

Language Glass

Keala Francis

Dear Reader,

Once there was a little girl who climbed into a shell to get out of the rain. She felt safe in this curled-up shell by the seashore. She stayed.

What do you think? Where were her parents? Did she have a family who cared about her? You cannot know, can you? This information is not in the text and psychoanalysis has fallen out of favor.

Do you think, though, that she stayed in the shell until she died?

No, Dear Reader, she did not.

One day it happened that a man was walking by as she poked her head out of the shell to feel the wind that blew, ferocious, across the bay and Alcatraz and the Golden Gate Bridge where people attempted suicide more than anywhere else in the entire world. She got that statistic from Wikipedia, which was apparently pretty accurate: by 2005 more than one-thousand two-hundred souls (can one really say that these days?) had jumped, meaning that, on average, one body every two weeks hit the water at seventy-six miles per hour.

Oh, how old was the shell girl when she climbed out? She was twenty-five. She had been in her shell for fifteen years. She had, of course, Internet access.

The man passing by at that same moment when she stuck her

head out – coincidence? fate? deus ex machina? – liked her green eyes. He asked her out to dinner. And what do you think she said? Was she scared of this strange man? Was she hesitant to leave the shell? Did she fear, so to speak, this jump?

No, she did not. She agreed. She thought that perhaps the shell was small and confining, although she had, of course, read all the classics along with some postcolonial literature and Edward Said.

The man placed her into a shopping cart, which he stole from the Marina Safeway, the hottest pick-up spot in San Francisco, located close to the fields and the beach and the bars and a nice little restaurant where he hoped to impress her with his worldliness.

The woman – her name, if you are interested, is Anne – had carefully pulled out her shoulders and arms, so that she could steady herself in the shopping cart. The man was a rather bumpy pusher. She smelled the sweet asphalt drying after a downpour.

The man – his name, if you are interested, is Jess – took her to Pizza Hut[®]. Anne could not believe the incredibly fantastic taste of pepperoni lover's pizza[®] and Pepsi[®]. And once, when Jess told her a joke, she laughed.

What was the joke?

How do you make a tissue dance... Put a little boogie in it.

Jess liked her laugh, so he asked her on a picnic. And what do you think she said? She didn't have much choice now, did she? Anne lived in a shell and had not yet come out, fully, so the shell operated somewhat like a closet. She had pulled out only one leg. She had not, quite, disavowed her shell.

They picnicked on top of Mount Tamalpais under the stars. Did they ever speak to each other or was their growing potential for love based solely on physical attraction? These questions may constitute separate questions depending on, let's say, subjectivity. For Jess, the answer seems likely to rest on green eyes, but that is only because that is all you've been told about what he liked. Jess and Anne may have had some very intellectual conversation about Foucault and the genealogical trap of the shell for the woman, all the while cutting long strands of cheese with their teeth and sipping pinot noir. Anne may have revealed that society had, in fact, forced her as a ten-year-old to go into a shell before

puberty so that tweeniness could not intervene in her intellectual development. Anne was, after all, extremely bright, and how sad it would have been to spend fifteen years pretending that she was not so.

Jess, despite his frat guy looks, had a job as a CTO. Do you know what that is, Dear Reader? Of course you do, that's a Chief Technology Officer. What is his job description? Well, you know that poststructuralism has made such terminology a floating signifier. So, the meaning of CTO will change over time and space, as well as tax bracket. What mattered was the car he drove, which was a Toyota Camry. His money was all tied up in stock options, and the market had tanked.

Anne, though not so intrigued with his class status nor for that matter his car, decided to pull her other leg out of the shell and re-enter the world of language. Her legs became signifiers. What for? Well, as you know, that depends on the gaze.

Jess's gaze confirmed his opinion, and he asked Anne to marry him. Anne hung her shell by a thread around her hips. She said, "I will." A performative speech act.

She began to study classical rhetoric at Berkeley as an unclassified student – her transcripts were non-existent. She survived on Oreos[®] and talent. Judith Butler loved her, despite Anne's clinging to heterosexuality as a potential trope for love.

Jess and Anne had a beautiful little wedding in a small church on the outskirts of Napa. Anne did like the wedding. The sun was shining and the champagne was bubbly. Everyone said they were the perfect little couple.

Jess's company had gone public, thanks be to Marx, a federal subsidy for solar panels, and capitalism's insipid flexibility. Jess donated the Camry and purchased a BMW. Do you really care which model, Dear Reader? Oh, I suppose you do. He wavered over a Mini, for its cool factor, but ultimately went with a pre-owned 535xi wagon.

