

A Touch of Beauty

by

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Characters

MIRA: an older woman, beautifully dressed in a straw hat, silk sundress and heels.
A trifle wilted because of the heat.

SURI: a south-east Asian man in beat-up jeans and a T-shirt.

Setting

A small room with a cot and storage box, in a run-down area of a city in S. E. Asia.

Time

The present.

A Touch of Beauty

MIRA and SURI are in a small room. She looks around.

MIRA: This isn't what it looked like on the Internet!

SURI: Look closely, madam. It's the same.

MIRA: Where are the flowers? The candles? The soft music? The carved bed? I want what I saw on line! On the video!

SURI: What difference does it make? How long will you be here?

MIRA: I don't care! I want it to be nice! A voluptuous bed with silken sheets. Perfume in the air. Soothing music. Not a squalid, windowless little room!

SURI: You're a woman of refined tastes.

MIRA: *(taking off her fabulous sunhat and shaking her damp hair)* When the taxi dropped me off, I thought he'd made a mistake. Coming along that laneway—the garbage, the graffiti, the smell of urine...*(looking around her—and at him—with distaste)* I expected something more...upscale.

SURI: *(beat)* Madam, why did you choose here?

MIRA: Why do you think? I liked your website!

SURI: Thank you. I'll tell my cousin. He designed it.

She sighs.

SURI: No one's ever complained before.

MIRA: I can't imagine why not.

SURI: Maybe, when you're leaving it all behind, it doesn't matter any more.

MIRA: It does to me.

SURI rolls his eyes. She looks around for some place to put her hat, can't find any place clean enough, and fans herself with it, instead.

MIRA: It's got to be 40° Celsius in here.

SURI: *(gesturing to the cot)* If you don't mind—I have another customer in ten minutes.

MIRA: I suppose that isn't time enough to re-do the whole room. But surely you can provide a touch of beauty somewhere in here.

SURI: What for?

MIRA: Some women fantasize about their wedding. Allow me to fantasize about my funeral.

SURI: This isn't your funeral. If you want, you can have one of those later. But right now, it's your death we're talking about.

MIRA: Death, then! Let me fantasize about my death.

SURI: Alright, alright! I'll get you something from the box... Here.

He pulls out a half-burnt candle, some artificial flowers, and a bright cotton bedspread, which he tosses over the cot.

SURI: Now we have the décor settled—

MIRA: *(testing the bedspread with two fingers)* You call this décor?

SURI: It's the best I can do. Lie down.

MIRA: Hands off!

She fusses over the bedspread, then sits on the edge of the cot, touches up her make-up, fluffs her hair, and arranges her hat and clothes artistically. As she's about to lie down, he takes a pillow out of the box and heads towards her.

MIRA: What're you doing?!

SURI: It won't take long.

MIRA: *(leaping up)* Stop! I signed up for an injection.

SURI: There's a shortage of sodium pentobarbitol.

MIRA: Well, you're a doctor, aren't you?

She looks at his face.

MIRA: Your biography—

SURI: Stay calm. Experience is what counts.

MIRA: I insist you use some other medicine.

SURI: Nothing else works as well.

MIRA: Can't you buy some on the street? Everything else is for sale there.

SURI: How much of it is genuine, madam?

She thinks about it.

SURI: We'll have to use a manual technique.

He raises the pillow again. MIRA backs up.

MIRA: Don't you touch me!

SURI: Stay calm. I've done it before.

MIRA: How many times?

SURI: Many. It doesn't take long.

MIRA: I'll look ugly!

SURI: You won't see yourself.

MIRA: Bulging eyes, protruding tongue...I don't want anyone seeing me like that!

SURI: I promise not to look.

MIRA: I don't trust you.

SURI: We can do it in the dark, then. Down in the basement.

MIRA: Stop pushing me!

SURI: Sorry, sorry.

MIRA: I refuse to die in a basement.

She grabs the pillow out of his hands and sits on it.

MIRA: I want an injection.

SURI: I can't give you one. At least, not today.

MIRA: But I've spent all my money!

SURI: You didn't think you'd be needing it. That's the problem with you people. No thought for tomorrow. Just today. Now. Whatever happened to saving for the future?

MIRA: What's the point, if you don't have one?

SURI: Stay calm, there are plenty of other ways. For example, I could put a plastic bag over your head. Tight, tight—and you're gone.

MIRA: You're joking.

SURI: I have a friend. A policeman. Is a shot in the back of the head acceptable?

MIRA: Absolutely not!

SURI: We could rig up a guillotine.

She gives him a look.

SURI: You are hard to please!

MIRA: *(getting up; jamming on her hat)* And I'm going to take my business elsewhere.

SURI: You can't. First of all, because the shortage affects everyone. And secondly, because nobody's going to kill you for free.

MIRA: Give me back my money!

SURI: I've already spent it. A trip to the Emirates with the family. We had a wonderful time—thank you.

MIRA: You had no right to touch the money until you provided the service!

SURI: As I keep telling you, I'm willing.

MIRA: I don't want to suffer.

SURI: You westerners don't know what suffering is. You have everything. But does it make you happy? No.

MIRA: I don't have everything.

SURI: Look outside, madam. What do you see?

She peeks around the corner.

MIRA: *(beat)* Beggars.

