

Kookaburra Sweet

by Irenosen Okojie



Several factors contributed to Kara's series of self collisions. Several pale, pin pricked airbags shrank between two victims each time; herself and herself. The airbags wouldn't have been necessary if she hadn't missed her original flight at Sydney Airport because her mobile died which meant no alarm to wake her up. If there hadn't been an issue settling her hostel bill since the front desk clerk claimed there was a problem with her Barclay card which meant pretending to enter one of the empty pool rooms to call Barclays but slipping into the toilets instead. Then out through the window without injuring her legs or alarming the few street kids passing on skateboards, chatting and smoking in clusters. She jumped out into parched Sydney streets that had become concrete enemies, exiting into the blazing heat, wonky, small silver suitcase in tow, wheels squeaking like a distorted instrument for the unlucky. A suitcase full of broken Sydney dreams folded mockingly between bright clothes, her black bar tending uniform. And she rushing through traffic to hail a cab, cast out from a bloodshot vision like a split thirteenth apostle sewn back together. By the time she reached the airport, made it to the check in area breathing heavily as though about to birth something tiny and unrecognisable through her mouth, an offering to the gaunt faced flight attendant in exchange for good news, it felt too late. The attendant sported a tight brunette bun that made her look severe. Her name badge read Christina. Calmly she said "I'm afraid you've missed your flight love. It left ten minutes ago; you'll have to book another one. You don't have any insurance, there's nothing else I can do." It was delivered unsympathetically, coldly. Kara got the impression she'd said this many times before in autopilot mode. She ran a



hand through her shoulder length braids, felt her armpits producing sweat beads to water unfulfilled half formed women that grew on runways. Bodies swirled around her, flashes of colour on a broad never ending canvass of travellers who would drink from the periphery while their fingers moulded plane engine noise into surprising shapes. The din of the airport rose in the afternoon heat. Her pretty face crumbled. Her heart sank. Her mouth went dry. This was the problem with being late often. It actually changed outcomes when it mattered.

She booked another flight to London which left her with only £100 for the rest of the month. *Jesus Pontius Pilate Christ!* She'd have to eat Rice Crispies for breakfast and lunch and scrambled eggs with sardines and hard dough bread for dinner for at least two weeks. *Pontius ras clat Pilate.* Kara wandered through the airport shops thinking of home in Forest Hill; the wooden floors, the high white ceilings and large windows. The stumpy cactus on her cracked kitchen window sill she'd bled on after cutting her finger accidentally while slicing plantain. She was convinced it was dead, that her bulbs of blood only temporarily sated it. She had a way of killing things unwittingly. She pictured the shrivelled cactus, its thirsty soil, the desires she'd hoped would come to fruition in Sydney wearing dead, prickly cactus skin, sitting still on plane seats to be flown to various destinations. She thought of women who didn't know what to do with the sea inside them. Who didn't know how to let it line their paths or flush out neon signs forming in the blood to misdirect them in gloriously foreign countries.



After wandering around for about an hour, she settled into the seating area opposite an Espresso coffee house. She looked up at the screen for an update on her flight. The man to her right watched her curiously. He was Aborigine, dressed in blue jeans, a warm coloured Aztec style shirt and a black cowboy hat. His long hair curled past his shoulders. He held a dark brown leather bag. He smiled warmly at her. His broad features stretched. It was a beautiful, welcoming smile. He offered her his hand, shook hers enthusiastically. “You look like you could do with some good fortune eh? I’m Kizzy.”

She adjusted in her seat, pulling her shoulders up so she didn’t slouch. “Kara. Probably not the best company right now, spent more money today than I have in the last month.” She grumbled.

He chuckled, in a way that was infectious not rude. Not as if he was laughing at her misfortune.

“A good distraction is to talk to a stranger and eat sweets.” His eyes were alert, persuasive, the gold in them darkening intermittently.

“That’s your solution to my problems?” She retorted, unconvinced, stretching long restless legs out.

“Well its one solution eh missy?” His lips curled. He opened his leather bag. Sure enough, it was choc full of sweets, bright red packets of Liquorice begging to be ripped open. The brand name was Kookaburra. Kookaburra Liquorice.



“Help yourself.” He instructed. An announcement for an abandoned dog was made on the tannoy. He opened a packet, popped a short stick of liquorice in his mouth, chewing slowly, savouring the taste.

Kara grabbed a handful she’d save for later, stuffing them into her rucksack like a magician stowing tricks she’d use in time.

