

Dooley

Cynthia Cady

The girl entered the pet shop by cocking a hip against the door. She looked maybe 14, but Dooley hoped she was older. Fourteen'll get you 20, he remembered hearing somewhere. She prowled around the shop, putting her palms and long fingers up against the glass of each tank, defying the signs. Her red T-shirt did not quite reach the top of her jeans in back, revealing a one-inch tanned strip of skin dotted by three tiny moles in a triangle, just above her right hip pocket. She wore her hair twisted into a mess atop her head; a tiny diamond stud shone in her nose, and earrings made of feathers and pieces of bone swung from her small, pink ears. An ancient Nikon hung from her neck by a thin, ragged leather strap. Dooley pictured her handling the little green nets, neatly dipping into the tepid tanks, scooping up Oscars, Jack Dempseys, Red Terrors. He had a "Help Wanted" sign in the window; he hoped that was why she was here.

"Can I help you?" he said. He had her pegged for a fish lover, but she could be a snake girl. Tough call.

"I'm thinking about a fish," she said.

Dooley silently congratulated himself on his accurate first instinct. Fish lover.

"Anything in particular?"

"I like green," she said. "Do you have any green ones?"

Dooley squeezed from behind the counter and lumbered over to her at the tanks. He was 18, coarse-browed, with a dense pad of black hair. His weight tipped him well into the "morbidly obese" category, according to the National Heart, Lung & Blood Institute Body Mass Index calculator he had found on the Internet. Behind his thick glasses in their heavy black frames, his eyes appeared strangely large and limpid. His full lower lip and slight underbite gave him the appearance

of a placid grouper.

Dooley wiped his damp hands on his baggy cargo pants and pointed to a two-inch oblong fish in the cichlid tank. "There's a green one. In fact, it's called a Green Terror. One of the South American cichlids. It'll get a lot bigger if you give it room."

"Is it a nice fish?"

"Nice? Not exactly. They're pretty aggressive. If you have other fish this might not be a good choice. Other cichlids can usually hold their own, though."

"I mean, would it be nice to me?"

"Well, this one guy I know used to feed his by hand, if that's what you mean," Dooley said. He was confused. Usually people just wanted to know salt water or fresh, live food or dried, and how much. "I guess that means it's nice." He rubbed his hands on his pant legs again. The girl stared at him boldly, looking him up and down. He turned away from her and moved to another tank. "If you want nice, get a gourami. They're not very aggressive. But they're not interactive, like the cichlids."

"Interactive?"

"You know, feeding by hand and so on."

"Look," said the girl. "Do you have any money?"

"Huh?"

"Money. Moolah. Diner-y-o. Cash."

"Um ... a little." He had twelve dollars and thirty-six cents zipped into one of the seven pockets on his pants. The girl stared at him, head tilted, fingering the moles in the small of her back.

"Would you buy me a burrito next door?" Next to Animal Magnetism was an Asian-fusion burrito place.

It was, after all, almost lunchtime. Dooley felt his stomach writhe briefly at the suggestion of food. "Um, sure," he said. "I was just about to go there

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myself.” This was a lie. He didn't like the kind of burritos they made at Arigato Jalisco. They were too light, the fillings too airy and crispy. He preferred the burritos at Las Guitarras: heavy, solid, stuffed with slow-cooked meats and beans in a rich sauce, plenty of cheese. No vegetables except for a couple of spoonfuls of dark red spicy salsa. He locked up and they went next door.

When Dooley was six, his father said to him, “Son, I don't expect you'll have to worry about getting chased by girls.” Dooley was already large and lumpy and showing signs of a Neanderthal brow. He didn't know what to make of his father's remark; girls chased him every day at recess, drove him to the perimeter of the playground under a hail of tanbark, into the no-man's land near the cyclone fence, where he crouched, digging sowbugs out of the dirt until the bell rang and the girl-pack went back to class. Girls chasing him was definitely something he had to worry about.

The girl ordered a tempura shrimp-chile burrito. Dooley didn't know what to get, so he ordered a teriyaki steak burrito, which was just teriyaki steak and rice rolled up in a tortilla. He didn't get the point, really.

“This place is great,” said the girl. She tore a bite out of her burrito and shook wasabi-flavored hot sauce into the opening. Dooley didn't like wasabi; it made him sweat.

“So how were you going to buy a fish,” he said, “if you didn't have any money?”

“Oh, I have money,” she said. “I

just don't have it with me at the moment. Can you pass me the soy sauce? I have to go and get it from someone. They owe it to me. Get it?"

He didn't, but he just nodded. He watched her attack the burrito, sharp little teeth ripping at the chewy tortilla, slicing through the chiles, gnashing tempura shrimps to bits. She ate like a shark. He couldn't look away.

"What's your name?" he said.

"What's yours?"

"Dooley. Dooley MacDonald."

"Your parents really named you Dooley?"

"Actually, it's Donald. But everyone calls me Dooley."

