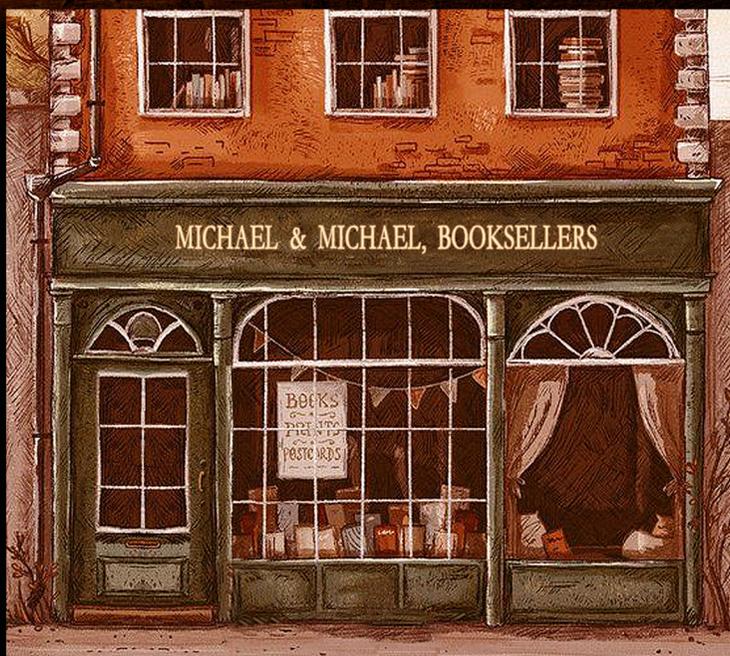


# PETER ATKINS

A SHORT STORY



FRUMPY  
LITTLE  
BEAT GIRL

# FRUMPY LITTLE BEAT GIRL

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“They don’t make hats like that anymore,” says Mr. Slater.

Jesus. Five minutes in and first thing out of his mouth. Bethany looks up from her book and through the windshield to see what the hell he’s talking about.

There’s a pedestrian, a Hispanic guy, crossing in front of the Lexus. He’s in no particular hurry about it, and he doesn’t need to be. The light they’re stuck at, the one at San Fernando and Brand, can take three minutes even in a good mood and, at eight-thirty in the morning, you can usually count on it being pissy.

“Sure they do,” Bethany says, meaning the hat.

“No,” Mr. Slater says, his head moving to watch the man reach the sidewalk and turn to wait, like them, for the northbound green. Bethany hears the pleasure, the admiration, in his voice. “They make things that *look* like it, maybe,” he says. “But that’s *period*.”

He has a point. It’s not only the grey fedora. The pedestrian—elderly but vigorous, his body lean and compact, face like leather but like, you know, *good* leather—is dressed in a subtly-pinstriped black suit

that could be new or that could have been really well looked after for decades. There's a tight quarter-inch of white handkerchief showing above the suit's breast pocket, and the man wears opinionated shoes.

"Cool," Bethany says. "*Buena Vista Social Club*."

"You think he's Cuban?" Mr. Slater asks, as if she was being literal. "I mean, like, not Mexican?"

Bethany, no idea, shrugs and smiles. The light changes and Mr. Slater—you know, you really can start calling me David, he's said more than once but she's been baby-sitting for him and his wife since she was fourteen and just can't get her head around it—moves through the intersection and takes one last look back at the guy. "Check him out," he says, happy and impressed. "It's 1958. And it's never not going to be."



Gay Michael's on with a customer when Bethany comes into the bookstore but he takes the time to cover the phone's mouthpiece and stare pointedly out the plate-glass window as Mr. Slater's Lexus pulls away into the Glendale traffic. He gives her an eyebrow. "Bethany Lake," he says, delighted. "You appalling little slut."

"My neighbor," she starts to tell him, ready to add that she'd needed a ride because her piece-of-shit Dodge is in the shop again but he's already back on the phone giving directions.

