

Whoever She Is

by Katie Johnson

I am sitting on the edge of one of those large, circular beds you never see outside of old black and white photographs. The sheets are pink; the pillows are numerous and heart-shaped, a spectrum of red and pink and gold. The wallpaper is an odd shade of baby pink with a gold trim, and the many pieces of ornate furniture are painted gold to match. The hotel calls it the Valentine Suite, and I am feeling out of place in my stuffy suit and tie.

It looks like Cupid threw up.

Seated at the tacky golden vanity is a girl who looks to be about the age of a college freshman. Her hair is long, black, and very straight, peppered with cheap plastic barrettes in neon pinks and blues and yellows. Her back is turned to me, but the reflection of her liquid-gold eyes gazes at me in the mirror.

“How old do I look to you?” she asks.

I sigh. “We play this game every time; I always guess wrong.”

She smiles at me. She looks very Asian, aside from the eye color. “Mm, true, but I didn’t ask you to guess how old I *am*. How old do I *look*?”

I shrug. “Eighteen, maybe nineteen. I don’t know. Younger than last time. Younger than me.”

She begins picking the barrettes out of her hair, one by one, forming a small pile at the edge of the vanity. She adds her chunky plastic bracelets to the collection; they are the eighties pink of Barbie shoes.

“How old are you now?” she asks me. “You were, what, twenty last time? How long ago was that? I’m not so good with time anymore.”

“It’s been almost three years. I’ll be twenty-three next month.”

Her reflection wrinkles its nose at me as she sticks out her tongue. "Ew, old."

"We can't all be like you." I can't help but smile. She's electric, somehow.

She tosses her hair smugly and turns to look at me over her shoulder. "It's not as hard as you think."

"Oh?"

She removes her shirt and jeans, which are both a tacky, garish shade of yellow. The T-shirt has a print of a cartoon panda on the front; I watch it fall and clash with the scarlet carpet.

"Yeah." She shakes out her hair, examines herself in the mirror. Her fingers roam over her face as she stares into her own tawny eyes.

"Harmony?"

She starts, glances at me, and wags a finger in my direction. "Uh-uh, not Harmony anymore. I'm Amy right now, remember?"

I nod. "Sorry. Amy."

Satisfied, she turns her attention back to the mirror. She brings her fingers to her face and pushes up her cheekbones, her flesh like clay beneath her fingers. I watch, fascinated, as she molds her features to her liking. She rounds her eyes to an almond shape that better suits their odd coloring, lengthens her face, adjusts the nose, tweaks the shape of her ears just slightly. Her thin lips become full and alluring with an expert brush of her index finger. Once she is satisfied, she tousles her hair as if washing it, lightening the black to brown and eventually a dirty blonde color.

Content with her face, she sets to work on her figure, flaring out her hips and making her waist narrow to accommodate an hourglass shape.

She twirls before the mirror, examining herself from every angle. "What do you think?" she asks me.

“Nice,” I answer honestly, “very beautiful.”

She smiles brightly; her eyes dance, glittering like secrets in the lamplight. I melt a little bit on the inside.

“How old do I look now, do you think?”

I consider her question for a moment. There are, of course, no wrinkles, no scars, nothing that might even remotely mar her perfect countenance.

Ageless, I think. Timeless. Perfect.

I say, “Twenty.”

“I was going for twenty-one,” she says. “I love being able to drink.”

“I doubt you ever buy your own with a face like that.”

“I bought one for a boy once,” she retorts with an impish grin.

It’s sort of an inside joke: I met her at a bar on my eighteenth birthday, too scared to order a drink for myself. She was a petite redhead then, going by the name of Michelle, and no less beautiful than the nameless blonde before me now. She bought me a drink, which I realized after tasting it was ginger ale.

Since then I have met her on six different occasions.

Each time she has worn a different face and gone by a different name. I don’t know if she seeks me out or if I just keep finding her. No matter what face she wears, I always seem to know who she is.

Whoever she is.

“How did you learn to change your appearance like that, anyway?” I ask, attempting to stretch out the sore spot in my lower back. I had spent the previous night in a cheap hotel room an hour away; the lumpy mattress hadn’t exactly done wonders for my back.

She gets up and walks over to the small, generic hotel bathroom and rummages through the duffel bag on the counter; I watch her in the mirror as she slips into a red cocktail dress.

"It's not something I can explain. I just... do."

"Could you try to explain it?"

She returns to the main room and sits to put on a pair of strappy, deadly-looking stiletto heels. "It's all about focusing your energy," she says. "What do you think of the name Alysia? Or do I look like more of a Gwen to you? Nevermind; I like Gwen better. It's classy, don't you think?"

"Yeah, it is. Hey, Gwen."

"Hmm?" She is piling her hair on top of her head, pinning it with bobby pins.

"Why do we keep meeting like this? I mean, why me?"

I have been superstitiously avoiding this question for years. I am like a child; part of me believed that if I asked, she would stop finding me. The magic would be over, and some part of me can't live without it.

She turns to me and smiles. "Could be coincidence. Could be fate, if you believe in such a thing."

She leans in close to me, sits on the bed. Her arms snake around my shoulders. She leans close to my ear so that I can feel her breath as she whispers, "Or maybe I just like you."

She stands up, and I am frozen. If I move, the moment will be over; I am in a perpetual morning, unwilling to let go of the final remnants of a dream.

She takes her purse from the vanity and heads for the door. "I'll see you around, 'kay?"

"No," I say, almost pleading. "Just... stay. Just this once."

She smiles at me, and her expression is full of sadness, of pity. Her hand does not leave the doorknob.

"You're a sweet boy. Find a nice, normal girl. Settle down, get married, have kids. Do normal people things."

"Are you coming back?" I ask.

There is a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

“Sometime, maybe,” she replies airily. An impish sort of smile crosses her lips. “See ya.”

She closes the door and is gone. I don’t get up, don’t go after her. She’ll be back, I know. She always comes back.

And when she does, I’ll be waiting.