

SWAN SONG

by
J. McGovern

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J. McGovern
6637 Woodwell St
Pittsburgh, PA 15217
(206) 850-2202
jamie_mcgovern@hotmail.com

EXT. AGNES R. KATZ PLAZA - DAY

EMILY, late 20s, carrying her brown-bag lunch, walking this tree-lined plaza near the heart of downtown Pittsburgh. Stopping in front of a newspaper vending machine, not enough loose change to buy the Post Gazette, she scans the crowd of passers-by, spies--

HENRY, early 30s, across the street, having his lunch on a park bench. Emily approaches, apologetically smiling widely, benignly extending a dollar bill in hand.

EMILY

Excuse me, sorry. Hate to bother you. Can you break a dollar? For the paper. I never have enough change; my desk is 40 floors up.

Mouthful of hoagie, Henry nods, searches his pockets. Produces 3 quarters and a small, polished seashell. Chokes out his response as he tries to swallow.

HENRY

I'm a little short.

Emily wrinkles her nose. What is that, a button?

EMILY

Oh. That's fine. I'll trade you for the quarters. You can keep the rock.

Henry SLURPS the last drops of his cola, clearing his throat.

HENRY

(winking)

Take it. It's not a rock. It's a seashell. You like seashells, yes?

Henry passes the contents of his hand to Emily. He's right. It is a seashell.

EMILY

I do, as a matter of fact. How did you know?

Henry taps his temple with an index finger.

HENRY

I'm a mind reader--

But it's a little eerie, because she *really* loves seashells. Emily eyes Henry suspiciously.

HENRY (CONT'D)
 --besides, who doesn't like
 seashells?

Smiling politely, Emily nods, makes the exchange and proceeds to get her paper. Returning to the plaza, she sets herself up at an adjacent bench. Flips to the crossword, but... Emily fingers the smoothly polished seashell instead... She folds up her paper and approaches Henry.

EMILY
 What am I thinking right now?

Henry closes his eyes and concentrates.

HENRY
 You're thinking about the elevator
 ride back to your desk. 40 floors,
 give or take, depending on whether
 or not they've numbered lucky 13.

Henry opens his eyes to see Emily, game to play along.

EMILY
 Am I? What about it?

HENRY
 You're bothered by the close
 button.

EMILY
 The close button?

HENRY
 There is no such thing. Of course,
 there's a button that says *close*,
 two equilateral triangles, point to
 point, but you know it's not wired
 to anything.

EMILY
 It's not?

HENRY
 The doors close of their own
 volition.

EMILY
 What's it there for then?

HENRY
 For show. The button is there to
 address your insecurity. It's an
 illusion of control.

(MORE)

HENRY (CONT'D)

You see the button and you think, *I can change things. I can influence the speed of my departure.* But you can't. The elevator has its own schedule. You're just a passenger.

EMILY

I think your imagination is running wild.

HENRY

Imagination is a good thing. All failures in life are failures of imagination-- the inability to picture something else. I'm not right? Someone whose inner voice sounds a lot like yours is thinking pretty loudly about elevators.

EMILY

Hmm. Sorry, I was actually thinking about... goldfish. Domesticated, not cheddar.

HENRY

Ooh. I was *this close*. Goldfish, huh?

EMILY

Yep. Hate them with the fire of a thousand suns. Rats with fins--

HENRY

--And gills, and an orange hue, but otherwise, agreed, very rat-like. You're preaching to the choir here.

Emily smiles.

EMILY

You weren't *this close*.

HENRY

The jig is up. I can't really read minds.

EMILY

Good. I feel better now. And I'm going to keep your seashell.

Emily extends her hand.

EMILY (CONT'D)

I'm Emily. Mind if I join you?

HENRY

Hello Emily. It's a free country.

They shake, officially meeting.

HENRY (CONT'D)

Henry.

Emily takes a seat, picks at her lunch.

EMILY

So... you work around here?

HENRY

Depends on your definition of work.
I compose and arrange music. I
come here for inspiration.

EMILY

Wow, really? Impressive. Jingles,
symphonies, reggae, techno...?
Tell me when I'm getting warm.

HENRY

Orchestral arrangements.

EMILY

And people pay you for that?

HENRY

No, but I do it anyway. I enjoy
it. It's kind of a side-thing at
the moment.

