

## Pet Shop Girl

Today I was a teenager. Around four– no, maybe fifteen. Such a claustrophobic age. I'd never liked it.

The first time around, fifteen had seemed like nothing more than the door on the other side of sixteen. A stuffy waiting room was fifteen. One with no air-conditioning, a thoroughly-thumbed stack of *Town & Country* and a vending machine with a sign that said OUT OF ORDER. It was the pregnant silence before the starting gun, or so I thought. When I did eventually turn sixteen on a dismally grey day in January, I was assaulted with the realisation that sixteen was really no better than fifteen. And so it continued. Each year another loop of my mortal coil was wound round Age's finger. Well. Until it wasn't.

I scooped a few sherbet lemons into the paper bag and popped one in my mouth. Then another. The woman behind the till didn't look up from her crossword. I filled the bag up to the very top. Strawberry laces, jelly snakes, flying saucers, Love Hearts, gobstoppers, sour cherries. The woman weighed it on the scale.

"Two pounds forty-three."

I built a tower of twenty pence pieces on the counter.

"Undone by the sun. Six letters, second letter C," she muttered, sucking her teeth.

"Icarus," I told her.

She looked up at me then, eyes narrowed, then back down at the crossword.

"So it is."

I bit the head off a jelly snake and put the bag of sweets in my pocket.

"Artful. Four words."

"Deft."

I crossed to the door, deftly.

“Obscure marginal seat, one I could secure all things being equal. Fourteen letters, fifth letter I, seventh letter A.”

“Egalitarianism,” I called over my shoulder.

Over the feeble tinkling of the bell I heard her say, “Ah. Thought so.”

The street outside was teeming with maroon blazers. The first time I’d been fifteen, I’d worn my skirt down to my knees and my hair in two long plaits, and had spent the majority of the school day staring down at my ugly brown brogues. This morning, as I sat in front of the mirror and assessed this new face – no, not *new*, I’d lived in it before – this...*revisited* face, I decided to change it up a bit. The blazers parted like the maroon sea as I stalked through them, dressed in a leather jacket, ripped fishnet tights, black lace-up boots and a purple dress that clung to every inch of my still-flat frame. I’d lined my eyes and painted my lips post-box red. I heard a boy wolf-whistle, or at least attempt to. I enjoyed the stares. It was nice. To be looked at. No one had spared a glance at me yesterday. Yesterday I had looked...quite different. It’d been a few weeks since I’d been young.

I found a bench in the park. A man in a grey suit and orange tie sat down next to me. He was speaking loudly on the phone to someone called Jeffrey. I frowned at him. He noticed. He told Jeffrey he’d see him in the boardroom and hung up.

“Good morning,” he said, uncertainly.

I chewed on a strawberry lace and wondered how long it’d take until he asked me whether I should be in school.

“Shouldn’t you be in school?” He asked.

I finished the strawberry lace and replaced it with bubble-gum. He cleared his throat and nodded to the paper bag of sweets in my pocket.

“Nutritious breakfast you’ve got there.”

I smiled sweetly at him. He smiled back. Then I took my bubble-gum out, stuck it behind my ear, replaced it with a Marlboro Gold, lit up, and blew a smoke ring in his face. He blinked several times. I heard him telling Jeffrey about me as he marched away.

I ground my cigarette under the toe of my boot and decided, for no particular reason, to go to the pet shop. The sharp April breeze bit at my exposed legs, but I didn’t care. I’d been holed up in the flat too long. I was often holed up in the flat too long. It wasn’t because I was scared someone would realise. No. Who would ever suspect? Even Nosey Neighbour Norman downstairs would have a hard time piecing this one together.

The pet shop smelled of sawdust and bleach. I peered at the rabbits and guinea pigs. Made a face at the mice and rats. Nearly choked on a pear drop at the bearded dragon. I wandered over to the fish tanks. Dozens lined the walls. I read each plaque beside them. Goldfish. Clownfish. Angel Fish. Black Moor. Swordtail. Elephant Ear Betta. Wood Shrimp. I paused by a large tank. It contained a single fish that was every colour I could think of. The plaque next to it read: Siamese Fighter. Then underneath: Should be kept singly. The fish was hardly moving in its solitary prison, gazing lazily back at me. I reached out a hand, a fifteen-year-old hand, small and smooth, so unlike the one I was painting with yesterday, which was rough and callused and pigmented. I pressed the pad of my fingertip to the tank. The fish didn’t move.

“You’re not the only one behind glass,” I told it, sternly.

It fluttered its fin dismissively.

Then a voice behind me said, “Why are you talking to the fish?”

I turned. A girl was staring at me amusedly. Her arms were laden with boxes of dog biscuits, which she dumped unceremoniously at my feet.

"Why are *you* talking to *me*?" I shot back.

She shrugged.

"No judgement. I talk to them all the time. You can tell them anything at all and they forget it in like six seconds. It's cathartic."

She looked a few years older than me. Than me today. She'd pinned badges all over her uniform. One of them said IMPOSSIBLE. Another was shaped like a dragonfly.

