

## Lilith

He met her at the airport, sitting at the gate, waiting to catch a red eye from La Guardia to London Heathrow. She was sitting by the large ceiling-to-floor window that looked out on the airplanes taxiing and workers lifting luggage, her knees hugged to her chest and her bangs in her eyes, so she looked like a child, very young and very lost.

“Are you headed for London?” he asked politely, taking a seat across from her.

“Yes, and yourself?” Her voice was strangely rich and melodious, like honey infused with spices, or a finely aged wine with notes of cherry and mahogany. Her English was flawless, but she spoke with an accent he could not place.

“Yeah, my sister’s having a baby.”

“Congratulations to her and your family.”

“Thank you, we’re very excited.”

A hint of a smile played at her lips, but he found himself drawn to her eyes. With her dark hair and thin frame, she looked somewhat Asiatic, except for her eyes, which were a clear grey blue, like the London sky or the shadowy surface of an opal.

He cleared his throat. “Look, the flight leaves in ninety minutes. What do you say we get a bite to eat? My treat.”

She shrugged, and her hair cascaded over her face like a dark waterfall. “I’m not hungry.”

“A drink then? Come on, I’m starved. I could use some company.”

They made their way to a nearby Irish bar where he ordered a burger with all the works and a dark stout, and she ordered water with no ice and no lemon. They sat comfortably at a booth, listening to Johnny Nash on the radio.

“So where are you from, originally?” he asked between mouthfuls of tomato and pickle.

She laughed, a clear sound like unseen birds on a spring morning. “I’m from all over. I lived in New York for a while, but I spent a good deal of my childhood in England, just outside London. We had a farm with a well.”

“Oh? Where in England?”

“About a few miles east of Westminster.”

“Really? That’s all city. There haven’t been farms around London for ages.”

“Well, maybe that’s when it was. Ages ago.”

“You can’t be that old.”

“How old do I look?”

“About twenty four.”

She smiled and sipped her water.

“Am I off by far? Years? Decades?”

“Millennia,” she said seriously.

“My name’s Arthur.”

“Nice to meet you, Arthur. Like the king?”

“Like the king. My mom was a big fan of T. H. White.”

“Do you have a Guinevere?”

He hung his head shyly. “Not really, I’m bad with girls, actually.”

She nodded solemnly at his confession. "I had a sister named Morgan."

"Le Fay?"

"Exactly."

The flight was not a packed one, so Arthur managed to grab a seat next to his new friend. Together they watched the earth tilt away from under them, they saw the buildings and cars shrink into insignificance, and soon they were coasting over the deep blue of the Atlantic, with waves rippling its endless glassy surface. Soon they surpassed even the clouds, soaring like Icarus through the curling architecture of cumulo and nimbus.

"So what do you do?" he asked, as smiling flight attendants began to make their way down the aisles, offering drinks.

"Oh, a bit of this and that. I'm a freelancer, you might say. I also danced a bit."

"You write?"

"Not necessarily. What about yourself?"

"I'm a student. It's basically the only thing I know how to do. I finished my undergraduate last month, and now I'm going to take a year off to apply to graduate and medical schools and so on. It's not terribly thrilling," he said apologetically.

"You have my attention."

He smiled gratefully. It was not often that pretty women deigned to give him the time of day, much less their attention.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” a crackling male voice announced over the PA. “We regret to inform you that we will be experiencing a bit of turbulence. Please stay in your seats with seatbelts fastened until further notice.”

Outside, lightening crackled at a frightening vicinity. It danced wickedly around the wings of the plane, and the storm lashed rain against the windows.

“Are you religious?” he asked, as the thunder rumbled so deep they could feel it beneath their skin.

“No, I’ve never been on good terms with God.”

“Really? You’ve never gone to church?”

“I can’t imagine they would be too pleased to see me.”

“All sinners are welcome in the house of the lord,” he intoned in his best priestly voice.

She laughed, like the last few drops of rain after a summer shower. He felt strangely elated.

“Would you believe it, up until a week ago I thought I was going into seminary?”

“You wanted to be a monk?”

“I was a history and religion major in college and everything. Totally thought I had a calling one night I was out drinking. I even visited a few monasteries just to see if I’d fit in.”

“I knew a priest once. I had dinner with him.”

“How did that go?”

“It was delicious.”

Arthur was unsure of how to respond.

“So what happened?” she asked, after a tactful silence

“Um, well, you know, I realized I hadn’t lived all that much. “God grant me chastity, but not right now,” and all that.”

“Augustine,” she said, nodding. “One of the wisest fools I ever knew.”

“You knew him?”

“Briefly.”

“What, you read him in intro to philosophy or something?”

She ignored him, and for some reason he felt so mortified that he decided to feign sleep for a while. If he had stayed awake, he would’ve noticed that his companion never closed her eyes for more than a second at a time. For seven hours, she didn’t even yawn.

When he awoke, they were an hour away from landing and she was sipping another glass of water, no ice and no lemon.

