The Bald and the Beautiful

William Bradley

*General Hospital* was particularly good today. The trial of Brenda and Jason for Alcazar's murder began, but Brenda did not appear in court. They are both innocent, of course. Framed, most likely, by one of Sonny's enemies. Maybe a foe from the past, back to settle a score. Only one thing's for certain—I'll be tuning in tomorrow.

Ostensibly, these soap operas are just on for background noise, something to fill the silence of the apartment while I write next semester's syllabuses or dust the bookshelves or make notes for my book. But as I do these things, I find my gaze wandering towards the television, where dark, chiseled men have their arms around the waists of slim, gorgeous women and say things like, “You taught me what it means to love.” And I find myself ignoring the important, mundane tasks of real life, preferring, instead, a world of mobsters, secret agents, teenage lovers, and evil twins.

And later, as my fiancée and I sit on the couch, watching a documentary or a foreign film, she tells me something she read earlier that day about the roles women played in Middleton's city comedies, and I respond with, “You know, I'm pretty sure that Cameron is Zander’s father, but he doesn’t realize that he’s right there in Port Charles.”

Emily is fairly easygoing, and she puts up with a lot of inane comments, but at this she sighs and says, “How can you watch those things?”

“They’re da bomb,” I answer.

She doesn’t say anything. Just tries not to smile. In our graduate student relationship, it is generally understood that she is the serious one, and that I’m the fool she puts up with. She plays the straight man, rolling her eyes and groaning at me. Deep down, though, I think part of the reason we get along so well is that she finds me charming in my goofiness.

So I elaborate. “I like soap operas because the actors get to say things like, ‘I will destroy you.’”

“Uh-huh,” she says, raising her eyebrows and folding her arms across her chest. “And that appeals why?”

“Well, I mean, it’s funny. How many times have you told someone you were going to destroy him?”

“Never.”

“Exactly. Me neither. But they say it all the time on soap operas. ‘I will destroy you.’ It’s awesome. I’d love to be able to say dialogue like that. Also, I like it when the guys on the shows are all dark and seductive. They glare out of the tops of their eyes, really intense. Like this.” I lower my head slightly and gaze at her with the most smoldering intensity I can muster. Lowering my voice, I say, “I can see the light of a thousand stars in your eyes.”

“Ooookay,” she says, pushing against my chest and rising from the couch. She walks out of the room, towards the kitchen.

My mother is really the only person I can talk soap operas with. When I was 21 and diagnosed with Hodgkin’s disease, I had to move back into my parents’ house. My mother and I would spend our afternoons in the living room watching adulterers and blackmailers scheme, while the heroic characters struggled to overcome the obstacles these villains placed in front of them. And the amazing thing was, the good guys almost always did overcome. Sure, the villains might gain a temporary victory or two, and—if an actor decided to leave a show—a heroic character’s plane might crash into the Pacific or something.

But the thing about soap operas—and this gets left out when people criticize them—is that virtue is always rewarded, and vice is always punished. If you cheat on your wife, she will eventually find out and leave you for your brother. If you fake your child’s DNA test, the real father will eventually piece things together and raise the kid with his new, good-hearted wife. If you try to use your weather controlling device to freeze the entire town of Port Charles—and all of its citizens—in an effort to conquer the world as a power-mad dictator, the device will eventually be turned on you and you will wind up being frozen alive.

I think we can all learn a lot from that.

More important, though, it seems to me that soap operas offer a type of permanence, something you can count on. Actors may change, super-couples may ride off into the sunset, heroic characters may eventually be replaced by younger, hotter bodies that look better shirtless or in a bikini, but you can usually turn on a soap opera—any soap opera—and figure out what’s going on pretty quickly. The good guys show their teeth when they smile; the bad guys smirk. The eyes of the villainess will dart about nervously, while the heroine’s gaze stays fixed and constant. Storylines may end, but they’re guaranteed to reappear a few years later. One character’s evil twin will be taken care of, but someone else will have a doppelganger soon enough; the popular couple will face a grave threat to their relationship, but they’ll emerge stronger than ever; the character who dies will somehow come back, if he’s charismatic enough to have left an impression on the viewers.

As I watched while chemotherapy devoured my cancer—along with the lining of my stomach and my hair follicles—I was struck by the feeling that these shows will go on forever. Many of them—*The Young and the Restless, Days of
Our Lives, General Hospital—started long before I was born, and will, presumably, continue long after I am gone.