"I guess so. Donald MacDonald. That's ridiculous. Your parents have a mean streak."

Dooley didn't know how to respond so he took a big bite of his burrito. Warm steak and teriyaki rice filled his mouth. He chewed slowly, letting the taste soak all the way in before he swallowed. Here he was, having lunch with a girl, right out in public like anyone. He felt himself turning red for no reason; even more horrifying, he felt his penis expanding slowly against his leg. He tried to think about something else: the broken water pump in the tree frog tank, how he had to feed the land tortoises when he got back, where he'd left his copy of *Aquarium Life*.

"So what do you think," the girl was saying.

Dooley jumped as if he'd been lightly shocked. "About what?"

"The fish, dummy. Should I get that green fish? Is it hard to take care of? What does it eat? How big should the tank be? Does it need friends? What about plants? Will my cat try to eat it?"

Dooley tried desperately to keep up. "Sure. Not really. Mealworms and live goldfish when it's bigger. Twenty gallon is okay to start. It's always nice to have more than one. I have some good greenery. You'll need a lid if you have a cat." The girl was exhausting. He was sweating a little. He worried that it was showing in his armpits, but he didn't want to look.

"Look," she said. "I have a lot of business to take care of today."

"You don't look like a business person."

She stopped eating and glared at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, just that you, you know, don't look like one of those suit people."

"I'll have you know," she said, "that I have three suits. Three. And I wear them, too. All the time. I just didn't feel like it today. I felt like dressing down today."

"Sure," Dooley said, growing more mystified by the moment. He couldn't imagine her in an office, wearing a suit, the little bone and feather earrings dangling and the tiny diamond post in her nose reflecting the overhead fluorescent lights.

Two days went by, and he was right in the middle of telling himself that that was it, she was an aberration; she would never appear in the doorway of Animal Magnetism again, and besides, not only was he not sure if she liked him, he wasn't even sure he liked her, when she walked in.

“Is my fish still here?” she asked.

Dooley froze like a deer. “Uh...,” he said.

“Never mind,” she said. “I don’t have a tank or anything yet anyway. I just wanted to visit it. Also I brought you this.” She reached across the counter and stuffed something into the pocket of his shirt. “Don’t look until I’m gone,” she said, and turned toward the cichlid tanks. “Is this him?” she asked, pointing.

Dooley lived with the fish every day, but still they all looked pretty much the same. “Sure,” he said. “I think so.” He tried to remember if he had sold any Green Terrors in the last couple of days. He watched the girl stare at the fish through the glass, the glow from the tanks giving her a Martian look. He thought she would probably look okay with green skin. Or bald, like the lady on Star Trek. He noticed that the back of her jeans pulled away from her spine when she bent over. He let his eyes travel downward over her round little rump, but it made him feel guilty and strange, so he turned a page in his magazine and tried to focus on an article about algae control. He had never had sex. He wasn’t sure if all the other boys his age had or not, because he never talked to any of them. Besides this girl, he had only spoken to customers, or his father, or to order food, since graduating from high school six months ago. The day after he graduated, his mother packed three black nylon suitcases and a red duffel bag and moved to Austin, Texas, because his father took everything too literally and didn’t like Fellini, and because Dooley was now a man and didn’t need her anymore. She left him the shop.

“Do you have fish at your house?” the girl asked.

“Yeah, sure,” Dooley said. “A few.” He had twelve tanks in his room, four in the living room, two in the kitchen and one in the bathroom. All Amazon Basin fish, all growing bigger day by day. The Arawana in his 200-gallon tank was already two feet long. It couldn’t turn around in the tank without bumping into the glass. One of his Oscars was large enough to eat a live mouse. “Look,” he said, “do you want a job? Like, for after school or whatever?”

The girl looked at him coldly. “I told you I have money already,” she said. “What’s your issue?”

“Nothing. It wasn’t because of that. I just thought, you know ...” he gestured lamely at the “Help Wanted” sign in the window. “I do need some help in here.”

“Well, you won’t get it from me,” she said. “I’ve got more important things to do.”

“Okay, just asking.” He was a little annoyed. “You know, you never did tell me your name,” he said.

“Are these fish interactive?” she said, pointing to a tank of Oscars. “I do like green best, but these are cool, with their red spots.” Whatever she had stuffed in his pocket was small and heavy. He wished she would leave so he could see what it was.

“Yeah, they are,” Dooley said. “Listen, I have stuff to do here, so look around or whatever.” Talking to her made him nervous. He didn’t want her to turn that cold look on him again, and he wasn’t quite sure how to avoid it. He started rooting around behind the counter, rearranging things. When he moved to the

back of the store to shelve a shipment of Luv-Yr-Dawg chew toys that had arrived that morning, the girl followed him. "Do you have other pets besides fish?" she asked him.