Jess anticipated children. Anne hated it. Not the children, not even the car, per se, but the rhetorical statement that such a car made and Jess's assumption that she would sacrifice her intellectual career for motherhood. Jess was a bit confused as he had never thought of motherhood as conflicting with career. Jess was, of course, male. To his credit, however, he never expected

Anne to stay home and tend to the brood. He thought that a civilized woman should work and hire and manage domestic help.

That concept, however, was so 1980s. Anne had covered feminist theory. She knew that Derrida was not simply the American pronunciation of *derriere*, although sometimes she thought that the similarity was, perhaps, insightful.

While Anne was writing her dissertation, she became pregnant. She realized that maximizing her use value suggested that the job of housewife made the most economic sense. Jess agreed, although he certainly did not insist. He had cashed out and opened a restaurant, a lifelong passion. His motto, "Life's a crepe!" Anne had no idea what that meant.

Anne thought that the world was a big place with lots of small ideologies that meant all of jack shit when her breasts turned into cantaloupes and her baby had colic.

Anne stood at the mirror in their bathroom with his-and-her sinks. Anne's engorged breasts hung, not perky, but huge, from her chest as if they did not belong to her. Bright blue veins ratcheted the skin and her areolas were ghastly, dark and ugly wounds for the newborn to suck from. The baby screamed and screamed and screamed. Anne had no more energy, nothing, desiccated to the bone.

Constant cries: Imagine it!

Anne jostled, bounced, lunged, sang, shushed, swished, put down, picked up, and finally, left the baby in the crib to scream while she went to cry in the shower, where the hot water burned and made her breasts burst with milk, squirting onto the stained tiles.

Jess watched his wife's c-section scar heal, wicked and yowling on her bloated abdomen, her gut still swollen from childbirth. She was pale with dark circles and sunken eyes. The real glow of motherhood.

But wait, Dear Reader, has the story taken a wrong turn? Did Anne sell out her independence for a family? Should she have more domestic help?

And here, Anne realized, she was stuck. Domestic help had already quit on her several times. This little being, the size of a football, was hers. And his. He was the father of her child. This awful, screaming baby was their child. And she loved this child

more than anything. It was the first time she realized that she would consciously die for someone else. Some days, she felt she was dying for this child, this sweet, screaming baby girl, who she would die for.

Anne began to think back fondly, nostalgically, for those days before her shell. Remember those days? You thought it was so tough then. Would you ever go through puberty? Did your best friend still like you? Could you stay up past 7:30pm because the Walt Disney Sunday Night Family Movie was extra long that night? Would you get ice cream even if your parents caught you feeding your peas to the dog?

What Anne would give to feed peas to the dog!

Did you know that fish eat frozen peas? Yes, fish in the ocean. Anne and Jess, on their honeymoon, fed fish frozen peas at Hanauma Bay. Anne and Jess hiked down the hill from the highway. The peas sweated in the bag and melted a bit, too. The fish darted, curved lines with heft.

An eel swam straight at Anne, a gaping mouth and creepy bulge on its head. Anne floated stock still in the water, the world outlined by a black rubber mask. Her breath rasped in the snorkel. The eel, so ugly, swam beautifully, with a curvy, swooshy body. The mouth opened wider and she felt the bubbles brush against her cheek as the eel snapped a fish into its jaws.

The baby suckled at Anne's breast, nestling into her flesh, pressed gently into her shrinking belly. Then the baby screamed. And screamed.

Why is there no cure for colic? Do you know this answer? If so, you will make more money than Jess ever did. Jess said to call the doctor, tired that Anne could not solve this problem. She was not a natural mother. Nature made women to take care of babies and Anne could not do it. But then, as you will recall, Jess and Anne had already possibly had a discussion on Foucault and so arguably Jess knew that such a perspective was totalizing and ignored the balance of power inherent in such a normative heterosexual relationship. Real truths come out, though, when characters are under duress.

"Does she have a temperature?" the nurse asked over the phone.

"No," Anne said.

“Is she vomiting?”

“No,” Anne said.

“Is she gaining weight?”

“Yes,” Anne said.

“Sounds like you just got a tough one.”

“Is that fucking medical advice?” That’s what Anne said to Jess.

Anne never wanted to kill the baby. She wanted to kill herself. Or Jess.