"Yes, Ma'am," he's saying, "*Michael & Michael*. On Brand. Between Wilson and California." Listens for a moment. "Of course. Consider it held. And it really is in lovely condition. The website pictures don't do it justice." Bethany watches him run his hand over the tooled leather binding of the book on the counter in front of him as if he can send the seductive feel of it down the line. It's an 1827 *Paradise Lost*, the famous one with the John Martin mezzotints. Bethany catches his eye, points to the curtained annex at the rear of the store, mimes a coffee-cup at her mouth.

She'd figured she'd have to brew a fresh pot but Fat Michael's already on it; three mugs waiting, OCD-ed into a handle-matching line atop a napkin that's folded in geometric precision. On a shelf above the coffee-maker, his iPod is nestled in its cradle-and-mini-speakers set-up and its random shuffle—which Bethany pretends is a radio station with

the call-sign K-FMO, for 'Fat Michael's Oddities'—is playing *Jack the Ripper* by Screaming Lord Sutch. "Is your name Mary Blood?" his Lordship is currently screaming, albeit at low volume; Fat Michael would like to pipe K-FMO through to the store, but Gay Michael's foot is firmly down on that one. "What are we, fucking Wal-Mart?" is about as far as the conversation ever gets.

"He's really got a bite on that Milton?" Bethany says, knowing the boys have been asking high four figures. The coffee-maker pings.

"Some sit-com star's trophy wife," Fat Michael says, filling Bethany's mug first and handing it to her, no milk no sugar, just right. "She's shopping for his birthday. You know, like he can read."

"None of your customers read, Michael," she says. "They *collect*."

"Hmph," he says, because he doesn't like to be reminded, and then, as the next selection comes up on K-FMO, "Oh, listen. It's your song."

It so is *not* her song. It's a bad novelty record called *Kinky Boots* about how everybody's wearing, you know, kinky boots. The only boots Bethany owns are a pair of Doc Martens but it wasn't footwear that had made the boys declare it her song. Couple of months earlier, Gay Michael, bored on a customerless afternoon, had treated her to an appraising look as she was leaning on the counter reading.

"Look at you," he'd said. "With your jean jacket and your ironic T-shirts." The one she'd been wearing that day had read *Talk Nerdy to Me*. "With your Aimee Bender paperbacks and your rah-rah skirts and leggings. You know what you are, Bethany? You're a frumpy little beat girl."

Fat Michael had clapped his hands in delight. Sometimes Bethany wondered which of the partners was actually the gay one. "*Sweet girls, Street girls, Frumpy little beat girls*," he'd recited, just in case Bethany had missed the reference to the stupid song's lyrics. She couldn't be mad at either of them—it was all so obviously coming from a place of affection—but, you know, Jesus Christ. Frumpy little beat girl.

She takes a sip of her coffee. "Not my song," she reminds Fat Michael, even though she knows it's like trying to lose a high school nickname.

Gay Michael pulls the annex curtain aside. "I have to drive it over at lunchtime," he says, meaning the Milton.

"She won't come here?" says Fat Michael.

“What, and leave the ’two-one-oh?” Gay Michael says. “She’d melt like Margaret Hamilton.” He raises a pre-emptive hand before Fat Michael can object further. “I am not risking losing this sale, Michael,” he says. “It’s two month’s rent.”

“It’s just that I have that, you know, that thing,” says Fat Michael.

“I’ll mind the store,” Bethany says. She knows that ‘that thing’ means a lunch date with a woman from whatever dating service he’s currently using. She also knows it won’t work out, they never do, but Fat Michael is a tryer and Bethany sort of loves him for it.

She’s never been left alone in charge of the store because the Michaels always stagger their lunch-hours, so her offer to tend it for a couple of hours without adult supervision prompts, big surprise, a discussion. But they do their best not to make a drama out of it—which Bethany appreciates ’cause God knows it’s an effort for both of them—and it boils down to her receiving several over-cautious instructions, all of which pretty much translate as *don’t do anything stupid*. After she promises that she’ll do her best not to, they take her up on it and Gay Michael’s gone by 11:45 to beat traffic and Fat Michael’s out of there by noon.

