

GIFT OF THE MERLION

by Rumjhum Biswas

Susie sat by the window listening to the wind woo-wooing outside. She liked listening to the wind and watching the water waltzing in the canal below. But she didn't like being left alone. That could hardly be helped though. Mother worked long hours. Now Susie craned her head out of the window and squinted. There he was!

She had seen him several times before, always from the distance of her tenth floor window. She had never been able to see his face clearly nor had she been able to make out his shape. But she always felt that he knew she was there, looking at him. Now she saw him once more, turning in the water, letting the liquid silk roll over his naked skin with leonine grace and piscine ease. Susie's skin tingled. She felt he was willing her to look. She thought she heard someone whisper an invitation. It could have been the wind. But she decided to go down anyway.

Susie made her way carefully down. She felt a little breathless as she walked towards the hibiscus hedge skirting the bank of the canal. Hot, scratched and nervous, Susie looked up. Straight into a pair of amused yellow eyes.

"So you made it at last!" His whisper sounded like little stones rolling in water.

He reminded Susie of stones too. Rugged craggy stones falling into the water, splintering the rolling sheet of liquid into a million jagged diamond shards! And then again, he reminded her of the fleeting lick of a flickering flame, the sandpaper graze of a curious tongue and the steam from febrile breath! Susie didn't understand why he reminded her of these elemental things, why his mystery enveloped her in a misty, dreamlike mantle.

"I'm Susie," said Susie, her nervousness sloughing off her like dead skin.

"I know."

Susie looked at him in surprise. Could he read minds, or was it her face that gave her away? Mother always said so - that her face was so transparent you could even see her thoughts slowly drifting around, in her head. And, then she had laughed, as she always did, in exasperation, because Susie was so slow. Slow to walk, slow to talk, slow to eat and slow to learn. Susie was slow, slow, and slow! She was so slow that life with her was a slow-motion nightmare. Yes, that's exactly what mother had said to uncle number seven, turning her exasperated laugh into a sad, little girl lost smile. Uncle number seven (Susie never seemed to be able to remember their names, because she was so slow and because they came in so fast into their lives and went out with such rapidity) had murmured appropriate words of comfort, and then they had both left Susie alone.

A low throaty laugh cut her thoughts adrift.

"Your thoughts are so beautiful, like the soft flow of an ebbing tide. Did anyone ever tell you that?"

It was more of a statement than a question. But Susie liked the way he talked. He seemed to take her thoughts out of her mind, gently with a tiny tug, like the way you would take wet tissues out of the tiny hole in a travel-size baby-wipe box. So she nodded to show that she understood and agreed with him. Susie stepped into the water setting off ripples around her. She felt unfettered by rules and norms, at ease with herself and free!

Susie swam in the fluid emerald of the water and under it like him. She laughed and sang with him. She savored the varying moods of the canal. The brackish canal water that sucked and growled, sniffed and licked, whispered threats and roared invitations all the time in quick shifts of mood. Susie marveled at the freedom she

experienced with him. Every cell in her body seemed alive and eager.

“What are you doing girl!”

Sharp like a whip, the voice cut through the air, down on Susie. A fleeting kiss, like a tongue of flame, a flap of tail, and he was gone. Dusk descended like a determined raven. The water felt cold. Susie felt naked and vulnerable. Susie let her mother haul her out. Mother's face looked like she had been caught wearing torn underwear. Susie's clothes felt like burlap.

“Susie! Idiot! You crazy or what!”

Mother's words swung out like a whiplash, laying a stranglehold on her throat. Susie's words stayed bottled inside, like they always did when mother or anyone shouted at her. Only her hand moved - a rag doll hand pointing towards a shadowy head brooding on the far side of the canal.

“That's only a monitor lizard, Susie.”

This was a soothing voice, with a trickle of laughter running through it. Susie looked up, unsure of the new voice. She looked up at the uncle standing next to mother. Smiling hazel eyes looked back at her. The sparkle in each pupil reminded Susie of the ember-ends of a pair of thin joss sticks.

That night Susie settled into her cot and tried to go to sleep. Shuffles and grunts crept in from mother's room, but she was used to that. The moonlight streamed in and brightening her room with a long swatch of white light, but she liked the moon. She kept thinking and thinking about him, and that kept her awake. She could feel him close to her and smell his salt breath too. It made her feel tingly all over, like she had a whole big secret to herself. Susie got out of her

bed and went and stood near the window. She was sure she saw a pair of yellow eyes gleaming up at her from the water.

