Through a Window

What can be seen through a pet shop window has long been underestimated. People walk by oblivious to the multitude of watchful eyes that follow their path. Day in and day out, the sun illuminates the outdoors. This calls the attention of the pensive owner and all those under his care, because outside is where they would rather be...

The radio rambles gently in the background of a small local pet shop: "Don't forget we'll be having fashion enthusiast Marc Prosaic on tomorrow to tell us about this summer's fashion do's and don'ts...." Adding to the ambience is the promising tinkle of a bell hanging over the door, being blown in the gentle breeze. The owner of the shop has propped himself in front of a pedestal fan; forced by the fan his shirt clings to his chest revealing a thin slouched frame. It is the height of summer in the isolated southern hemisphere, where the sun appears to target Australia with particular fervour. The people of 'Coral' still have Wednesday, Thursday and Friday to conquer before contemplating the hour long drive to the beach.

The owner's son, Owl, sits contentedly switching his watchful gaze from his father's slouched figure to the 'limitless' happenings outside.

Life in the pet shop is in a sort of suspended animation for the animals I think, who are fed and groomed in preparation for their special day - the day they are bought. From then life is supposedly vivid and tangible – the grass is greener. However, the most significant change would be seeing life without the glare of the front window...an old rag teamed with a spray bottle doesn't exactly give it a 'streak-free shine.' Until then, budgies perch with their heads under their wings, the cats rub up against the glass hoping to defy it somehow and dog ears prick in response to the tinkle of the door bell.

'Owl go fetch the paper will you,' my father says without even looking back. I know his mind is on that woman again, Charlotte Black. She works across the road in a furniture store, which sells imported pieces. He has become increasingly infatuated with her, since she has been volunteering her Saturdays to help out with the animals. You may think me cruel for saying so, but it is entertaining to watch his fervour and excitement grow as the week draws to a close, and then observe his subsequent listlessness on a Sunday morning.

Picking up the paper I observe the front page story – something about a political scandal, the smaller boxes below no doubt directing the reader to other intriguing stories on page five, nine and seventeen. This world will never interest me.

I keep track of the years by watching the school kids pass by each day. The summer months are characterised by light dresses and white t-shirts. They all attend the school further down the road which I cannot see through the window. At first their parents walk with them teaching them the route to and from the school. Later, they are allowed to walk home with friends, gangs of girls followed by groups of boys. As they grow even older the stratification is abandoned, handholding and illicit kisses behind the furniture store follow. These small details amuse me.

The convenience store to the right of the park is always swamped by these hungry young people after 3pm. A bag of crisps in one hand and a drink sustain them for the rest of the walk...

I don't really know her name, but I like to call her 'Pond.' Pond is an elderly woman who used to come once a week with her husband to feed the ducks, in a park just besides "Giuseppe's Fine Cuisine." They would come during school hours, when no-one else roamed the streets. The two slightly hunched shapes following the familiar path to the pond, never failed to attract my attention. I admired the way they would sit until their bag of crumbs was empty. Tea in the lid of a Thermos...
shared between them. Pond came alone for a while, without her husband and without her tea. She would empty the bag quickly and leave. One day she stopped coming entirely.

The man who owns the Laundromat next door comes across to the front door and beckons, indicating to my dad that one of the machines is free. He picks up his basket – a modest white affair with cracks that reveal yellowish paint underneath. A nod is all I need from my father, and I am in charge until he returns. Seeing him pass by the window I notice how much older he looks now. He didn’t elect to build a pet shop, and instead he had simply inherited the family business. You just can’t say no to family.

Maybe this shop, with its wooden shelves, bags of animal feed, squeaky faucets and piles of shredded paper will be mine someday.

The only reason I know there is a Laundromat next door is because of the sound, which fills the shop on a quiet afternoon, well, every afternoon. The owner is a tall, thin Asian-looking man with a mop of black hair. He always wears a pair of impressively white trousers which temporarily dazzle me when he walks into the sunlight. When he first arrived he was very athletic and spent at least an hour each day jogging around town. A small potbelly now stands testament to his change in lifestyle.

The shop which Charlotte works in is owned by an eccentric women in her late fifties who, for all her grey hair and drooping skin, I can assure you was once a young woman. She comes back to Coral twice a year, at the most, to look over stock freshly brought over from some exotic nation. She did come recently, dressed in a pair of baggy pants and a knee length dress on top, carefully embroidered and sequined.

‘You really must get away from this town,’ her bangles clinking as she explains the wonders of a foreign nation to my father. She would always go to see her fellow shop-keepers upon return. However, she never once spoke to the man who owned a small, sweet smelling bakery. A scandalous affair hidden in the past, is what I like to think is keeping them apart. She crosses the street instead of walking by the bakery.

As general traffic, on both the sidewalk and the road slow down, birds nesting in the park trees rummage through the bins. Courtesy of the students they sometimes find discarded morsels of sandwiches, cakes and bruised pears thrown away in preference of hot chips. They leave a mess of wrappers on the grass, which are always gone the next afternoon.

Occasionally customers wander in, and they almost always take home a pet.

She enters pulling a rather rotund man behind her. He glances at his watch several times, and warns her that they will miss the appointment. Like all children though she is not concerned with time, and has not yet learnt to count it, allot portions of it to certain tasks or how to waste it. She brings her face level with mine; I can see a pair of big green eyes, flecks of amber though-out, gazing right at me. Looking suddenly pleased she tells her father: “Daddy, I want that one,” and she points a tiny finger directly at me. Her fingernails, like her toenails are painted a shade of purple, chipped slightly in some places.

‘Of course, but wouldn’t you rather have a younger dog?’ A particularly clumsy puppy obliges the father, placing two small golden paws against the glass. Her eyes grow twice their size and she forgets me. My father comes and rubs between my ears. I close my eyes and yawn appreciatively, in response.

‘Sorry buddy, I really thought you had her for a moment there,’ he whispers...

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People rarely open chains in this area, and so family-owned restaurants are the place to go on a Friday night in Coral. While every other shop light dims, restaurants illuminate the street. It is dark now in the shop, and all I can see are shimmering lights in the distance. The window is black. However, the slight glow from the outside world permeates the darkness enough to reassure me that daylight will come. As long as I know there is a world outside and a peephole to see it though, I can sleep soundly. After all, there’s no limit to what you can see through a window. One paw resting on the other, I wait...

Zainab Khan