She had this extremely vivid waking dream. Could she call it waking when the line between awake and asleep had been erased? Who knew there could be neither? Dear Reader, did you know that you could be neither awake nor asleep and still not be dead?

Some days, she felt like an alien had spread its tentacles to cramp tight on her shoulders and then pulled her neck muscles into her brain. Some days, her baby was Sigourney Weaver’s alien. She felt like it was only a matter of time before that alien ripped straight through her core and came out singing: “Hello my baby hello my darlin’ hello my ragtime gal...” And she imagined plunging from a ledge into the fiery futuristic smelting pot below her, holding that alien to her chest like love itself.

And, then, good god, the conversation!

SUSIE

Oh my god, Anne, this latte tastes so good. Kudos to Jess! God bless caffeine. I am soooo tired. Little Jimmy is teething.

JEN

Oh, Susie, your poor sweetie. Teething is so tough.

ANNE

There should just be a button. One day, you push it and – whoop! – up come all the teeth.

JEN

You are so fun-ny? Isn’t she funny, Suz?

SUSIE

Isn’t she, Jen? (*claps hands, turns to face Anne.*) You should write

E&F V.XI

a book, Anne! You're a writer, right?

ANNE

Right. *(pause.)* Well, not really. It's a dissertation.

JEN

A dessert what?

SUSIE

A DISS ER TAY TION, Jen. *(rolls eyes at Anne.)* God! Some sort of language-y thingy, right?

ANNE

Right. Language as thing. Language glass. A mirror.

SUSIE

Oh. Huh. *(pause.)* We sang the cutest song. At music class. Right, Jen? "Old King Cole"... a jazzy version. Little Jimmy just loved it. He was clapping and giggling.

ANNE

(deadpan.) How funny.

JEN

Sooo funny! You should join the class, Anne. It's really so fun.

SUSIE

So fun! But, you know, ladies, we need some girl time.

ANNE

Isn't that what this is?

JEN

You're so funny, Anne.

SUSIE

(ignoring them.) I need my sista time. You know, men just don't get it. It's so hard. I'm sooooo busy.

JEN

Babies are soooo exhausting.

ANNE

Life is exhausting.

Jen and Susie both look at Anne, appalled.

What do you think?

Anne had become angry. Jess, too, although he expressed his anger through absence. And their little girl – her name, if you’re interested, is Clare – tumbled and stretched. Up. Yes, Dear Reader, turns out that, like all babies, Jess and Anne’s baby grew up. At the age of ten, Clare stopped looking like Jess. Anne knew because iPhoto suddenly began to identify Clare as Anne in “Faces.”

Suddenly, Dear Reader, Anne remembered her shell. Every day she looked at her shell on the sink beside the soap. When Clare became a teenager, Anne had nothing, no experiences, to help her, and the shell grew larger. She placed the shell on a side table. Décor. Jess made crepes. Anne taught classes. Clare went to summer camp. And sometimes, when Anne least expected it, her heart swelled with love. An ocean heart she could hear in her seashell. And, like you, Dear Reader, she grimaced at this sentence. She wondered who created these goddamn heart metaphors. These clichés.

Then, suddenly, Jess was on a business trip and Clare went to college. Clare called Anne, and when Anne hung up the phone, she realized Clare was okay. Clare had come out of her shell. The language one, not the real one. A mirror shell, not a glass one. So, Anne took a bath. She let the phone ring without answering and placed one leg carefully back into the shell.

Jess came home from his trip. Clare came home for the holidays. Jess and Clare asked why Anne had put her leg in a shell. Anne shrugged. Then, she put the other leg into her shell. She used a wheelchair and thought of filing a lawsuit when she got passed over for promotion. She knew, though, that the justice system

had an inherent able-bodied norm. Clare returned to college. Anne wanted to use her body as protest, to embody the material exigencies of an absent body. Instead, she put her arms back into the shell and slid down into her old room.

Did she find what Alice found there?

No, she did not.

She found that the shell was much larger and more comfortable than when she was twenty-five. She was amazed at the amount of space. On one wall of the shell hung her winner's certificate from the third-grade spelling bee and one pair of comfortable brown shoes. On another wall, a painting hung above a small yellow divan. On a third wall, a bookshelf held all of her old books, no speck of dust. On the last wall stood a single bed with a single pillow.

Anne lay down on the bed and studied the painting above the divan: A woman stands on a beach looking out to sea as the sun sinks beautiful as lilacs. A man waves his arms at her from deep in the ocean. She cannot tell whether he is waving or drowning.

8