"Need any help with anything?" She asked.

"Nope," I said, tersely.

"Kay."

She was the most beautiful person I had ever seen. She picked up the boxes and turned to go. I tried to think of something to say.

"You have grey eyes," I said.

*You have grey eyes. You have grey fucking eyes? What?*

She raised an eyebrow, smiling slightly.

"They're...very rare. Less than one percent of the world have grey eyes. They scatter light differently. It's to do with a lack of melanin."

*SHUT. UP.*

"Cool," she said. "And you have green eyes. Like...sea glass."

"Yes," I nodded, wishing to spontaneously combust.

"Let me know if the fish talk back," she called as she walked away.

I turned back to the Siamese Fighter.

"That was your fault," I told it.

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“Are you visiting someone?” Nosey Neighbour Norman asked, looking down his large nose at me, which was almost purple with broken blood vessels.

*Here we go.*

“Yup,” I said, breezing past him up the stairs.

“Flat four, is it?”

“Yup.”

“And who are you?”

“Her sister.”

“Gets a lot of visitors, doesn’t she?”

“Yup.”

I heard him mutter something about a *bloody recluse* before I let myself into my flat.

Sitting on the counter as I waited for the kettle to boil, I thought about Pet Shop Girl. I thought about her as I buttered some toast and cut the crusts off. I thought about her as I dropped the needle on to the vinyl and Dolores O’Riordan’s voice filled the studio.

I studied my fifteen-year-old face in the mirror, turning the paintbrush over and over in my hands. Yesterday’s face was still sitting on the easel. I pinned it up on the wall with all the others. A thousand pairs of green eyes watched me as I painted another.

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When I woke up I was on the wrong side of forty. I examined myself in the shower. Yesterday’s jutting ribcage and flat chest were gone. Today I was fuller, softer. I traced the stretch marks with my finger.

I perused the 40-50 section of my wardrobe. I selected a teal cashmere cardigan, white blouse and bootcut jeans, and coiled my hair back at the base of my neck. It was greying slightly at the temples.

I ordered a three-shot hazelnut milk latte in the shop at the end of the street, which burned my tongue and made me jittery. I sipped it as I walked to the pet shop.

The fish from yesterday was swimming aimlessly around its tank. I watched it for a while, chewing on a gobstopper. I could hear Pet Shop Girl humming as she stacked some shelves an aisle over. She appeared a moment later, wearing silver hoop earrings and a bored expression. It tweaked upwards into a smile as she saw me. My heart sputtered.

“Hi. Can I help you?”

“No. Yes. No. I’m fine. Thank you.”

*Smooth.*

She nodded and turned to go.

“Wait. Actually, yes. Yes, you can help me.”

She turned back.

“I was wondering...I wondered if you could recommend a brand of...fish food?”

“Sure,” she nodded, leading me over to a shelf.

I asked her if she had any fish. She told me that she had seven fish. I asked if they had names. She told me their names were Dopey, Grumpy, Happy, Doc, Bashful, Sneezzy and Sleepy, after the dwarfs in *Snow White*. I asked her which one was her favourite. She told me it was Grumpy.

When I thanked her for her help and bought the foul-smelling fish food for my non-existent fish, she smiled and said *my pleasure*.

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I could sense Nosey Neighbour Norman standing behind his front door, watching me through the peep hole. I resisted the urge to throw up a finger.

My new paints had arrived. I'd bought them with the money from the last painting I'd sold. It had been of a lighthouse in a storm. The guy who'd bought it had started quoting Virginia Woolf at me down the phone. I'd hung up as soon as the payment had come through. I never sold the faces. My faces. I set to work on the new one, resenting myself for having hoped that *she* ever could have recognised it.

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The sun streamed through the curtains as I heaved myself out of bed, arms shaking with the effort. I reached for my stick.

These were the worst days. These were the days I didn't leave the flat, the days I sat curled on the sofa watching mind-numbing teleshopping channels until it was time to go to sleep again. Everything took five times as long in this body. I scrabbled round for my glasses, nearly tripping over yesterday's sandals. I scowled at the 80-90 section of my wardrobe.

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"Here you are, love," a balding man on the bus said, gesturing to the seat he'd just vacated.

I thanked him, and then winced, hating this voice. I looked out the window, watching the world through glass.

It was Saturday, so the pet shop was busier than usual. Children whined and clamoured and cried. My fish gazed at them disdainfully. I wished I was under water, too. She was stacking shelves. Pet Shop Girl. Her perfume smelled of cherries.

"Morning," she said, smiling kindly.

Her dark hair was braided down her back. My own hair was white and wispy. I'd hidden it under an ugly tartan hat. She'd added a new badge to her tunic. It said: *Just Be*. I realised then that she was looking at me expectantly.

"Yes. Sorry. Good morning."

“Are you after something in particular?”

“No. No, thank you. I’m just looking.”

She peered round me at the Siamese Fighter.

“That one’s been a favourite recently. It’s favourite of mine too.”

“Are you interested in fish?” I asked her.