Kizzy smelled like spicy incense. His dark, velvety brown skin glowed. Kara imagined the pulse in his neck had a silvery wing flickering beside it, as if it too had attempted a flight journey which went wrong. A leather watch in his pocket matched his bag, showing the incorrect time of 11am. He began to hum then. A quiet rumbling that got into her bones slowly, a drug transported through song. She didn’t think to ask how he’d known she’d suffered a misfortune because the air was charged with something indefinable, molten, till she heard the wing beside his pulse changing direction.

“What does the song mean?” she asked, resisting the urge to reach out to touch whatever had been released in the space between them.

He took his hat off, turning it slowly to a distant rhythm. “Maybe it’s about becoming what we consume, a song for a woman in translation.”

Back in London, Kara emerged from Forest Hill overground station dishevelled, starving. Plane food had been paltry, inadequate. She remembered the strips of liquorice in her rucksack, followed by Kizzy’s potent smile, the confession that he was of no fixed abode, that he liked to fly god’s class rather than first, he’d quipped drinking juice from Banksia plants instead of alcohol that tasted like kangaroo piss. Her stomach rumbled, punctuating



her pattern of thoughts. It was Saturday, the start of Open House week when people in Forest Hill received strangers into their homes to share artwork, conversation, music. Anything. The streets hummed with activity. In the station forecourt, she passed tables of free edible plants. Hordes of people gathered around them were resistant to an orderly queue, grabbing plants like Okra, Winter Luxury Pumpkin, Dill, Rosemary. Some children left their parents' sides, rushing to the ticket machines, pressing their hands against the screens as if gathering evidence of the day's journeys so far. They ran to the bikes under the shelter, leaning against each other in a false sense of stability. They circled the brightly painted piano, thrashing the keys in barely contained musical chaos before threading their way through the rest of the forecourt. Kara reached inside her rucksack with tired hands, grabbing a packet of liquorice. She ripped it open, bit into one, momentarily closing her eyes in delight as the sweet bitter taste flooded her tongue. On the Dartmouth Road where her flat was situated, she passed a mural of a giant white haired woman in the clouds, surrounded by a fleet of red birds. The strip of liquorice melted into her blood. She popped another one in her mouth. They were so moreish, she finished the packet right there on the street. In her suitcase, the bar outfit spilled a small electric horizon from the black shirt collar into a zip, an insect dead from shock in the right light.

At the flat, she fell asleep in the bedroom. When she woke up, her body felt supple, soft, bendy, unfamiliar. She spotted a dark stain on the blue bed sheet. She looked at it with suspicion, rubbed the spot. Her fingers were



black, liquorice coloured, stretchy. Her heart rate tripled. She leapt off the bed somewhat unsteadily. Rushed to the mauve coloured bathroom, skin care products lined the edges of the tub, crowded the sink. She accidentally knocked over a bottle of Palmers Cocoa Butter Crème in her haste. Her toothbrush went flying. She switched on the light. The 60 watt bulb stuttered in anticipation as she rushed to the mirror, light flickering sporadically as though arguing with itself. Chest heaving, she starred at her reflection, her breath pale magician's smoke. Sure enough she was not herself. Or, she was herself but something different. Something skewed and accidental, something tainted with the margin particles of an incense smelling man who could mimic the curves of a sidewinder. Her bathroom had become a circus balancing on two hinges, rocking unsteadily in the ether. She took tentative steps closer to the mirror. Sure enough she had transformed into liquorice; a black, sweet liquorice woman, a liquorice sweet black woman; bendy, stretchy, adaptable in harsh conditions, resplendent and irrepressible. Reconfigured heart oozing liquid midnight, necessary external jaggedness flung out like day traps, moist turning tongue set anti-clockwise to catch soft light, soft memory, soft landing. She turned the taps on for the sound of the sea to fill the sink and tub. All that came through was bursting, rushing water. She placed her hand under the cold tap, the weight of water bending her fingers slightly. She used her right hand to adjust them back, then raised both hands to water her head with night dew. She turned the cold tap off. The blast of hot water meant the pipes started whistling. Slowly, then speedily, panicked by the possibilities of changes tumbling through their lengthy, corroded bodies. She pressed her



fingers into her head, feeling her way around for a crack. Steam misted the mirror. She didn't want to melt. Melting meant not existing. She turned the hot water tap off, waiting for the whistling to stop. She started screaming.

The fading sounds of the chugging pipes mutated into an alarm ringing in her head. Anxiety spread from the very heart of her, a burning sensation in her new body. Sydney had been a disaster. She was broken by it. Almost. She stepped back away from the mirror, trying to weigh the ache within, the losses she'd left on Sydney harbour turning to twisted currencies glowing in the dark, the octopus shaped critter that had tried to gain entry into her suitcase to find a corner to possess. She pressed her mouth against that corner to breathe, to steady herself; loss of confidence, loss of income, loss of heart, loss of lover. The ache inside her grew into a kite shaped slipstream spotted with silver. She started to cry, heaving sobs threatening to become accomplices in the cramped bathroom. She needed to fill the ache, to do something. It was open house week after all. She grabbed a black bin bag from the top of the cabinet.

