and she crawled forward; desperate in her need to find the source.

She came to a clearing. Serena saw the flicker of a white fire; its light creating a halo contortion that splintered over the encircling trees. The source of the incense. The flickering light seduced her and pulled her closer. The enclosing foliage was laden with aggressive-looking doves and cranes. Approaching in a slow trance three hooded figures loomed from behind the fire. They were holding hands and chanting;

“Black bodies to black earth

Brightly burn a black birth

Black blood has one good worth

To renew our white light

The white stars of black night

For the white right we fight”

Their white robes glowed with white light as they unanimously removed their hoods . A young woman with colourless skin, watery eyes and long bleached hair; an old man with a sallow grey complexion and a superior demeanour; a stiff middle age man, plainly dressed in chalk. As one, they rotated their heads towards Serena. In her stupor, Serena went to meet them.

Out of the blue, there was a flash downpour. The fire was immediately obliterated, the smoke dissipated, and Serena was drenched. She looked around, panicked. Realisation dawned on her as she saw the wreckage of the scene before her and the three figures encroaching. Again, she ran. She left the clearing and wound through the wood - each branch an offered hand, each rock a foothold. She ran and didn't look back. She ran and her heart beat stronger, fuelling her motor. She had to find the road this time, there was no other option. But something was helping her this time, it was like nature was on her side. The blackbirds were back, guiding her along their flight path. The rain was still pouring down from the sky, the

lake was rising rapidly flooding the path she left in her wake. Instinct told Serena that she was nearly there: she heard the road and her feet did not slow.

She burst from the nightmare into the Lakeland night, where the real world returned along the road to The City. A black BMW that looked vaguely familiar pulled over and wound down its window:

“Need a ride?”

It was Charlie, her dad’s childhood friend, and his family. Serena almost yanked the door off its hinges in her scramble to get in the car. As they drove away, free Crop-Over beads (jingling from the rear view mirror) taunted the Lakeland demons. Serena settled into the leather seat between Charlie’s twin toddlers and allowed their innocent joy to wash over her.