As my condition deteriorated, my mother and I moved from our living room couch to the sterilized furniture of a hospital room (perhaps a dying room) in Ann Arbor. But those beautiful people still appeared on the glowing box, alternately pleading eternal love and planning corporate takeovers. In that hospital room, handsome men made love to beautiful women, while I vomited up mouthfuls of bile, my intestines burned with painful diarrhea, and the lining of my mouth dried and cracked. Things got worse and worse for me, until, untill…

Until, at the very last moment, a crack team of medical specialists arrived to administer one last, experimental treatment. Drs. Monica and Alan Quartermaine, Dr. Rick Weber, and Nurse Bobbie Spencer arrived from Port Charles’ General Hospital; Dr. John Hudson and Dr. Janie Frame were flown in from Bay City General; Dr. Ben Davidson came all the way from Llanview, Pennsylvania. “You'll be fine,” Bobbie whispered to me as the doctors tried to work a miracle. Fighting back tears, she said, “I won't let you die.”

“He's coding!” Ben exclaimed.

“No,” Alan shouted as he worked above me. “I won't lose this one. Not him. Not him!”

“Don’t you die on me,” Monica pleaded. “Don’t you die on me.”
And suddenly, at the last possible moment, the machinery started beeping rhythmically.

“His cancer!” Janie exclaimed. “It's going into remission!”

“It’s a miracle,” John replied, clenching his jaw.

Okay. That's not exactly how it happened, but that's close enough. There wasn't actually a beeping machine, but my doctors did work diligently, and I survived as a result of their efforts. My continued survival—will be six years this December—could indeed be considered miraculous, considering how close to cancellation the days of my life actually came.

These days, I find soap operas comforting. Cars blow up, pregnancies are faked, lies get told, and people are shot. But none of it is surprising. No one has ever watched a soap opera and said, “My God! I can’t believe that happened!” No one’s life has ever been changed by something he or she saw on a daytime drama.

This, I think, is why Emily is so surprised by my fascination with these shows. We both study literature for a living, and we both believe in the transformative power of art. We have long conversations about how the works of Montaigne, Shakespeare, Beethoven, Andy Warhol, Joan Didion, David Lynch, and Tobias Wolff challenge our perceptions, and provide for an enlightened understanding of the world. And we both turn up our noses at movies and television shows that pander or simplify—particularly when they seem to aspire to profundity.

But I still love soap operas. They don’t pretend to have any amount of depth, as shows like E.R. or The West Wing attempt to. The most they can offer is predictability and stability. In a world where wars get launched for dubious reasons, where my livelihood may be threatened by a fickle state legislature’s cutbacks in education, and where a 21-year-old is forced to realize that his life can—and will—be snuffed out, probably without much notice, that type of predictability can feel like divine intervention.

I often wish that life were more like a soap opera. It’s not that I need more melodrama in my life—I had quite enough six years ago—but their simplified world seems easier to live in. For example, several months ago, when my grandmother died, Emily and I had a conversation about our future, and I had to tell her—as gently as I could—that I will die much sooner than she will; my medical history guarantees it. I will die before her; I will leave her alone. “I want you to be happy,” I promised her. “Even when I’m gone.”

It was hard for us both, but it was something that had to be said. I didn’t feel that we could commit till death do us part until we had discussed what exactly that might mean. I was afraid that she was unaware of the risks, that my own positive attitude and goofy charm might have given her the impression that there was nothing to be scared of, in terms of my cancer and the chances for a relapse or damage from long-term side-effects of treatment.

It turned out I needn’t have worried. She tearfully assured me that she understood the risks, the likelihood that she would go on without me someday. That getting married means that, when the relationship ends, rather than divide up the CDs and the books, one person buries the other in the ground. She put her face against my chest and cried, and I reminded her that we are both in perfect health, and would likely live for a long, long time.

And I wished that life were a soap opera. I wished that, instead of sitting on the couch offering weak reassurances, I could lift her up in my arms, kiss her neck, chin, and lips, and tell her, with certainty, that things would always be good.

“There’s never anything for you to worry about, ever again. When I’m thoughtless or cruel, it’s not me; it’s my evil twin. If my plane goes down, my car blows up, my cancer comes back, or for some other reason you have to order my headstone, don’t despair. It’s okay. I will be back, a few years later, in a dramatic, triumphant return. Love never dies, and nor will I.”

But since life isn’t a soap opera, I just kept my arm around her shoulders and kissed the top of her head until it was time to go to sleep.