EMILY

What do you do for money?

HENRY

That sounds very sinister. *What do
you do for money?* Not much I do
for money.

EMILY

Ah. Independently wealthy. I hate
you.

Henry laughs.

HENRY

It's more a case of a low standard
of living. What do you do on the
40th floor?

EMILY
I'm just a temp. At a law firm. I
do what I'm told.

HENRY
Also sinister. *I just follow
orders.*

EMILY
(crossing her heart)
I'm the least sinister person
you've ever met.

HENRY
I believe you. I'm infrequently
sinister myself.

EMILY
That's good to know. Is there a
reason you don't have a day job?

Emily stops herself.

EMILY (CONT'D)
I'm totally being nosy. None of my
business. Don't answer.

Beat.

EMILY (CONT'D)
But it's kind of suspicious.

Emily waits in anticipation for an answer.

HENRY
I have a condition. Makes it hard
to hold down a steady nine-to-five.

EMILY
I'm sorry to hear that. What's
your condition?

Henry pauses, letting the suspense build, and then whispers
it like a secret...

HENRY
I'm forgettable.

Emily throws her hands up. Of course. It's just banter.

EMILY
You're forgettable?

HENRY
Chronically, *magically*,
forgettable.

Emily swoons, an exaggerated display of shock, horror, and empathy.

EMILY
No! Aww. That's awful.

HENRY
It is. I leave the impression of a warm hand on cool glass. I fade. You're not going to remember me five minutes after we part.

EMILY
Magically, you said?

HENRY
It's more of a curse.

EMILY
Of course it is. Hmm. Well, I have to confess Henry, I don't believe you. That mind-reading lie kind of blew your credibility.

HENRY
I'll tell you one thing, kiddo. People will believe what they want to believe, whether if it's perfectly logical or completely insane. So I can't make you believe me.

EMILY
But you really believe you're forgettable?

HENRY
Don't get me wrong. It's not all doom and gloom. There's a flip side. I can insult people with impunity; they won't remember.

EMILY
Really?

HENRY
No one likes you, smelly. It's your personality, or lack of one.

Henry grins. Emily punches Henry in the arm.

EMILY

Hey, that's nice! Did you really just call me smelly?

HENRY

I'm just making a point. You won't remember any of this.

EMILY

I doubt that. I'm a revenge-served-ice-cold kind of grudge-holder.

HENRY

It's the effect I have on everyone.

EMILY

Maybe I'm special.

HENRY

You're not. I mean, maybe you are in other ways, like maybe you can walk through walls or bend spoons with your mind--

EMILY

--I do bend the occasional spoon, never really thought that made me special.

HENRY

Do you like it?

EMILY

Bending spoons?

HENRY

Temping.

EMILY

Heavens no. It's demeaning. I'm vastly overqualified. And--

HENRY

--And?

EMILY

I don't want to say. It's a little embarrassing.

HENRY

I told you I'm for all intents and purposes rendered invisible in the grand scheme of things. I think we're sharing here.

EMILY
 Okay. I'll share. I said I'm a
 temp, right?

Another whispered secret.

EMILY (CONT'D)
 They call me... *The Tempt.*

HENRY
 You? But you're hideously ugly.

Emily laughs, self-consciousness defused.

EMILY
 They do. That's what they call me.
 Behind my back, if you can imagine.

HENRY
 They sound not so nice.

EMILY
 They are not. Yet I'm the one with
 the reputation. That sound fair to
 you? I'm very professional.

HENRY
 Life is not fair.

EMILY
 You think your condition might rub
 off on me? Some days I'd like to
 disappear.

HENRY
 I don't physically disappear. And
 it's not contagious. Why don't you
 quit?

EMILY
 Unlike you, I need the money. And
 no single moment of it is
 unendurable. I'm a Temp.
 Temporarily...

HENRY
 Which is a stepping stone to...?
 What do you really want to do?

EMILY
 The truth?

HENRY
 Or make something up. Either way.

EMILY
 Okay. I want to sing,
 professionally. Ooh! Maybe you
 can compose something for me?

HENRY
 I could, but be warned, I only
 write swan songs.

EMILY
 Ah, the myth of the Mute Swan--

HENRY
 --born with one beautiful song,
 living its entire life in silence,
 it sings its song as prelude to
 dying--

EMILY
 --so if you write me a swan song--

HENRY
 --curtains for you.