Which is how Bethany comes to be alone when the man in the Chinese Laundry initiates the Apocalypse.



Bethany’s lost in her Kelly Link collection when the old-school bell tinkles on the entrance door. She looks up to see the door swinging shut behind a new customer as he walks in, holding a hardcover book in one gloved hand.

Huh, Bethany thinks. Gloves.

They’re tight-fitting gray leather and, given that it’s spring in California, would look even odder than they do were it not that the man’s pretty over-dressed anyway. His suit is a three-piece and its vest sports a chain that dangles in a generous curve from a button and leads, Bethany presumes, to a pocket-watch that is currently, well, pocketed.

He’s not in *costume* exactly, Bethany realizes—the suit is of modern cut and fit—but he’s hardly inconspicuous. She flashes on the elderly Hispanic guy she and Mr. Slater had seen at the light earlier and won-

ders if she somehow missed the memo about this being Sharp-Dressed-Man Day in Glendale. ZZ Top start riffing in her head but the accompanying mind-video is a spontaneous mash-up with Robert Palmer and his fuck-me mascarenes and Bethany makes a note to self that she needs to start spending a little less time watching *I Love the 80s*.

“I wonder if you can help me?” the customer says, coming to the counter. Cute accent. Like the guy from *House* when he’s not being the guy from *House*.

“Almost certainly not,” she says. “But I’ll be real nice about it.”

“Ah,” he says, not put out at all. Far from. “I take it, then, that you are neither Michael nor, indeed, Michael?” Now he’s doing the other Hugh—Grant, not Laurie—and Bethany thinks he’s laying it on a bit thick but decides to give him the benefit of the doubt.

“Just Bethany,” she says.

“Exactly who I was looking for,” he says, laying the book he’s carrying onto the counter. “I wanted to ask you about this.”

*There’s no such thing as a book you never see again*, Fat Michael had told her, a little booksellers’ secret, shortly after she started working here. *Sooner or later, no matter how rare it is, another copy comes across the counter*. He’d been trying to make her feel better because she’d fallen in love with a UK first of Kenneth Grahame’s *The Golden Age* and had been heartbroken when it left the store with somebody who could afford it. He’d been right, too; in her time with the Michaels, Bethany had seen many a mourned book wander back to their inventory, including the Grahame; one of the store’s free-lance scouts had scored another copy at an estate sale just a few weeks ago.

And now here comes this customer with another book, another blast from Bethany’s past, from long before she worked here, but just as she remembers it; rich green cloth boards with a stylized Nouveau orchid on the front panel, its petals cupping the blood-red letters of the title.

“You do recognize it, don’t you?” the man says.

“Sure,” Bethany says, because she does. “*The Memory Pool*. 1917. First and only edition.”

When she looks up from the book she sees that the customer is staring at her with an expression that she finds confusing, one of well-in-

tioned but distant sympathy, the kind of expression you might give to a recently bereaved stranger. He touches the book's front panel lightly and briefly. "Mm," he says. "And quite rare, wouldn't you say?"

"Extremely rare," Bethany says, and immediately wants to slap her stupid mouth. *Curse me for a novice*, she thinks, a mantra of Gay Michael's whenever he's made a rare misstep in a negotiation. She's only been at the store a year, really *is* a novice still, but tipping a customer off that they've got something of real value is like entry-level dumb.

"Oh, don't worry. I'm not actually looking to sell it," he says, as if reading her dismay. "Just wanted to see if you knew it."

"Huh," says Bethany because, you know, Huh.

The customer looks at her again, cocking his head as if intrigued. He extends his gloved hand across the counter. "James Arcadia," he says, as Bethany shakes it. "I think, Just Bethany, we'd best have lunch."

"Why?" she asks, and she's smiling. Not too much, though; he's cute and all but, c'mon, he has to be forty at least. Still, she's flattered. Feels like she should conference-text the Michaels. *Not so frumpy*.

Arcadia returns the smile and she's glad that his eyes are kind because it softens the blow of his reply. "We need to discuss exactly how we're going to save the world," he says.