“Oh yes,” she said, nodding eagerly. “I’m actually taking evening classes in aquaculture and marine biology. I want to be a conservationist.”

She pointed to a badge on her collar that says: *Save Our Oceans*.

“I wish you the best of luck with that,” I told her, and meant it.

She beamed at me.

“What beautiful eyes you have,” I said, softly. “Grey eyes are very rare, you know.”

She blinked. Then turned a little pink.

“Oh. Thank you. Yours are...lovely too.”

I stared into her raincloud eyes and decided to paint them.

\* \* \*

“Fuck,” said the seven-year-old in the mirror.

I pulled a face. I pulled on a pink pinafore. I pulled up a stool to reach the high-up cupboard. It was too risky. I shouldn’t leave the flat today. I knew that. A child on their own would draw too much attention. Someone might even call the police. But I had to see her. Yesterday’s wrinkled face watched me from the canvas as I let myself out the front door.

I stayed close to other children, following families, trailing behind them, hopping from one to the other until I reached the pet shop. My fish was waiting for me. Pet Shop Girl was mopping the floor by the tanks. She knelt down beside me.

“Hello,” she said, softly. “Where’s your mum then?”

I shrugged.

“Do you like the fish?” She asked.

I nodded.

“Which one d’you like best?”

I pointed at the Siamese Fighter. A flicker of surprise rippled in her eyes as she took in my own. Then I pointed at her shirt.

“I like your badges,” I squeaked.

“Oh, these?” She said, looking down at them. “Thank you. I make them myself.”

Then, without quite knowing why, I ran.

I opened a tube of Love Hearts on the way home. The first one said: *YOU GOT THIS!*

I dropped it down a drain.

I didn’t wait for the portrait to dry before I hung it up beside the others. Then I painted her eyes, and cried.

\* \* \*

For weeks I went to the pet shop. Some days she wasn’t there. They were the emptiest days. But most days she was. When I spoke to her, when she looked at me, I felt...well. That’s just it. I *felt*.

\* \* \*

Today I was the age I’d been when Age had...malfunctioned. Twenty-two: the calm before the chronological fuck-up. Three years ago I had woken up on a crisp, cold morning in September and had thought that I’d still been dreaming. I’d blanched. I’d screamed. I’d clawed at the loose skin on my face and hands. I’d turned away from the mirror, slowed my breathing, convinced myself that it *wasn’t real, wasn’t real, wasn’t real*. Then I’d looked into the glass again and the process had started over.

After about a week, when it became clear that this – whatever *this* was – was never going away, I recalled sitting on the floor in the corner of my studio, looking around ten or eleven, covered in green paint, holding my canvas and staring into my own eyes. Because only they had stayed the same. I remembered feeling an overwhelming sense of grief. Not for the life I'd left behind, but for the life I was supposed to have lived. Every new realisation of all that I could never now do, all I could never now see, all I could never now be, burned me. Kicked me in the stomach and stamped on my windpipe. The world shrunk. It closed in. I sat there for hours in the darkness, being buried under that landslide of unlived losses.

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My hair was the colour of autumn. I chose a black skirt and blue T-shirt from the 20-30 section of my wardrobe, and ate a bowl of Cheerios with no milk.

“Not seen *you* in a while,” Nosey Neighbour Norman said on the landing.

“Yup.”

He shook his head as I sat on the bannister and slid down to the bottom.

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“I'd like this one, please,” I said to Pet Shop Girl, pointing at the Siamese Fighter.

She looked at me, then at the fish, then back at me. I waited.

But she only said, “Sure.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek. She returned a moment later with a net and an odd expression on her face.

“Do I know you?”

My chest constricted.

“I...I don't know. Do you?”

“I feel as though I do,” she said, thoughtfully.

I rubbed my palms on my skirt. She opened the tank and gently ensnared the fish in her net. It looked rather disgruntled.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Silver. As in Long John. What’s yours?”

“Sage,” I told her. “As in the herb used to ward off evil spirits.”

She laughed, dropping my fish into a water-filled plastic bag and handing it to me.

“Nice to meet you, Sage. Although I feel like I’ve met you before.”

I wanted to say: You have met me before, Silver. I see you every day. But you don’t know it’s me. Because some days I’m a child, some days I’m an old woman, some days I’m thirty, or forty, or fifty-seven and three quarters. I live in the wrong order. I am an anomaly, an aberration, an ontological oddity. I don’t know why. Perhaps I never will. All I do know is that I’m terrified. I’m so fucking terrified of spending the rest of my life alone. You are so beautiful. You are the lighthouse in the storm. You are my favourite colour. And I’m watching you. And you’re looking at me. And I hate myself for hoping that you’ll see me.

But I didn’t say that.

“You have grey eyes,” I told her.

She angled her head, blinked, frowned slightly. I clutched the bag containing my fish and stared back at her, hardly daring to breathe, willing her to understand.

I thought of every face I’d ever painted. There was only one part of me that Age couldn’t alter, couldn’t change.

Grey eyes looked into green. And widened.