EMILY
 That's terribly inconvenient. You
 couldn't branch out? Just this
 once? Could I have a theme song
 instead?

HENRY
 Swan songs are kind of my niche.

RINGING BELLS signal the changing of the hour.

EMILY
 Oh no. Sorry Henry. That's my
 cue. Emily, exit stage right.

HENRY
 Do you have to go?

EMILY
 Henry, *The Tempt* is the catalyst in
 an entirely different story. And
 if I don't go, there's an entire
noir story-line that would just
 peter out.

HENRY
Noir, is it?

EMILY
 Oh yes!

INT. THE 40TH FLOOR, GIVE OR TAKE - DAY (FLASHBACK)

We see Emily at work. Checks her watch. She knocks on an office door, enters to find her SUPERVISOR, mid 40s, an empty suit, working behind his desk.

EMILY (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Tres noir. Heaving bosoms, hard-
 drinking men... A double cross--

She shakes out flakes of fish food for the goldfish he keeps in a small aquarium on his desk. It's a demeaning task she's forced to do. He's smirking, leering, watching her feed the fish. She's being objectified. Violated. She sees him.

EMILY (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 --A gun from the shadows--

She cedes yet another sliver of her trust, her innocence.

EMILY (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 --Lust! Booze! Violence! Blood!--

At her desk, she pulls her blazer closed tightly across her chest.

EXT. AGNES R. KATZ PLAZA - DAY (PRESENT)

A MOTHER and CHILD pass by, the mother covering her kindergartner's delicate ears. If looks could kill.

HENRY
 (loudly singing)
 --and that's the day the Teddy
 Bears have their picnic!

Emily shrinks in embarrassment.

EMILY
 I've scarred that little boy.

HENRY
 No worries. I saved it.

Emily smiles. A comfortable silence between them. Just enjoying one another's company... And then it's time.

EMILY
 Henry, this was the most enjoyable
 lunch I've had in as long as I can
 remember.

Henry touches Emily's arm.

HENRY
(seriously)
What if you didn't go?

MUSIC from a passing ice cream truck.

EMILY
That's our swan song, Henry.

Henry lets her go.

HENRY
Is it? Could very well be.

EMILY
Hey Henry, do you know what they
say about goldfish?

HENRY
Other than their obvious similarity
to rodents? No, tell me.

EMILY
That they have only 3 seconds of
memory. 3 seconds, and then...
poof, it's gone. It's an old
saw: the memory of a goldfish.

HENRY
And?

EMILY
And it's not true. Scientifically
disproved by a 15 year old. Made
all the papers a little while back.
A boy trained a goldfish to swim to
a beacon to eat, and when he
removed the beacon, the goldfish
remembered where to go. You can,
as they say, look it up.

Emily rises. A palpable sadness visible in Henry.

EMILY (CONT'D)
Maybe I'll see you around.

HENRY
I'm here all the time.

EMILY
Getting inspired?

HENRY
Some days more than others.

Emily blushes for the second time.

HENRY (CONT'D)
It's not out of the realm of
possibility we'll meet again.

EMILY
But I won't remember you.

HENRY
No, I don't think you will.

EMILY
Well, I'll believe what I want to
believe and you do the same. Shall
we leave it to fate?

Henry nods. Okay, to fate it is.

EMILY (CONT'D)
Hey Henry?

HENRY
Yes Emily?

EMILY
I really do love seashells. They
remind me of my childhood.

HENRY
I know.

Emily walks away smiling, Henry growing more distant in the background. Turning the corner, she decides that we make our own fate. Jots down her telephone number on a scrap of the newspaper, signing Emily, the "i" dotted with a smiley face.

Returns to the plaza, where Henry still sits on the bench, feeding the pigeons with the last crumbs of his sandwich bread. Emily approaches--

--And hesitates, as a cloud of confusion sets upon her. Her smile fades as she struggles to hold the last grasps of memory. Walking past Henry, we see him long for any hint of recognition. But he knows. *The doors close of their own volition.*

Puzzled at the scrap of paper in her hand, Emily sticks it in her pocket, where she finds the seashell. Fingering the smoothness she remembers the summers at the shore in her youth.

Looking at her watch, late to return from lunch, she wonders where the time goes...