Palace of Cool

I’m in the back, washing coffee mugs. Afterwards I need to sort the beans, emptying the newly arrived bags into their respective bins. My place is in the back. I know this. But still I invent reasons to come to the front. I bring some coffee beans up to brew. I run grinder. I notice the music has stopped so I switch The Cranberries for The Counting Crows in the tape deck. I smell freshly brewed coffee mingling with the scent of the 18 or so bins of beans. It’s a comforting smell. I’m reminded of my father, who always seems to smell like this, even on his days off. I linger for a moment, watching him behind the counter, bantering easily with customers. He makes a joke about the weather.

“Yes,” he says, “It is colder than you would expect here. We say that you can always spot the tourists because they are dressed like it’s summer.”

Everyone laughs. He always seems to know what to say. He moves with a swagger that, to my 12-year-old eyes, is the knowing confidence of someone who belongs here, in this palace of cool.

Indeed, The Black Pearl *is* cool. Strong coffee, live music, Thursday night poetry readings, older people debating politics and current events, young people dressed in flannel or all in black: The Black Pearl is the epitome of cool.

I lean on the bar, which takes up almost one entire side of the long, narrow coffee house, and canvas the room. The brick walls are lined with bookshelves and paintings by local artists. Like a cave, The Pearl gets darker and dimmer as it goes back. The only natural light comes from the windows by the door. I stand in the shadows, looking frontwards.

A little old black man sits at a table out front, teaching my brother, Ben, how to play chess… the same way he taught me a few years before. I can’t hear what they’re saying over the noise inside the shop, but Benny seems frustrated. The tables and chairs on the opposite wall are filled with a variety of people. One table is occupied by obvious tourists, wearing fluorescent *Pismo Beach* sweaters, gossiping over lattés. At another table sit some cute guys, perhaps 10 years older than I, whom I watch shyly. They are dressed in flannel and conversing animatedly over coffee. They must know my father, as one calls to him by name.

“Hey Bruce, what is the name of the guy in Catch-22?”

*Yosarian*, I think to myself, but I don’t speak out loud. Instead I hear my father shout the same answer over the counter.

My older sister walks through the door. Her ankle length skirt hangs low at her hips, barely above her pubic bone. Her tank top ends right below her breasts, revealing her slender torso. As she turns I can see the tattoo in the small of her back. Another adorns her left shoulder, barely covered by her hair. Her hips move as she walks, and her long spiral curls sway to the beat. I roll my eyes in disgust, but secretly I’m jealous. She stops at the counter and smiles sweetly at my father. She leans in and speaks to him quietly. I can’t hear what they are talking about over the chatter of guests and the stereo in the background. She is only three years older than I am, but they seem to understand each other in some adult way that is beyond me. She is his favorite, I am sure of it.

I could never be his favorite. I’m not mature like Erin, who has already been to jail. I don’t pitch fits and demand attention the way Kymber does. Ben is the only boy. Melissa is the baby. I’m quiet and introverted. I don’t have the audacity – or the inclination really – to demand attention. And if I got in trouble, who would take care of Ben and Melissa while he is at work? Not my mother. We haven’t heard from her in months.

My attention shifts back to the present. The back beckons once again. There are dishes to be done, and beans to sort. Instead, I invent reasons to stay up front – I microwave a scone for a woman from Bakersfield – I restart the Columbian roast. Erin saunters over and pokes me in the belly, giggling like the Pillsbury-dough boy, on her way to the bathroom. The young men watch her intently, and my father watches the young men, wearily. I, in turn, watch my father. He found a boy in her bedroom one morning, a few months back, and chased him down the street, shouting and waving an umbrella. I wonder if he would do the same for me, if he were to ever find a boy in my bed.

He leans across the counter now, no customers to serve, joking with the tourists. I notice that his long grey hair is tied back in a pink scrunchy – the evidence of raising four daughters. He is tall and skinny, and a little hunch-backed as he leans towards the women. They are gaudy, like all tourists, but not wholly unattractive. While we were living with my mother, there was a constant flow of men in and out of the house, each one seedier than the last. Since my father moved in and took over, he hasn’t been on one date. But it’s fun to watch him flirt.

Beneath the baritone of his deep voice, I can hear the Counting Crows playing softly over the stereo.

*She parks her car outside of my house. She takes her clothes off. She says she’s close to understanding Jesus. She knows she’s more than just a little misunderstood. She has trouble acting normal when she’s nervous. ARROOOUUUNND HERE.*

This is my favorite song right now. Dad brought the album with him when he moved back in, and I listen to it over and over again – play it over and over again while I’m here. I know that I’m more than just a little misunderstood.

I shift awkwardly, filled with a strange mixture of contentment and anxiety. I like being here. I like having a job and I like working next to my father. But I don’t really I belong here. I feel like an imposter. I am not cool enough. Not like my father who is smart and witty. Not like my big sister who is thin and beautiful. They belong here. I do not. I am fat and awkward and I don’t converse easily with others. I’ve been in school now for almost three years and I’ve pretty much caught up on all the course work. In that time I’ve gone from near illiteracy to college level reading skills. Yet my social skills are nonexistent. I just cannot master the art of normal human interaction. I’ll never be cool. But The Black Pearl is cool. *Really* cool. And by being a part of it, I too am made cool. So I busy myself. I wash the dishes and sort the beans. I work under-the-table for $5 an hour in order to validate my presence, for otherwise I don’t belong here.

Soon national chains will have capitalized on the coffee-house format, creating assembly-line cafés on every corner of every town in the US – and eventually the world. The Black Pearl will one day close its doors, becoming nothing more than a pirate ship in a Disney movie. But by that time I will be living on the other side of the country. I will have dropped 30 lbs and secured a good job at a publishing company. The vast amounts of knowledge amassed as an introverted child who did nothing but read, watch movies, and listen to music will, by that time, make me “cool”.

One day, while home for a visit, my father and I will stroll through the streets of Pismo Beach, reminiscing. Erin, having left town last minute for some shady reason, won’t be with us. Kymber, too preoccupied with herself, won’t be there either. Ben will too be busy with his garden up in Humboldt County, and Melissa will be hitchhiking around the country, as she has been doing since she was 13. So my father and I, alone, will stroll and talk about the past. He will apologize for the amount responsibility I had to take on as a child, and thank me for helping him raise the kids, for working two jobs to help pay the bills, for being the good kid. He will tell me how proud he is of me, how much he loves me, how he thinks I am cool. And we will happen upon the building that once housed The Black Pearl, now a cheap touristy sandwich shop no local would dare to enter. It will be bright inside, with decorations that reek of Pottery Barn. There will be no heart. No soul. No cool. And so we will turn and leave without ordering anything, saddened by the death of something that, at the time, seemed so infallible.

But for now I’m 12. And the dishes beckon in a way I can no longer ignore. If I’m not working, after all, I have no place here, in this palace of cool. So I turn and head into the back.