"No," said Dooley. "I had crabs once, but they died." He realized from the look she gave him that what he'd said sounded wrong. "Hermit crabs," he said. "You know, the ones that steal shells from other creatures."

"Did you ever think of going on Atkins or something?" she said. "You could lose a lot of weight. You might be kind of good-looking if you lost a lot of weight."

Dooley didn't want to talk about his weight. He heard enough about it from his father, from his doctor and from the mirror hanging behind his bedroom door. Somehow he had been hoping this girl wouldn't notice how big he was. He realized suddenly that it was always the first thing anyone would notice, when they saw him.

"I mean, you have nice eyes and stuff," she said. "And great hair. You'd be okay."

Dooley felt himself heating up, flushing and starting to sweat. "Well," he said, "I have a lot of stuff to do here, so ..."

"I gotta go anyway," she said. "Take care of my fish until I come and get him." She left the store slowly, running her fingertips along the shelves, sifting through items in the sale bins, kicking at the large bags of dog food, until she reached the front door, banged it open with her hip and was gone.

It wasn't until she was out of sight that Dooley realized she had said "kind of good-looking," "nice eyes," "great hair" and "you'd be okay." No one had ever called him "okay" before. He

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wished she would come back so he could try to kiss her, or buy her another burrito. Then he remembered the thing in his pocket. He reached in with two fingers and pulled it out. It was a roll of Kodak film.

That night at dinner he refused the mashed potatoes that his father held out to him in a big yellow bowl, and after they finished eating, he went out for a walk. He carried the roll of film with him and walked the four blocks to the Walgreen's. He arrived puffing and sweaty. "One hour service, please," he said to the photo counter guy.

"Three by five or four by six?"

"Four by six."

"Doubles?"

"Uhhh ... sure," Dooley said. He didn't know what the pictures were, but he thought the girl might want copies. He sat down at the blood pressure testing machine to wait.

"You can go and come back," the photo counter guy said.

Dooley contemplated walking the four blocks home, then another four back to Walgreen's, then another four to get home again. He didn't want to overdo it on the first day. "I'll wait," he said. He took his blood pressure, which was in the yellow range. The ranges were green, which meant good, or normal, then yellow, then orange, then red, which Dooley assumed meant you needed to get to the hospital at once because you were about to have an aneurysm. His was usually in the green range, despite his weight. It must have been the walk over that bumped it up to yellow. He got up after a while and wandered around the store. He got one of the little red plastic baskets and loaded it up with diet snack bars. He kept thinking he would see something good that he could give to the girl, but everything seemed too personal or too strange. He decided he would give her the fish she liked. Maybe she would want him to help her set up the tank. He wondered where she lived, if she had a family, a sister, a brother. He went back to the blood pressure machine and sat down again and closed his eyes so that he could think about her some more.

He must have dozed off because the photo counter guy's yell woke him. "Hey! I asked you, did you take these?" He was waving a handful of four by six glossy prints at Dooley. He looked very angry. Dooley tried to see what the pictures were of, but the guy put them under the counter. "You can get in a lot of trouble for this." Dooley didn't want to get into trouble, but he didn't want the girl to get into trouble either. "Well?" said the photo counter guy.

"Yeah."

"Sit down over there. I'm gonna have to call the cops."

That was too much. "Okay, actually, no, I didn't take them. Someone gave me a roll of film. I just wanted to see what was on it."

"Who gave it to you?"

"This girl."

“The girl in the pictures?”

“I don’t know,” said Dooley. “I haven’t seen them, remember?”

The photo counter guy reached under the counter and handed Dooley the packet of photos. Dooley looked through them slowly, carefully keeping the duplicates together. When he was done, he didn’t know what to do with them, so he set them down on the counter. They both stared at the photo on the top.

“I’m still gonna have to call the cops,” the photo counter guy said. The girl’s face stared up at them from the photo. Her hair was slicked back, wet. She was naked. She was in a jewelry store, leaning back against one of the glass counters. Dooley had been hoping that she was older than 14, but in the picture she looked about 12. In the other pictures, she was posed in a delicatessen, a shoe store, a barber shop and an ice cream parlor that Dooley recognized as the one down the street from Animal Magnetism. His stomach boiled.

“I got a daughter that age,” the photo counter guy said. “She’s just a kid. Still keeps dolls on her bed.”

“I have to go home,” Dooley said. “I don’t know who took these pictures. You can keep them. I have to go home now.” He turned and walked out of the Walgreen’s and down the four blocks to his house. He went to his room and shut the door and lay on his bed in the dark, still breathing heavily from the walk, his heart slamming around in his chest. The tanks all around the room glowed; the movements of the fish cast little flickering shadows on the ceiling. The pearl-colored Arawana wove back and forth across the surface of the big tank, bumping against the ends with each silvery turn. Bump. Bump. Bump.

Cynthia Cady’s fiction has appeared in Potpourri, Dark Recesses, West Marin Review, and the anthology Zebulon Nights. She lives in Woodacre, California.