

## Pick's Place

by Colin O'Sullivan

A gecko sticks to the outside of the window, attracted to all the lights inside, the flashing faux-retro disco bar bulbs the owner Pick got from some junk off-load. The gecko could be dead for all we know, plastered there, like a rubber toy some kid licked and flung, foot-suction-pads sticking to the surface - or is it just some damn creature, plain giving up in the summer heat? We're all a bit like that in here this evening, flung, stuck, and giving up - Pick setting the beers in front of the three of us: Gert, Mixxy and me, Pick taking our money and keeping the change. He doesn't even thank us anymore, and we never offer, we've been here so long - years I mean, and communication is such a labor we don't care how out of pocket we get. Our lives are all torpor anyway, only early thirties but still, bad luck/ bad decisions, the usual. We're in a bar after all, what kind of story were you expecting? That's what has us here staring at a gecko, and at Pick, his Takemine electric guitars hanging over his head. We don't even mind that he picks his nose the way he does - only one of the reasons for his moniker - rummaging like that, same hands he pours our beer with, same fingers he uses to flip nuts into our bowls, same dirty bowls we stick our heads over and sniff like the dogs we are.

Mixxy is really Mick, a straight London guy with a gay nickname. He doesn't like it but that's the way with nicknames, they glue to you and you can't do anything about it.

Gert's another regular guy and he must be from Germany or someplace. We forgot to ask, and it's too late now. We've known him for years and it would be rude.

I'm Milly, and that's not a nickname. My parents called me that and thought it was a nice name for a pretty girl like me. Maybe they meant Molly. Who knows? My parents were Irish, and people easily get confused.

Three of us here, we're not really from anywhere, that's the way the world is now, full of wanderers. Pick seems to be the only stationary thing in our life. He's always standing there, doing his job. That's admirable. A couple of Japanese girls enter and smile and wave at him and Pick smiles and waves back, though he senses trouble. We don't see many natives in here anymore, maybe they're all scared of us. I overheard someone call us vampires once, thought that was a bit of a stretch.

When Pick locks up and the other two have staggered off somewhere, I go upstairs to a room over the bar, Pick's place, and soon he has me on my back, legs in the air. When we're done, I keep my legs up, hoping the sperm will stay in and at least one swimmer makes it so I can become pregnant. There seems to be little more that I'd want from a life. I'd even stop drinking. Plus, I'd have more of a right to be here. Pick has his stance going on, that kind of look, eyebrows and forehead lines, as if all he's ever wanted was to be in a shadowy 30s film - or better, a novel, described. He chooses this moment (me: legs akimbo, him: scotch and ice-cubes swirling) to say that if it's gonna be a guy, he wants him to be called Marlowe, and if it's a girl, maybe Marlowe. I ask him, does he mean the playwright or the private investigator? He says: what playwright? It's then I wish the sperm to flow back down and the swimmers not to bother. Pick's English

is pretty good. It's not that we don't understand the words we send out; it's that we don't understand each other.

Gert's on about the things he remembers from childhood. No gecko tonight, unfortunately, no such distraction. He's saying: orange bedclothes, a bucket he used to get sick into when he had some virus or chicken pox or whatever used to cause that yellow bile to up and spew-burn. And Debbie Harry. On a big poster looking down at him. Not all sexy and sultry as you'd expect, but in a peach scarf, strangely conservative, incomparably beautiful. No one has ever surpassed Debbie for Gert, he set his standards very high from the onset. No wonder he failed and is here. He still has *Autoamerican* on cassette. We all sigh at this, remembering cassettes, how they were once our future. In Japanese they have a word for this feeling of nostalgia, *natsukashi*. Shame we don't have an accurate word in English, nostalgia too wistfully sepia, not quite cutting it. I like listening to him talk about Debbie Harry, except when she's within the same sentences as virus, pox and spew: she doesn't deserve that. I say this to him and he starts to weep a little, as if he's betrayed her. Well, he has. Pick's good at moments like this and brings us more drink and keeps the change for himself.

It's all your fault Pick.

Pick smiles.

Every night one of us says that to Pick, and he always just smiles, a crooked-leering-grin that he's been working on.

It was Mixxy said it this time. And when we say it it's like we mean every word of it.

Mixxy says he hides out in the bar because he is afraid they will come looking for him. He says if they find the people he's killed that it'll be the end of him, and of us, as if we are all complicit by listening to him and drinking with him. We like these stories he tells, he sounds so sincere. And Pick never smiles when Mixxy's in the throes of the telling. I wonder sometimes, sometimes get a shiver - like what if even one of the stories was actually true? He says hiding in a bar in this part of town is so obvious that the police would never look. They're probably looking for murderers in the decent part of town, some guy trying to blend in with the norms, not here in the docks. Mixxy says he doesn't know what it would be like to be in a Japanese prison. Says he's heard horror stories, abuse, things being stuck up asses. One of us at least is tempted to say, what's new and original about that? But no one says anything, we just look up at the guitars hanging, wonder who ever plays them. I never seen Pick use his fingers on a guitar, just sticks them in his nose, or up me.

A cockroach this time scurries past my bare feet as I go towards the bed in Pick's place. Pick is ready already, and I've yet to take all my clothes off. Sometimes I don't even take the shirt or bra off anymore. It's not about that now, just getting a job done. I don't know why there is so much wildlife in Pick's bar and natty apartment; something is always crawling around when we're there. Pick says there are lizards about too, and I think of Mixxy and Gert and say: yeah, I know. Pick is on me then, delivering, and as I lie back after - it doesn't take long, nothing about life really does - I feel it squiggling up me, some tiny reptile thing making its way home perhaps, making it's way to where it

should really belong, a nice place where Debbie Harry isn't befouled, but handsome in her peach scarf and cassettes were in people's hands and loved and people had names that weren't dirty but were their own real names in their own real places. Pick holds me tight and I can forgive him his dirty bar and the way he picks his nose, and I can forgive him the pretence and everything else. He's the only worthwhile thing in our life, me and them boys. Why do I say life and not lives? And I can forgive Mixxy too for the things he does, and why those two Japanese girls never came back, and the screaming behind the building with Gert and Mixxy laughing, and I heard shouts in Japanese, words I can understand now, words of hateful protestation, and I try to block them out and think of Pick instead. How he'd get them pregnant too, if they wanted maybe, those girls, but it was too late for them, too late. He's good like that, many of the natives are just like that around here, decent, taking care of us, putting up: Pick especially, pouring out the beer when he knows it's what we need. Some nuts in our bowls. He's always standing there, doing his job. That's admirable. The police have yet to come and ask a single question, and so we wait, stuck, given up, and Pick never says a word to anyone, just serves us.

*Colin O'Sullivan is an Irish writer living in Japan. His debut collection of short stories, Anhedonia, was published by Rain Publishing in 2006 and a novel for teenagers, Majo, is due out later this year.*