*Well*, Bethany thinks, *that was dramatic*, and, as if on cue, a woman screams from somewhere beyond the store. By the time a man's voice, equally horrified, hollers *My God, look at that!*, Bethany and Arcadia have already turned to look through the window.

On the street outside, a man is melting.

He'd presumably been walking, but he's not walking anymore. He's rooted to the sidewalk, his legs already a fused and formless mass, his flesh and his clothes running in multicolored ripples of dissolution down what used to be his body as if he was some life-size religious candle burning in fast-forward.

Other people on Brand Boulevard are screaming now, some running away, some gathering to see, one idiot on his cell-phone like he could actually fetch help, another using hers to snap a little souvenir of the atrocity. A group forms around the vanishing man, circling him but not going near, as if instinctively establishing a perimeter from which to bear witness but to keep themselves safe.

From what's left of the man's face—now liquidly elongated into a vile burlesque that puts Bethany briefly and horribly in mind of Munch's screamer—he appears to be, have been, a middle-aged white guy. *He has a life*, Bethany thinks, *he has a story, has people who love him*. But he's featureless in little more than a second. One of his arms has already disappeared into the oozing chaos of the meltdown but the other is waving grotesquely free, fingers twitching either in agony or, as Bethany wonders with a devastating stab of pity, as if he just wants someone to hold his hand in farewell as he slides helplessly from life.

When there's finally nothing about it to suggest it had ever been human, the roiling mass begins to shrink in on itself, disappearing into a vanishing center as if hungry for its own destruction, growing smaller and smaller until, at last, it shivers itself into nothingness. There's not even a stain on the sidewalk. It's taken maybe seven seconds.

"Oh my God," says Bethany.

Arcadia is keeping his eyes on the window. "Watch what happens next," he says. And when Bethany does, she decides that it's even more appalling than what came before.

Everybody walks away.

There's a blink or two from one or more of them, and one older woman in a blue pantsuit looks to her left as if she thought her peripheral vision may have just registered something, but there's no screaming, no outrage, no appeals to heaven or cries of *what-just-happened?* Everybody on the street quietly moves on about their day, neither their manner nor their expressions suggesting that anything out of the ordinary had occurred.

"What's *wrong* with them?" says Bethany. "They're all acting like it never happened."

"Don't be cross with them," Arcadia tells her. "It sort of *didn't* happen."

"But it did."

"I don't want to get too abstract about it," he says, "but it's a sort of tree falling in the forest question, isn't it? Can something actually be said to have happened if it's something nobody in the world remembers?"

"*I* remember," Bethany says.

Arcadia holds her gaze for a second or two, his face expressionless. “A-ha,” he says quietly.

Bethany’s still trying to think about that when he pulls his watch from his vest pocket and checks it. “Hmm,” he says. “Only eleven minutes in and already a serious anomaly. That’s a bit worrying.”

“What?” says Bethany, horrified as much at his calmness as at the idea that this nightmare is on some kind of a schedule.

“Clock’s a-ticking,” he says. “Lunch will have to wait. Come on.”

Bethany’s surprised to see that she’s following him as he moves to the door and opens it. Perhaps it’s the tinkling of the bell, perhaps just a desire to remember what she was doing the last time the world made sense, but something makes her look back at the counter.

“Wait,” she says. “What about your book?”

Arcadia throws it an unconcerned glance. “Do you know what a MacGuffin is, Bethany?” he says.

“Yes,” she says, because she does. She watches her fair share of Turner Classic Movies and she briefly dated a guy who once had an actual name but whom she’s long decided will be known to her memoirs only as The Boy Who Loved Hitchcock.

“Well, the book’s a MacGuffin,” Arcadia says. “It’s not *irrelevant*—I mean, it never existed and yet you remember it, which is good for a gasp or two and certainly pertains to the matter at hand—but its real function is this: To propel us headlong into a thrilling and probably life-threatening adventure. You good to go?”

He waves her through the door with a hurrying motion and they’re on the street and walking south before Bethany can get her question out.

“What do you mean, ‘it never existed’?” she says.

