Story for performance #439
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It happened toward the end of the carnival season. I took my coffee in the back room of the little Turkish café that opened directly onto the town square, and on low box seats spread out my papers. That summer I was living out the graduation of my rural childhood, armed with a reading-list for my first university term, and retreating in austere ceremony to my serious studies. From the back alcove I had a clear view out through the café to the open door. Revellers passed with sticks of candy and the occasional hard-won, primary-coloured, stuffed toy animal.

A young man from the town entered the smoke-filled room with his father and through the haze I first made out his pallid and dissipated features, as vague as if from memory. The older man was blind and wore a black eye patch strung across one smooth cheekbone. His patriarchal beard was moustache-less and clean-white. Emerging from a smoke cloud his son made a shallow bow and they took a table across from me. I made a slight gesture of moving my papers and shuffling them. The young man motioned to my favourite waiter, a tall unbending man more elegant than any of his paying customers. The waiter drew alongside him to take their order and made one nod of the head in acknowledgment before turning on his patent shoes and returning to the counter.

The father was a Doctor, well-known in town. While still a young man he had contracted a blennorrhoeal conjunctivitis while making a gynaecological examination, and within a few days had gone totally blind. When it had become clear that his tragic condition was incurable, his ophthalmologist left at the patient's bedside a small bottle of atropine in expectation that his patient would somehow use the poison for a purpose other than one of healing. But the blind Doctor, after a bitter inner conflict, decided to live on for his family and profession. To our town his infirmity, far from damaging his practice, gradually gained for him the reputation of a miracle Doctor. The sick came in adoration, and my own mother often produced sudden ailments so that she might suspend her housework to spend a blessed wait in the hall of his surgery. It was agreed amongst our townspeople that his fate was worn with dignity, symbolised for all in the wearing of the black eye patch. He retained a priestly glow and his noble features, reiterated in the faces of his four children, were much admired as a sign of great breeding and intellect.

And so it was to my parent's great surprise and delight when the Doctor's son, after this first silent meeting in the Turkish café, began to court me. Although we rarely conversed without witnesses, and to my shame and frustration seemed only to utter trivialities, we were considered a couple before the carnival had left town. He was studying gynaecology and by my own admission his frequent whispered references to that secret anatomy were enough to make me feel there was less sin and more education to be had from snatching a private moment with him. So we did embark on an affair. The Doctor's son had his own rooms above the tobacconist and we were able to disappear into the dim light of drawn-curtains for five summer afternoons, during which time my escaping virginity went floating down through Venetian blinds to the town square, audible pleasures smothered only by the carrying carnival sounds of young children screaming their heads off on the Ferris wheel on the easterly road from the town. He had his father's warmed hands. Occasionally over those days he would pen me a hurried sonnet without metre or beauty, and written in the scrawl of a trainee Doctor, ripped from his writing pad with all the romance of a prescription.

I waited in vain for my Doctor's son in the café three weeks later, on the last day of the carnival, and there my first love story ended. When I met him in the city by chance in the winter of the same year, I had begun my first semester at the university. He declared that he had only been late to the café and I had left too soon. He stood for a while with a petulant mouth, eyeing the bicycle I was astride, fingering the spines of the books in my wicker basket, and trying to hide his fascination with the deep décolletage of the dress beneath my new wool coat. Yet we chose not to bring up the question why, after this abortive meeting in the summer, we had not written a word to each other, and he gave me to understand, with that three-quarter honesty which is customary after the termination of such love affairs but which by then have lost their charm, that he was having a serious affair with someone else.

On the last day of the carnival that summer the elegant waiter at the café had watched me forlornly stirring my coffee and watching the door as the final parade of fairground toys and candy marched past. At last he pulled his pristine white cloth from the rope of his apron and flung it down on the counter. He marched over to my table and made a low bow, his clipped formality disappearing as he slowly raised his head to show a wide smiling mouth. He invited me to an evening at the fairground. I passed a pleasant night of platonic frivolity with the waiter; we rode every fairground ride and ran about the fields like joyful children, he spending all his tips in an effort to win me a goldfish. We played all night as if it were the beginning of the revelry, and not the end.

To this day I share my rooms with a giant, gaudy blue teddy bear, a note pinned to his breast, an unsentimental poem written on a restaurant order-pad in beautiful, curling italics.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Clara Brennan.