Around 1am she wandered the streets, bin bag in tow. Squishy sounds of her new limbs kept her company. She walked to the sprawling Horniman Museum gardens, found nothing to catch except the reflection of her old self in the café's glass doors and windows. That Kara had gone to Australia chasing a story; a dreadlocked molasses hued man who believed his lost mother appeared to him during volcano eruptions, who took tender



photographs that captured her silhouette exiting those eruptions. Kara had wanted to write his story but the man gave her heart to a volcano for his mother to eat. On the steep London Road, she entered the white houses through windows left open. She gathered from the inhabitants things most people would never take during open house; the post office clerk's fear of failure, the sweet shop assistant's paranoia he'd die before doing half the items on his bucket list, the glint from the blade the kebab shop owner used to carve scenes for three stillborn babies trapped in a revolving winter, the deli owner's conversations to the gremlin he'd transplanted into his chest, that kept trying to break ceilings with a long, slimy tentacle. She wandered through houses while people slept, humming the tune Kizzy sang at the airport, leaving a trail of deep, warm sweetness, stuffing her bag until it was fit to burst. When she arrived back home, the bin liner split on her bed, on the crumpled tulip patterned duvet. The things she'd caught had charred wings and were flapping towards possible exits frenetically. White airbags sprung from the corners of her bed, shrieking incessantly before the air left them twisted into mean, sunken expressions. And the sharp pain exploding in Kara's chest before liquefying was unbearable.

After discovering that a last self collision resulted in change you couldn't foresee, Kara limped out onto the Dartmouth road the next morning, having caught her left foot in a trap she'd flung from herself. She clutched her plane ticket to Sydney, a sacrificial woman in the heat hollering Kizzy's song about becoming what you eat. It was bright out. The day was alcoholic. As she



sang, her body began to separate. Her head went first, tossed into the blind spot of a sputtering drunk holding a Guinness can like a lover. Her head shrank rapidly. Her legs came off, tumbling backwards into an argument between the off license owner and a woman holding a leash without a dog she claimed she'd lost at Heathrow airport. Kara's golden eyes uprooted into the traffic, speedily rolling between lanes, between tires, frantically blinking away images of a life that were discarded receipts for gutted angels with streaks of black tears on their faces, reduced to husks on the bent skyline. Her arms were dark boomerangs confused by an unplanned separation, the dizziness of slow traffic in the sky, attempting to embrace satellite dishes, antennas, and items that found their way to rooftops while the road swelled with resignation of a split, of a break somewhere that saw small creatures from accidents with Kara's last heartbeats mutating in their chests as they scurried onto the pavements on either side, leaving patches of unleaded fuel and kaleidoscopic red in their attempts to talk. Residents from cafes and the boutique, village like stores and eateries including The Hill Lounge and Kitchen and Bird In Hand spilled out onto the street watching. Two assistants from Sugar Mountain sweet shop abandoned its light, tantalising atmosphere of deep booths, board games and seductive retro sweets in large jars. They rushed out carrying a jar each to catch bits of Kara's body. People from Forest Hill Pools filed out barefoot onto the pavement still in their costumes, dripping translucent daydreams doubling as swimming strokes beneath the sun. The locals were chess pieces held still by a human combustion on a glimmering day. Kara's thighs spun. One slid down a lamppost, leaving a dark, honey like



trail before becoming stuck at the bottom. The other slid across the window display of Il Mirto's Italian deli and Ice Cream store. Her head now reduced to pulp was being lapped up by the drunk on all fours in abandon. His tongue darting greedily, the Guinness can forgotten, squashed under his knee, pennies spilling from his pocket like a marauding coppery fountain. Kara's mouth was sylph like, chased by an aboriginal cowboy's hat into the distance before it melted onto the rim in the shape of an atom bursting, an accidental decoration. Her scattered teeth were white jewels for the afternoon. A stuntman man in a diving costume caught her vagina, sucking on it like the nectar of a goddess. Her hands were clasped together, prayer like while bits of clouds morphed into the shapes of temporary pale clothing for the inhabitants of Forest Hill to wear as the uniform of witnesses. After their naïve prayer, her hands eventually melted on the wheel of a dented blue Ford Cortina that would run out of fuel later. And all that was left was the morning to come. All that was left was her torso on the edge; black, gleaming, edible, sweet. Liquorice sweet. Full of warped, rhapsodic song in the traffic.