“So were you born in England?” he asked, hoping to regain her favor.” Do you still have family there?”

She shook her head. “All of my family died a long time ago. I was born in the fertile crescent, near Mesopotamia.”

“Mesopotamia? Like, Afghanistan?”

“If that’s what they call it these days, sure.”

They sat in silence for a while, and the pilot announced they would be soon beginning their descent.

“I was born in Indiana,” Arthur confessed. “I went to a boy’s school until college so that’s why I was never good with girls. I got through college and one of my friends was about to get married, and I realized I’d never been with a girl, so.”

She looked at him as if seeing him for the first time. “You mean you’re a monk AND a virgin?”

He blushed, and looked around to see if anyone had overhead. “I’m not a monk.”

“But you’re a man of God, so to speak.”

“So to speak.”

When the plane finally pulled up to their gate, Arthur helped her with her luggage, and after walking through the bustling afternoon airport, they arrived underneath a giant sign labeled “Arrivals,” where they sat on a bench and waited for a cab.

“Well look,” Arthur said bravely, “It’s been really nice talking to you and all. I’m not busy tonight, so I was wondering if you’d want to get dinner or see a movie or something?”

She looked at him curiously. “Are you asking me on a date?”

He hesitated, his heart pounding in his throat. “Yeah, I guess I am.”

She blinked, with a look of what seemed almost like pity in her eyes. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea. You don’t know me. I’m not like most girls.”

“I know,” he said quickly. “That’s why I like you. I think we could be friends.”

“I don’t usually make friends.”

“Me neither, but for you I’d make an exception.”

They found a quiet pub on Picadilly Street, where Arthur ordered fish and chips and a soda and his friend ordered a glass of water, no ice or lemon.

“Are you sure? When’s the last time you ate?” he said with concern.

“Not too long ago,” she said, sipping her water. “I’m not hungry.”

“Are you on a diet?”

“No, I’m just not hungry.”

“When are you going to eat?”

“Later tonight, I would imagine.”

They sat in silence, while Arthur debated in his head the best working for his next question.

“So why aren’t you on good terms with God? Did you do something bad?”

She shrugged. “I had a lot of sex. With a lot of different men. I liked being on top.”

He looked taken aback for a moment. “Wait, are you a prostitute or something?”

She laughed. “No, nothing like that.”

“Were you married?”

“A long time ago. His name was Adam. He’s with someone else now. Someone more docile.”

Arthur laughed admiringly. “Don’t worry, I’m not scared of strong women.”

She looked at him shrewdly. “Well, maybe you should be.”

Around dusk they found themselves strolling in the shade of a long street lined with weeping willows. Arthur was engaged in a fierce internal debate about whether he should reach for her hand, and she was quietly thinking about the names of animals and what she would have called them, given the opportunity. The sun was bleeding red and orange in the sky, with a few wispy clouds to keep it company on the horizon. All about were the usual denizens of London evenings – children with their mothers, lovers walking arm in arm, the elderly with their walkers and canes. No one noticed the two of them, a nondescript man and a nondescript woman, walking silently among the flowers, their bright colors washed out in the twilight. They passed a pond, where a cat and a goose hissed and batted at each other, although who was predator and who was prey no one could tell.

“It’s starting to get dark,” Arthur said finally. “Do you need me to walk you home?”

She shook her head. “It’s fine. I’ll take a taxi and find a room somewhere.”

“Aren’t you worried about thugs and rapists and such? I thought most women were scared of walking in the dark.”

“I’m not most women.”

“I know,” he said hastily. “I was only trying to be a gentleman.”

“That’s not necessary,” she assured him.

“Still,” he said shyly. “I was hoping you would give me a reason to walk you home.”



She smiled and gently caught his hand in hers. Her small fingers were cool and soft against his palm. Arthur felt like someone was playing the 1812 Overture in his stomach.

“You don’t need a reason. I’d love for you to walk me home.”

The streetlights were beginning to flicker to life, one by one, illuminating the cobblestone streets with little puddles of light. The crowd had melted away around them, until they were the only couple walking there in the dark, except for a stray tabby or two, peering with luminous eyes from behind a trashcan or mailbox. Arthur stepped carefully, one foot in front of the other, seriously concerned that his internal buoyancy might lift him into the air, and he would float away like some children’s balloon, his happiness propelling into the sky.

“You look like you have something to say.”

Arthur blushed. “I just. I’m so glad I met you. And. And I’ve never said this to anyone but you’re really beautiful. I’ve been thinking it all night. Like right now, and at dinner, and on the plane, and when I first saw you. I wish there was a special word to describe how beautiful I think you are but there isn’t.”

She looked at him with a strange expression in her eyes. “I’m not beautiful.”

“You are though! How can you say that? Have you eve –“

She interrupted him. “Do you believe in magic?”

“What?”

“Magic. Like black magic and white magic. Potions and elixirs and dragons and maidens and crones and witches. Nightshade and mandrakes. Sorceresses. Demons. Shape shifters. That sort of thing.”