“Well, not in this particular strand of the multiverse. It’s a cross-over, like the unfortunate gentleman outside your shop. Do you have a car, by the way?”

“No,” she says. “I mean, not here.”

“Oh,” he says, stopping in front of a green Mercedes. “Let’s take this one, then.” He opens the passenger door for her, apparently without needing a key. Bethany doesn’t ask. Nor does she look too closely at how he starts it up before making an illegal U-turn and heading down Brand towards Atwater Village.

“What are we *doing*?” she asks, because she figures it’s about time.

“Well, we’re fixing a hole—”

“Where the rain gets in?” she says, flashing absurdly on the Beatles vinyl she’d rescued from her Dad’s stuff.

“Would that it were merely rain,” he says. He nods toward the sidewalk they’re speeding past, and Bethany looks to see a small boy turning to green smoke while pedestrians stare open-mouthed and his screaming mother tries to grab him, her desperate fingers clawing only at his absence. By the time Bethany has swung in her seat to look out the rear window the smoke has vanished and the crowd, including the mother, has forgotten it was ever there.

Bethany’s eyes are wet with pity as she turns back to Arcadia. “Tell me what’s happening!” she almost shouts.

Arcadia swings the car into the right lane as they pass under the railroad bridge. “I’ll try to make this as quick as I can,” he says, and takes a preparatory breath. “The spaces between the worlds have been breached. Realities are bleeding through to each other. People who took one step in their own dimension took their next in another. What you’ve witnessed is the multiverse trying to correct itself by erasing the anomalies. Problem is it’s happening in each reality and the incidents will increase exponentially until there’s nothing left in any of them.” He turns to look at her. “With me so far?”

Bethany unfortunately *is* with him so far, though she wishes she’d heeded those schoolyard theories that comic books weren’t really for girls. “Collapse of the space-time continuum,” she says in a surprisingly steady voice.

“Precisely,” says Arcadia, pleased that this is going so well. “A return to a timeless shining singularity without form, thought, or feeling.”

“But how?” she says. “And why?”

Arcadia has started to slow the car down now, scanning the storefronts of Atwater Village’s main drag. “Because about seventeen minutes ago, something that’s lived all its life as a man remembered what it really is and spoke certain words of power.”

Bethany doesn’t like the sound of that at all and, as Arcadia pulls up outside one of the few remaining un-gentrified stores on a strip that is mostly hipper new businesses and milk-it-quick franchises, she stays

silent, feeling the sadness and fear tightening in her stomach like cancer, thinking of people vanishing from the world like a billion lights blinking out one by one.

“Is this where we’re going?” she finally says, nodding at the store as they get out of the car.

“Yes,” Arcadia says. “Have you seen it before?”

Bethany nods, because she has. It could have been here since 1933, she’s always thought; peeling red paint on aged wood; plate-glass window whitewashed from the inside to keep its secrets; and a single hanging sign with the hand-painted phrase, *Chinese Laundry*. She doesn’t think she’s ever seen it open for business. “I always figured it was a front for the Tongs,” she says as if she was kidding, but realizes as she says it that that actually *is* what she’s always thought.

“You’re such a romantic,” Arcadia says, and he sounds delighted with her. He opens the door to the laundry and leads her inside.

Its interior is as weathered and as free of decoration as the outside. A hardwood floor that hasn’t seen varnish for decades and utterly plain walls painted long ago in the kind of institutionally vile colors usually reserved for state hospitals in the poorest neighborhoods. Bethany is surprised, though, to smell the heavy detergent and feel the clammy humidity of what is clearly a working laundry. There’s even the slow hissing, from behind the screen space-divider, of a heavy-duty steam press. The place isn’t menacing, merely nondescript. The fifty year old man behind the bare wood counter would be nondescript too, were it not for the subtle phosphorescent glow of his flesh.

Arcadia makes the introductions. “Bethany Lake,” he says—and Bethany registers the use of the surname she hadn’t told him—“meet the entity formerly known as Jerry Harrington.”

Bethany gasps a little as the man fixes his eyes on her because they are the almost solid black of a tweaker on an overdose about to kill him.