SURI: And yet, they want to live, and you want to die. How curious.

MIRA: I'm suffering, too! My boyfriend of fifteen years moved into a retirement home—and now one of the women there has latched onto him.

SURI: Can't you share?

MIRA: No, I can't! My only revenge is that half the time he can't remember her name and calls her by mine.

SURI: If you want him so badly, join him.

MIRA: Nothing doing! I've got too much life in me to shut myself up in one of those places.

SURI: You prefer a coffin?

MIRA: Today! Now—before I change my mind!

SURI: Just choose, madam.

MIRA: Don't rush me!

SURI: Decide. Please. Whatever way you want, I'll do it.

MIRA: Injection.

SURI: Lie down.

She sits on the edge of the bed.

SURI: Close your eyes.

MIRA: Nothing doing. I want to see what you're up to.

SURI: I'm up to getting you a glass of water.

He pours from a jug.

MIRA: Is that tap water?!

SURI: Stay calm. You don't have time to die from it.

He hands her two pills.

SURI: Take them.

MIRA: I thought you said you didn't have any other medicine.

SURI: I'd forgotten about these.

MIRA: Will they...?

SURI: Within the next five minutes.

She gulps them down.

SURI: Now lie down—thank you.

She re-arranges herself, with the pillow under her head.

SURI: I see you've brought your iPhone. Why don't you listen to something soothing?

MIRA: *(putting in the earbuds)* "I did it my way." My favourite song.

SURI: If only it were true, but I fear, madam, none of us does it our way. To think we can control what happens in our lives is an illusion.

MIRA: Maybe. But one thing I can control—the timing of my death.

SURI: Only because I agreed. You couldn't've made me.

MIRA: I paid you!

SURI: Some things you can't buy. If I didn't like you, I wouldn't kill you.

MIRA: Well, fortunately, you do.

She closes her eyes and crosses her hands artistically over her chest.

SURI: Do you want to say a little prayer?

MIRA: I'm an atheist.

SURI: There's only this life, eh? Or so you think.

MIRA: I know.

SURI: None of us "knows," madam.

MIRA: Well, if I find something else, I'll come back and tell you about it.

SURI: Please don't. Ours is an old country. We have too many ghosts already.

MIRA: It's the unhappy ones that come back.

SURI: Which is why you will not. Because I'll make your death a very happy one.

MIRA: I already feel a little...floaty.

SURI: Can you touch your nose?

MIRA: *(tries)* No.

SURI: Excellent.

He whips the pillow out from under her.

MIRA: What—?! Noooo!

SURI: Shhhh! You want to die—

MIRA: I took the pills!

SURI: *(straddling her)* They're only muscle relaxants.

MIRA: Get off me! I refuse to die this way!

SURI: This way, some other way—what difference does it make? What’s a few minutes of agony at the end of a long life?

MIRA: I want a beautiful death and I’m going to live until I get one!

SURI: Too late.

MIRA: No, it isn’t!

SURI: A few minutes and it’s over. Come on—buck up!

MIRA: *(straining to escape)* Hel—p!

SURI: *(covering her mouth)* Stay calm. You did it your way, now I’ll do it mine. Close your eyes if you don’t want to see it coming.

MIRA: I’ve changed my mind!

SURI: I’m just doing what you paid me to.

MIRA: Let me go!

A car is heard in the distance.

SURI: We’re going to have to hurry. That’s my next customer.

MIRA: You can have my iPhone!

SURI: I already have one. And I’m within a few minutes of getting another.

He leans further over her.

MIRA: You believe in reincarnation, don’t you? And karma.

SURI: Yes. So?

MIRA: So if what goes around, comes around, then helping me is in your own best interests.

SURI: Not in this life.

MIRA: But in the next! You need me. How many people have you killed?

SURI: Counting you? Seventy-seven, I think. Or is it seventy-eight?

MIRA: You need something to balance that, or you could come back as some hideous animal.

SURI: Only if you consider killing an evil. I think, if people ask you to put them out of their misery, then you're doing them a favour.

MIRA: Did everybody really, really want this favour?

SURI: Some were a little upset when the moment arrived, but they all went peacefully enough. As you will.

MIRA: As I won't. I told you—I've decided to live. For now, anyway.

SURI: Stop wasting my time. I'll do my part—you do yours. You've paid—that's the end of it.

MIRA: It's not the end of me!

SURI: *(raising the pillow)* Oh, yes, it is.

MIRA: I can help you. I'm an interior decorator.

SURI: So?

MIRA: People in the West don't want to die in a clinical setting. They've had choice all their lives—they want it when they die.

SURI: I offered you choice. You weren't keen.

MIRA: Because all your deaths were ugly and mundane! People want their last moments to be special. They want theme rooms with beautiful décor and different ways of dying—The Harem. The Roman Amphitheatre. The Haunted House... *(beat)* Prop me up.

He does.

MIRA: Put my hat on top of the box. Left side. The candle goes on the right, with the flowers scattered around it...See the difference a touch of beauty makes?

Knocking on an outside door.

SURI: *(calling out)* Just a minute!

MIRA: Trust me. With my background in design and your hands-on expertise, we could make a killing.

SURI looks at her speculatively.

SURI: You're sure?

MIRA: Yes.

A pause. He high fives her.

The End