“Um, I don’t know. I never gave it much thought, I guess.”

“It seems to me,” she went on, as if she hadn’t heard him. “That if you believe in good, you must believe in evil. If you believe in God, you must believe in the devil. The existence of one predicates the other. It would not make sense to have light without dark, or a day that was never interrupted by night. And yet people often take this to mean that the world exists in binaries, which is simply not true. Everything lies on a spectrum, even things like male and female. Two boxes are simply not big enough to cram everyone into.”

“What interests me though, is the issue of evil. Why does evil exist? If God is all-powerful and all knowing and all good, how can evil occur? Why do bad things happen to good people? I knew a girl, who was married off at a very young age to a much older man. Her father paid a lavish dowry, but it was not enough for her mother in law, and after much nagging, her husband poured acid in her face when she was sleeping, and it took her three weeks to die. Imagine that, three weeks! Then he collected the life insurance and in less than the time it took to bury her, he had a new marriage offer. It was because he was wealthy and owned some important business in Delhi. Now, if God did exist, why would he let something like that happen? Why would he allow the man to live a long and prosperous life, for him to bear three sons who took care of him well into his old age? If God is just, why doesn’t he punish such people for the world to see? Why doesn’t he smite them like he did in the Old Testament, although honestly, the Old Testament God did a bit too much smiting, if you ask me? When Lucifer rebel, why didn’t He uncreate him right

there? Why did He have to go creating man if He knew they were going to disobey? Why didn't He keep Lucifer from entering Eden?"

"Milton wrote that it is better to rule in Hell than to serve in heaven, but what does a blind man know of power and servitude? What does he know of Hell anyway, of millennia upon millennia of pain and torment and fire and brimstone? And when it comes down to it, don't you think the Devil, who endured all that, who had to serve and then refused to kneel, don't you think the Devil has more in common with the common man? Don't you think he understands us better than God, who spoke it and it was so? How can a being of infinite love and wisdom understand man, who is irrational and full of chaos and conflict? Don't you think we ought to be praying to the Devil?"

Arthur looked around nervously. "I don't think you know what you're saying. That's heresy."

She laughed, a ringing sound like church bells in autumn. "Would it be heresy if I just thought it and never said anything? What are you going to do, burn me at stake? You wouldn't be the first to try."

Arthur was beginning to wonder why he hadn't noticed that insane gleam in her opal eyes. And someone, he found himself captivated in her passion, and could not look away.

"Sometimes," she said after a while. "You have to do something you know is insane, just to prove to yourself that you can. Dostoevsky thought so." She looked at him with wide, trusting eyes. "This is my flat. Do you want to come up?"

Arthur felt like the earth and sky had inverted, or at least that his internal organs had rearranged themselves. He thought he knew where this was leading.

“Um,” he said, swallowing. “Yes.”

Her flat was cold and devoid of any furniture except for a Spartan table and three wooden chairs. There was no couch or television, and what might've been the living room led into a hallway with three other rooms, one of which was furnished with a queen-sized bed, and the other two were locked doors. Arthur sat down in one of the chairs and let the girl pour him a drink, which tasted strongly like wine and some sort of mouthwash. They sat in silence for a while, while he sipped away and felt increasingly brave and masculine.

Finally he downed the last of his cup, and she took his hand again and led him to the queen sized bed, and gently pushed him into the pillows. She lay next to him, her hair spread over the white pillows in tendrils like shadows on the surface of a pond. They lay like that for a while, until Arthur rolled onto his side.

“Look, I don't know if I'm up for a one night stand kind of thing,” he began. “I'm really not that kind of guy.”

“And I'm not that kind of girl,” she said, gently, stroking the soft brown hairs on his arm, a sad look in her opal eyes.

“It's just that, I think we have something special. If you wanted, we could date, and I could be your boyfriend and all that. I think I could fall in love with you. Hell, I think I might be falling in love with you already. I really don't want to ruin

anything by going to fast. I mean," he said, moving his lips with increasing difficulty, "I don't even know your name."

He realized, then, that he could not move his legs, and his arms felt like they were pinned to the bed.

She climbed over, straddling him and stroking his cheeks and running her fingers through his hair. She had, he noticed, begun to cry, and when a hot tear rolled off her chin onto his chest, he could not feel it.

"They call me Lilith," she told him. And she leaned over, pressed her lips against his, opened her mouth and began to chew.

A few weeks later, when the tumult about the missing Arthur Brodie had died down, and no one had discovered a small bag of bleached white bones placed unobtrusively in a dumpster on Picadilly Street, a small woman with dark hair and opal eyes was sitting alone at a bar. She wore a dark, low cut dress, and her mascara was smeared, as if she had been crying. She dabbed at her eyes with a napkin.

"Hey baby, can I buy you a drink?" A tall, blonde man in a motorcycle jacket pulled up a chair next to her. His arms were knotted with muscles and covered in tattoos.

She laughed, a clear, musical sound like icicles clinking in the winter, slid him her glass and said, "I'll have a water, no ice, no lemon."