*Not Chinese at all*, a part of her brain wastes its time thinking, and wonders if it’s entirely PC of him not to have changed the name, however generic, of the business he bought.

“What do you want?” Harrington says. His tone is hardly gracious, but at least it still sounds human, for which Bethany is grateful.

“What *do* we want?” she says to Arcadia.

“Well, *I* want him to stop destroying reality,” Arcadia says. “Don’t you?”

“Yes,” Bethany says. “Of course.”

Arcadia turns back to Harrington. “There you go,” he says. “Two votes to one. Majority rules. What do you say?”

Harrington laughs, but there’s little humor in it.

“What *is* he?” Bethany asks Arcadia quietly. She’s turned her head away from Harrington because his face seems to be constantly coming in and out of focus in a way that she finds not just frightening but physically disturbing.

“A being from a time outside time,” Arcadia says. “There’s several of them around, hidden in the flesh since the Fall. Most of them don’t remember themselves, but occasionally there’s a problem.”

The Fall? Bethany hesitates to ask, because she doesn’t want to say something that sounds so ridiculous but she supposes she has to. “Are you talking about Angels?” she says. “Fallen Angels?”

“Well, you needn’t be so Judeo-Christian specific about it,” he says, a little sniffily. “But, yes.”

“What do you want?” Harrington says again, exactly as he’d said it before. So exactly that it creeps Bethany out. Less like a person repeating themselves and more like someone just rewound the tape.

“We’re here to make you reconsider,” Arcadia says. “We can do it the hard way, if you want, but I’d prefer to talk you out of it.”

Again, the laugh. But there’s little human in it.

Arcadia moves closer to the counter, which Bethany finds almost indescribably brave. “Look, I get it,” he says. “You’re homesick. You want a return to the *tabula rasa*, the blank page, the white light, the glorious absence. You yearn for it like a sailor for the sea or a child for its mother. You’re disgusted by all this...this...” he waves his hands, searching for the words, “...all this multiplicity, this variousness, this detail and color and noise and *stuff*.”

“You talk too much,” Harrington says, and Bethany, though shocked at her treachery, thinks he’s got a point.

“But isn’t there another way to look at it?” Arcadia says. “We’re all going back to the white light eventually, so what does it matter? Couldn’t we imagine looking at these people amongst whom your kind has fallen

not with contempt but with delight? Isn't it possible that an angel could embrace the flesh rather than loathe it? Could choose to be humanity's protector rather than its scourge?"

"You can imagine whatever you like if it makes you feel better," Harrington says, and his voice is confident and contemptuous. "But you won't imagine it for very long. Because that's not the path I've chosen."

Arcadia smiles, like there's been some misunderstanding. "Oh, I wasn't talking about you," he says.

Bethany is wondering just who the hell he *is* talking about when the pores of her flesh erupt and the light starts to stream from her body. The rush of release almost drowns out the beating of her terrible wings and the sweet music of Harrington's scream.



Arcadia picks up the small pitted cinder-like object from the laundry counter with a pair of tweezers. It's still smoking slightly and he blows on it to cool it before dropping it into a thin test tube which he slips back into an inside pocket of his suit.

"I'll put it with the others," he says to Bethany. She wonders where the *if that's alright with you* tone has come from, like he's her Beautiful Assistant rather than vice-versa, but she nods anyway. She and he are the only people in the place and she's sort of grateful that she has no memory of the last few minutes. She feels quite tired and is glad of Arcadia's arm when he walks her to the car.



Bethany's relieved that she's back in the store before either of the Michaels. As ever, there are several out-of-shelf books lying around here and there and she decides to do a little housekeeping to assuage her guilt for playing hooky. She shelves most of them in the regular stacks, some in the high-end display cases, and one in the spaces between the worlds, though she doesn't really notice that because she's thinking about her crappy Dodge and how much the shop is going to charge her to fix it this time.

Gay Michael gets back first. Maybe Fat Michael's date is going better than expected. Bethany hopes so.

“Anything happen?” Gay Michael says.  
“Not so you’d notice,” Bethany tells him.

