Desiderata

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Summary

And they say now that Paris is for lovers.

Notes

Written for the 31-Days prompt, "the heart beats on and will not stop." Originally written and posted in 2006.

She watches him from the corner of the garret room, her back to the fire. Between the darkness of her unbound hair and the shadows cast by the decaying light, Yuuko looks as if she has been created from ink spilled upon white paper, her existence blossoming outward from the deep stain of her presence in his room. Carton is sitting also with his back towards the fire, and consequently to her; he is set before a desk that is strewn with papers, his ill-kept official wig and robe, and, of course, bottles. The bottles are the desk's largest defining feature by their number alone, and he is adding another one empty to their population. Carton's eyes are bloodshot and his hands are shaking with the drink.

"I know your heart's desire," Yuuko says, her voice pouring out of her like oil and wine and the heavy-heartedness that breeds along with its counterpart discontent in the streets below. She does not sound quite like herself.

He swallows another mouthful of cheap liquor and does not answer.
"I know also," Yuuko continues, "why you do not ask for it." She advances to the desk and drapes herself upon it, arranging her body and her heavy silk skirts so that she is able to look down upon him to greater advantage. He does not look at all well.

"I am gathering what no longer remains of my courage, and all my love," he says at last. His speech is not slurred in the least, though he has been drinking with fixed concentration for the last half-an-hour. "I have given up all rights to that wish."

Yuuko places her hand against his rough cheek, creating a small study of contrasts. She is all slimness, unearthly beauty and secret wickedness—and Sydney Carton is but a man, unshaven and in yesterday's clothes. Only Yuuko would describe him first and foremost as a good man, despite the convictions of others.

"You could wish it," she invites. Her voice is matter-of-fact now, perhaps even a little cruel. "You could wish that she would dream, for the rest of her life, of you and not her husband; that she would imagine the future the two of you had the potential to create."

There is no way, really, to sugarcoat the fact that essentially, she is offering to give Lucie Darnay a lifetime of unfulfillable wishes and dreams of adultery. Carton shudders and Yuuko can feel his jaw tightening beneath her palm. Lucie is, of course, too pure and too precious to be loved as he loves her, so hopelessly. But his shudder is an answer, one that denies Yuuko's offer vehemently; she smiles to herself, enigmatically. She is correct in her assumption of his character: he is a good man. She draws her fingers away from his face and Carton refills the glass between them for the eighteenth time. It is rather a large glass.

"Drink with me," he says, and watches with those eyes as Yuuko draws the glass away from his fingertips and tilts it towards her red mouth.

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The drink is sharp and alcoholic; she can feel it burning and biting as the liquor slides down her long throat like a prophecy, or something more potent: that poisonous honey made from the blossoms of the rhododendron.

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It has been hours now; because Yuuko is drinking as well the bottle is still not empty and Carton is beyond drunk; he has become hard, fixated upon his plan. He's almost moodily attractive this way and she is drunk as well. Still, the past quarter hour alone, she has offered him the love of Lucie Darnay a dozen times. She likes getting her own way too much to not do this.

At last he tells her, darkly, that there is little left that Yuuko can do.

"But do me this one thing," he says, and there is a hard and blazing look upon his laconic face, transforming him into another man. Yuuko smiles bemusedly as Sydney Carton places a hand against her white cheek and draws her face down to his.

"Deliver this message," he says, and kisses her drunkenly, deeply and with great despair. There is love beneath all of this too; he has closed his eyes.

Yuuko does not close hers, and this is perhaps the bitterest and sweetest thing she has ever tasted; she holds very still against his mouth until he draws away, and then she is trembling like a caged butterfly between his cupped fingers. She cannot say whether she is shaking with unshed tears or with bitten-off laughter.

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The Revolution is progress, yes, and progress that she has had a hand in creating. There is a wish to be found in every dark corner and she grants them without pity and with mercy; as always, she asks only for a fair price.

Her smiles are seldom and gilded, as though she is filled with a great and wounding hurt. To the peasants who encounter her, she is a strange goddess—some say the devil—and her mouth is redder than the wine that has been spilled in the streets.

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The last night, she is with him, invisibly. He exchanges places with Charles Darnay at last and with no tangible reward. Darnay is smuggled home to his wife and child and Carton is left alone in his cell, brooding. Yuuko watches him for much of the night, memorizing his meaningless babble absently. Dawn is a long time coming and she spends the hours contemplating his mouth.

