

OST END GIRLS

This is a short story about fashion - a set of clothes with a fabricated back story. But it's also about two people, one of whom loves the other and gets murdered. It's a crime story, so you feel at ease. It's not literature, it's advertising for clothes, with murder alongside. So the theme will carry it along and make you feel in safe hands, which you are - I know enough about the clothes to pull it off.

Have in mind a painting by Giorgio de Chirico – receding arcade, long shadows, and a fleeing girl. But imagine he did this one to order for a vulgar Miami collector, to go with a South Beach décor, so it's done in pistachio, gold and mauve. Regard the dark silhouette of a man sitting at a café table to the left; he's looking at the beach over a *Standaard* newspaper. This is a painting of the promenade in Oostende (the quiet end near the hippodrome, directly in front of the Thermae Palace hotel where the protagonists are staying). Because of the time of day the shadow of the pillar falls over his face. There is another version of the painting, owned by the same collector but on loan to the Wolfsonian as part of a show called *The Inventors of Tradition II*. It depicts exactly the same scene, but the shadow falls in the opposite direction because it's morning rather than evening. In this version there is a body of a drowned girl that has been dragged up the beach from a boat. The shadow of the pillar in this version falls across her body, neatly bisecting her midriff, between her bikini briefs and top.

De Chirico used the same cartoon to transfer the architectural structures that underpin the composition of both paintings, the geometry of which is deceptively sophisticated. From left to right: the hotel with the arcade which extends far beyond the boundaries of its terrace café; the boardwalk promenade; the beach huts that are accessed by a little jump down into the sand. Then the beach itself, furrowed and churned by hundreds of late summer visitors, the rough

brushwork rendering the ridges and shadows in the sand. Seen from a distance, say from the entrance to the living room, hung over the collectors couch, it becomes four stripes. It's a very simple composition.

The man's silhouette is purple brown. The only other figures, two girls on the beach, are in the full evening glow of the sun. The man's notebook is hidden to all but him behind his newspaper. It contains a drawing of an Egyptian symbol on the open page, quickly sketched in shorthand that he can work on and refine later. Because the girls loll and fidget it has taken a while to get the details right, but now there is no doubt in his mind that the symbol is the Eye of Horus. That means they are who he thinks they are. He draws an arm twisting over a chest - a neck craning round and a brow furrowed in a compulsive act of fingernail gnawing.

"Don't go swimming tonight." Chatty Cathy spits out the ragged nail, aiming into the sand, but it sticks wetly to the black and white picnic blanket. Trendy Wendy squints at the horizon. There is no reason why she shouldn't go swimming; Cathy just needs to feel like she has control over her. Four weeks of daily swims, striking out for a distant point like a buoy or an anchored boat, have made Trendy Wendy brown and elastic, the perfect corrective to the cloistered indoor life at school, where they are hidden away from the stink of Cairo and the danger of assault or kidnapping.

"But think about it. Ninety-five percent water and no brain or nervous system." Her eyes glaze over when she thinks about the jellyfish. It gets her in the mood for a swim, life simplified to propelling movement, daydreaming and avoiding tentacles. Cathy normally comes out with her a short way, then at the sight of one of the red stingers shrieks and splashes to the shore in a panic. They are hunkered down this evening, their tracksuits on now the summer is cooling off. Chatty Cathy lights a Parliament cigarette. She is irritated by Wendy's ease in the sea, around the monstrous jellyfish.

The Eye of Horus on their polo shirts, the essential component of a uniform that they wear even when away from the Swiss School of Cairo, is a controlling device. It reminds them that their behaviour must be kept in check as representatives of their elite boarding school. Their form mistress Miss Badru knows how to instil and manipulate loyalty. Their uniforms, when worn outside the school, are a badge of honour, their specific meaning and design a strict secret. The castle battlements on their rugby shirts echo the fortress architecture of the main building (nestling between four ornamental lakes, one for each of the dead children of the founders), the embellishment on their winter sport jumpers encapsulate the neo-geo design of the great hall, which is kept cool and gloomy in contrast to the heat outside. The outfits differentiate the pupils, who are the progeny of multi-national business and diplomatic titans, from the local Cairo teenagers. The man has sketches of the curve of a brown downy leg and the Greek key pattern waistband on their shorts. It's a false boxer-short shape - he glimpsed a popper-stud before a pink tracksuit went on over it. By the way, this detail, the Greek key waistband, was a request when the painting was commissioned, to go with the collector's décor.