The next day, uncle took Susie and mother to the zoo. Susie had been to the zoo once before, long ago. She remembered dimly that it had been an enjoyable day. This time however mother found Susie listless and irritating. Then uncle took her to see the Komodo dragons. As she watched the big lizards she heard a deep keening. It rippled through the ground below her feet, calling out to the spirits of water.

Susie wasn't quite sure she had heard it right. She looked up at mother and uncle, but they didn't seem to have noticed anything unusual. The Komodo Dragons continued to hug the dirt under the sun.

"Eee! They are so ugly," said mother. She adjusted her Cartier sunshades to drive home her disgust.

The sun had grown steadily hotter, so the three of them walked over to the zoo's air-conditioned souvenir shop. Mother stood admiring some semi-precious stone jewelry. Uncle stood near her, but his eyes were on Susie. Susie shuffled her feet, letting her eyes travel across the shop. A brass lion's head caught her eye. Susie left her mother's side to investigate. But she was disappointed. These were just cigarette lighters made in the shape of the Merlion. There were other Merlion trinkets too. Susie poked a Merlion statue in the eye half-heartedly.

"Do you like them Susie?" Uncle's voice poured into her ears in a soft, slithering whisper. His hand traced a pattern on her back.

Susie shivered as his fingers flicked across the nerves on her skin, but before she could reply, she heard a hissed warning.

“Run! Run while you can!”

Susie turned and ran. She didn't quite understand why, except that the hairs on the nape of her neck were standing stiffly. She heard the beat of running feet behind her. They were heavy feet, followed by lighter ones. It was a strange thought, but the sound of the two pairs of feet, with their different rhythms reminded Susie of deep manly breaths followed by mother's quick shallow breathing.

“Silly girl! Why you run hanh?”

Susie looked at her mother, unable to either think clearly or explain her thoughts.

“Ice cream Susie?” This was Uncle again, but his voice was like a gentle shower now.

“Yes,” whispered Susie, beginning to feel calm again.

By the time they returned home, the sun was sliding down the western rim of the horizon. Mother went out again with Uncle to get their dinner, so Susie was left alone at home. She felt too tired to notice the gathering clouds. Susie normally enjoyed looking at clouds and wondering about their different shapes. But today, she didn't feel like looking up at them. She almost didn't hear the whispered song. Then she stood up with a start and hurried to the window. She put out her hand to catch a soft warm drop of rain.

Susie felt a little nervous in the morning. She had never played truant from school before. But mother wouldn't notice. She left early, with barely enough time to gulp down her coffee. She never walked Susie to school. So, Susie made her way quietly down the lift and through the hibiscus hedge again. She sat on her haunches by the canal bed, chewing her lower lip as she tried to think and remember.

Nobody noticed her thin, small body crouching among the bushes. Susie looked at the water. But the canal seemed aimless and listless now. It flowed like a giant's urine trail, meandering on its delta-way to the latrine of the deep. There was a trail on the mud stalking the saline stain. Susie decided to follow.

Susie followed the trail scurrying down the canal bed half fearing someone would see her and call the police. But nobody noticed her, and even if they did, they were too busy and too engrossed with themselves to bother. Susie was grateful for that. She scampered over the soggy canal bed. Her footprints were as light as that of the egrets and sandpipers that waded in the shallows in search of food. Sometimes she lost his trail. This was usually where the water collected in sluggish and sullen pools, refusing to flow. Whenever this happened, Susie stopped and sniffed the water. She picked up the filaments of his scent as they wafted out from the air bubbles trapped in the mud.

Susie sloshed and at times waded, working her way steadily downstream, away from the overhead bridge, towards the swamp. The swamp still lay shrouded in the mystery of morning mist although by now the sun was considerably brighter. The overhanging branches of the shrubs and trees on the sides of the bank were closer now, forming a canopy of green. Blocking out much of the sun and the hustle and bustle of the city. The stillness was an anticipatory sort of stillness, refusing to tell her anything, refusing to share its secrets.

Susie started to feel flustered again. Her heart beat faster as she neared the swamp. Her mind slowed into a sluggish whirlpool of thoughts that refused to link themselves into any coherent structure. After a while Susie began to feel so confused that she no longer understood clearly why she was there and what she was trying to do. There was just this pinhead of a thought, glinting at her in the

marsh of her mind, that he was there, somewhere beyond, and she had to find him.

A breath of fetid air hung around the canal. But Susie was quite familiar with this unpleasant smell. The canal often smelt like this, foul and evil like a soulless harbinger of death. But today, the stench seemed stronger. The stench seemed to be a creature with a life of its own; a vicious creature that had caught something with its fangs and was worrying it to death. Susie shivered a little as she moved on.