He speaks to her directly only as the guards, noticing nothing (perhaps her hand is in this too, but he will never know whom the wish belongs to) take him away.

"I love her,"—and the words are cast from his lips like a supplication to a deaf god, as if they are a reminder, or a request for strength—"even unto the edge of doom."

Yuuko is alone in the room, unobserved, before she responds.

"Further than that," she says, tonelessly. "Your love is a ferocious thing, Sydney." Her only audience is the empty room, silence huddled about her like a conspiracy.

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"I don't want to die," says the little seamstress, wringing her shawl between her fingers. "I don't want to die, but if I must, I do not wish to be alone. I wish for a little kindness, that is all."

Yuuko looks at her for a long moment before holding out her hand. "Give me the ribbon about your throat," she says.

The girl fumbles with the knot and in a moment, the future is decided upon, her wish granted.

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Yuuko watches from the crowd as he bends to touch the lips of the little seamstress. She can imagine the feeling very clearly: sweet despair and that self-damaging kindness that nestles itself so subversively in Carton's brain. A good man, yes, and it is a little comfort to the poor girl and she dies before his eyes, trying not to scream. It is over in an instant, and it is Carton's turn now; his compassion has led him here, to kneel beneath the Guillotine in someone else's blood.

Yuuko watches without flinching, even as the dulling blade of Madame Guillotine smacks wetly against the bones of his neck.

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In another city, far enough away from Paris, Lucie Darnay is taking tea in the garden, alone. When a strange woman, dressed all in dark silks (she looks like she is in mourning, but there is a scarlet ribbon woven into the lace of her skirt), Lucie is too polite and too surprised to do other than offer her a cup of tea. The stranger accepts, and takes it with too much sugar before sipping meditatively at the cooling liquid, gazing at Lucie over the delicate, painted-china rim of her cup.
"Do you often think of him?" The voice of the woman is unexpectedly low and strange, as if she already knows Lucie's answer—or as if she is choked by a small grief, one that she will very easily put behind her when the time comes.

Lucie is not sure as how to respond—but of course they are speaking of Mr. Carton, so she says, "He was very kind to my husband, and he has given my family a most treasured gift. I will honor him for the rest of my life, as my children shall honor him throughout their own lives." She speaks very prettily, but she does not say, I am glad he did this thing or I love my husband very much. She does think it, and wonders if she should feel guilty for doing so.

"Think on this as well," says the dark woman, her lips twisting with what can possibly be defined as amusement before she leans forward, pressing her mouth against Lucie's. Then she is gone, leaving Lucie alone in the garden.

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For the rest of her life, Lucie will have odd half dreams of Mr. Carton, as if she has been kissed by him or been touched in some way, as if she has taken his hand and smiled at him, with more than kindness. She will spend an equal amount of time consciously not remembering that woman and her kiss, if it can be called that—there was no sensation, only numbness and a little triumph, as if Lucie had at long last received a letter that revealed to her the mystery of breathing.

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Yuuko returns home and bathes. She stands naked beneath a small waterfall and her hair falls down like a gown about her long, pale body (her breasts are incongruous, too large for her thin frame).

With one finger, she traces a surprisingly accurate shape of Madame Guillotine in the condensation on the stone wall, complete with a figure crouching beneath the blade. After staring at it for a moment, she steps out from beneath the cold spray, dries her hair, wraps a multi-patterned robe about herself, and leaves the bathing room.

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She goes to her bedchamber (the place is half-smothered with rich draping fabrics covering the walls, floor, and cushion-strewn bed) and gets drunk, horribly so until she can not associate alcohol with anything other than delirium, let alone Sydney Carton's lips against hers and the great heart he lent her. Instead she remembers this: there was blood mingling with wine on the cobblestones in Paris that night, a man clubbed to death because of a lace handkerchief.

This takes a long time, and it would take longer but for Clow, who comes as always and tidies the empty bottles and listens patiently as she prattles on in several dead languages, anything to avoid the taste of English on her tongue, that stark dialect with its strange and insufficient beauty.

Clow kisses her—it all comes down to a kiss and sometimes her life is like a fairy tale, so of course this is doubly true—and he takes her to bed. And because it is Clow they argue pettily about philosophy and physics and in the morning, once she is past her hangover, Yuuko is herself again, enigmatic. Her phantom hurts slip away down deep into that secret place where the fruits of her labors reside.

She has all the time in the world and more besides, and even with that sweet madness (It's all in the past, you demented old sot, she tells Clow, but she says it with fondness) she still adores France. They have excellent wine.
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