The generic di Chirico figure of the fleeing child with the long outflung shadow races up the central stripe, along the promenade. Her long dress billows behind her as if she hurtles along, but she's static. You look at another detail of the painting, the running dog ornament on the bikini bisected by the purple shadow on the corpse. The museum glass has ultraviolet in it and it's hard to see without your own reflection interfering. But you can see that the elasticated band is silkscreened and that the motif has degenerated from the stretch across the young girl's hips and breasts and from sea salt. The bottom of her bust pokes out under the bandeau. When she walks from the hotel to the sea, tiny muscles undulate over her ribcage. You look back to the fleeing girl who has not moved a millimetre.

Cathy and Wendy's classmate Layla hops down from the promenade to the beach, leaving a companion by the entrance to the hotel. Her steps are small, her long dress hampers her progress over the irregular sand. The girls on the picnic blanket make room for her and she sits.

"Can I use your room Wendy? Would you just sleep with Cathy tonight?" Wendy and Cathy appraise the boy hovering by the hotel entrance.

"Of course, just move my things." Wendy extracts a key-card from her beach-bag and hands it over. Layla smiles politely and pockets it, without inviting any questions as to why she does not want to sleep in her usual room in her parents' suite. She returns to the hotel and as she comes to his side the boy attempts to clasp her hand but she swerves adroitly away from him.

The man on the terrace is still writing in his notebook. The last time he saw Layla she was cascading down the screen and he had clicked to the last page of her blog. Like now, in that digital photo she wears a long cream coloured djellaba, with a cashmere headscarf round her face. Over the dress her waist and hips are encased in a black knee-length pencil skirt; she is a short, shapely, graphic vase. He knows that this cream smock is actually her art class painting attire, and that she has modified it and made it her own by the way she wears it. Her blog, *modestmisscairo*, has thousands of followers across Europe and the Middle East (exactly the markets his company are hoping to expand into). The influence of the Swiss School's uniform, with its idiosyncrasy, its austerity and symbolism, has reached the chicer corners of Egyptian street culture. Gangs have started mimicking different aspects of the uniform: the white work coats worn with knotted cashmere sweaters, the gymnastic ensemble of polo shirt, baseball cap and white shorts, all in various off-whites. Their school satchel resembles the ticket collector's bags from the Cairo tram network and several of these have been stolen at knifepoint by youths wanting to replicate the look. Wendy had been robbed at a cash machine when she was in the

city centre. She had her bike between her legs, credit card in one hand, cash in the other, but they had only taken her blue leather bag and Cleopatra baseball cap.

After an evening's swim Wendy changes into a hieroglyphic t-shirt dress and backless violet jumper. She walks to the Lafayette in the centre of Oostende to find Cathy as arranged. It is the first evening of autumn; the wind blowing in from the sea feels sharper. The bay is filling for the regatta that will take place at the end of the week. They'll be in Egypt and back at school by then. Cathy and Layla's parents have taken a trip to the Antwerp Opera and may or may not be back tonight. They are business partners, an American lawyer and Syrian film producer.

She finds Cathy at the back of the crowded bar in a familiar pose; staring down her nose aggressively at a local girl who sips Kreik and yaks with a friend. Cathy has hiked one loafered foot on to the bar stool beside the girl, and hams up her expression of judgemental disapproval, occasionally rearranging her chin so that she glowers at the girl through her fringe, then again down her nose, finally turning up the collar of her long black coat. This is Cathy's chat up technique. The young girl and her friend roll their eyes and giggle.

Last summer Cathy got so drunk in the Histoires d'Eau bar that she had beaten up a cigarette machine thinking it was a jukebox: there had been a rock band playing downstairs. Wendy does not want to deal with Cathy when she's in this kind of mood. Maybe she could go and look for Layla and that boy she's picked up? But she can't, she's Cathy's guest, and wants to see that her friend is OK. Wendy has no family of her own. She tugs on Cathy's sleeve, Cathy gives her a glower and returns to the girls. Wendy edges to the back lit bar.

"Hey miss," a voice somewhere above her. A hand encircles her wrist and she looks up a checked shirt into a black face.

"Hey miss, buy you a drink?"

"No thanks" she turns away. The hand slackens, but it stays close as she worms towards the bar. It grips her wrist again with snake pressure.

"Here with those friends of yours tonight? The Arab girl? Did you know this was Marvin Gaye's favourite bar?" Wendy pushed the hand off her wrist. She recognises this man from the last few days at the beach, where she had clocked him watching them. She doesn't like unwanted male attention. She feels him finger the neck band of her backless jumper and she wriggles free.

"Hey! Is that why you're here? You think you can touch up girls because you look like Marvin Gaye?" She tries to cover her anxiety by being provocative.

"No way, that's not my style. Lemme buy you a drink. You and your friends - your clothes are cool. It's nice to see different girls dressed so smart. Is it like a uniform or something?"