The branches overhead were more thickly knitted here and the scrub denser. Discarded plastic bottles crackled under Susie's bare feet. She winced every time she stepped on them. A kingfisher sitting on a small rock eyed her warily before flying away. Susie watched its shimmering blue coat reflected in the still pools of water as it flew, its breast skimming the islands of mud in the canal. Something black and furry darted among the stilt roots on the other side. Susie decided to cross over and investigate.

She pushed aside curtains of spider-web as she carefully made her way through the sharp roots and scrub. Susie was also careful not to step on the mud-lobster castles, but she was not always successful in avoiding them. The stillness in the swamp was beginning to get to her. Even the crickets were silent.

Susie wondered where he was. He was sure to be here, somewhere. She had to find him. She strode ahead, disregarding the garbage and mangrove spikes. She didn't have to go very far. Just a little ahead was the mangled limb of a tree strewn across the dry patch, its innards catacombed by termites. The ants were scurrying under it and returning with bits of flesh in their pincers. Susie stood on her toes to get a better view, and then she almost toppled over in fright and disgust.

Clots of dark blood spotted the herbage around the dead tree branch. Ants and beetles were busy feeding off these curdled drops. A noisy flock of crows were pulling out the long gray strands of intestines with the frenzy of shoppers during a shop-closing-down sale. The body was so systematically dismembered that it was impossible to make out the identity of its owner. A solitary eye lay forlornly next to what could have been a smashed up head or a pulverized pelvis.

Susie felt sick to the pit of her stomach. Susie looked around her in bewilderment. Questions circled her mind like wheeling hawks, ready to swoop down and snatch away her sanity. Susie felt she would faint. The trees swayed above her and the water slurped below at her feet. Hunger gnawed at her innards. She hadn't eaten anything in the morning out of sheer nervous excitement. It was time to go back.

Susie turned to face the canal again. She stood at the edge, looking at the canal bed. The giant's urine trail had almost disappeared. The water gurgled softly as she dipped her feet in it. She was very hungry by now, otherwise she would have stopped to slosh her feet in the water and watch the little brown fish dart away. Susie started walking through the water upstream, towards the overhead bridge. The path seemed much longer now. She thought it would take her less than five minutes, but although she had been walking for quite some time the bridge was nowhere in sight. Susie stopped. The wind was whistling under its breath so she could barely catch the tune. She didn't like the feeling it gave her. There was also an underlying sound of slobbering. The fetid smell of the canal was almost non-existent; instead, the smell of mashed wild fruit floated up to her nostrils. Susie tasted the smell. It smelt wild and sweet and dangerous. The slobbering was gaining on her steadily. She turned to see who it was.

A swathe of green silk came surging; a body of tidal water came lunging towards her like a sinuous beast. The bared white fangs of the wave nipped at her shoulders. Susie ran from the seething liquid green fury chasing her. She fell and, picked herself up again. The hunger in her belly had given way to terror. Susie plunged forward to stay ahead of the water. But invisible things picked at her legs, slimy ribbons entwined themselves around her feet, the mangroves shrank back their roots and branches, just out of her reach. The sun shot arrows of gold at her eyes, blinding her till she hardly knew where she was going. And all that time the water came pouring in from the sea eagerly gaining on her.

Susie thrashed her legs and flailed her arms. She swam wildly. In her panic she gulped in mouthfuls of rancid water. Susie spluttered and gagged. Her knees went weak. Her veins felt poisoned. Her lungs felt ready to burst. She was sure now that she would never make it. The sun didn't bother her any more. The world had begun to turn black. Then, there was silence...

When Susie opened her eyes, she found herself in a shadowy room. It smelt faintly of flowers and disinfectant. The walls were bare, save for a slim Crucifix hanging on a nail to her right and a picture of ducks wading in the water to her left. Someone touched her cheeks with infinite tenderness. She knew that touch. She had felt it, a long time ago.

“Mother?”

“Oh my sweet little girl! She's alive thank God!”

Susie looked at mother's tear-streaked face, and heard her panic stricken voice. A warm wet drop fell on Susie's cheek. It was just a little drop, but it was enough. In its soft salt touch Susie felt years of rebuke dissolve into remorse. It spoke to her of an ocean of love that needed just a little canal dug out for it to flow out towards her, and envelope her in its warmth.

Susie smiled. This was the gift that he had told her about, but she had run after a trail instead. A soft breeze teased the white curtains at the window. The breeze brought in the sound of laughter, of bubbles bursting in the rain. A woodpecker tapped on a branch far away. Its Morse code message thrummed soothingly against Susie's eardrums.

END