Ms Badru would not like her talking to a stranger about their clothes, which she considered as secularly magical as monarchy. This is where Ms Badru's self-defence classes would have come in useful, but she had not been allowed to participate in case it brought on one of her fits. Wendy spots Cathy, doing a slow drunken serenade to the giggling girls. She shoots the man a scowl and yanks herself through dancing tourists. The man keeps watching her. After ten minutes of being ignored by Cathy and eyed by the stranger she leaves.

She lies in Cathy's bed drifting in and out of sleep, trying to stay awake for her friend's return. But she's exhausted from the swim to De Haan and back along the coast. The sea had been full of sea lice that evening. In the month in Ostende she had observed the life cycle of the jellyfish and their pumping alien babies were being born.

From the room below, her room, a series of noises indicated Layla was there with her guest. Skimming in and out of consciousness it sounded like pieces of furniture being moved around and knocked over, strange bumps that would sometimes become regular, reach a feverish pounding and then suddenly stop. Once or twice she heard a guttural cackle. As she glided off again she heard what sounded like someone rummaging through an extremely disorganised toolbox.

By coincidence this exact noise had been imagined by the man and his boyfriend back in New York earlier that summer. They were walking round the Egyptian wing of the Met Museum when he had said out of nowhere:

"I think I know the sound I'll hear when I lose my mind. The sound of someone digging through a fucked-up toolbox. Screws leaking out of shitty boxes, drill bits all over the deck, cables and hammers and electrical tape all jumbled together in a tangled-up cable-salad. Someone looking for a hook at the bottom, churning through it, upending it all on the floor. That's what I'll hear when I lose it." His boyfriend had absentmindedly picked his nose and thought about coffee.

Wendy comes awake to the sound of the extractor fan in the bathroom. She opens her eyes and sees Cathy's loafers discarded on the floor, lit by the light under the door of the bathroom. The left has been used it to ease off the right, mimicking exactly the way Cathy stands when in front of the blackboard back at school, thighs crossed as she writes in her terrible scrawl the answer to a problem under Ms Badru's feline gaze. She dips back into sleep, thinking about the tool box rummage sound, which in her mind has now transformed into a kind of high, empty plastic rattle, echoing round an empty room. Cathy gets into bed and elbows her awake. Wendy pats her hair in greeting.

"Layla and that boy have been really going for it. How did you get on with those girls?"

"This big black dude kept hassling us and they left. Did I see you talking to him?"

"He was bugging me about our uniforms."

"You didn't tell him anything? He was the same with me, asking about Layla, it was really creepy. Ms Badru wouldn't like it. She'd blame me you know, if something happened. She always blames me."

"Not true Cath. Go to sleep." But it was true, Wendy was her favourite, and it's common for abusive teachers to bully girls who are abused by a parent, as Cathy is. They're trapped. This is why Wendy loves her so much.

The man watches Chatty Cathy and Trendy Wendy as they saunter out of the hotel entrance and down to the sea under an overcast morning sky. Wendy has bikini, bathing cap, waterproof mp3 player, snorkel and waterproof SLR camera round her neck on a strap and a big grin. Cathy feels awkward when not fully covered (the insidiousness of the authority of their Arab lives back home), and so waits till reaching the sea before taking off her bathrobe. He enters the hotel lobby unobtrusively - using this moment to break into their hotel room. He had discreetly followed Cathy home from the Lafayette the night before, shadowed her up the central staircase of the hotel and observed her enter her room. Taking the same stairs now two at a time, on the 4th floor he spots Layla. She's talking in a baby voice into an iphone which is held in place over her ear by her headscarf, her free hands stuffing sheets into an abandoned laundry trolley. She ends the call and turns to go into her room, but he has been following her, and when she goes to close the door he puts his foot out to stop it. In panic she tries to ram it shut on him but she's too late, and he shoves her back into the room, which is in total disarray, with the mattress half off the bed and heaps of clothes everywhere.

"Modest Miss Cairo" he states. She edges into the corner of the room.

"Don't be scared, I just want to ask you something." He looks round the wrecked room. "You wouldn't like people knowing that a student of the Swiss School of Cairo parties like this? In her uniform?" Lalya looks crestfallen.

"Look, I just want to know where your uniform is made."

"We're not allowed to tell people. Other girls copy us and the school doesn't like it."

"What about your blog? What do they think of that?"

"They don't know, please don't tell them. Who are you?"

"I won't tell them, I like it. So do lots of other people. I work for Get-Up Division - we want to make a line inspired by your streetstyle, and what easier way to make knockoffs than in the factory where the legit ones are manufactured? You know that's what Ralph Lauren do don't you?" She perches on the bed and puts her head in her hands. He goes to the wardrobe and extracts a grey cashmere coat, touches the label on the inside lapel. It has Wendy's name embroidered, the name of the school, and the name of an Alexandrian manufacturer. He writes down the details and leaves. "Thanks for the tips. We're going to make a lot of money off you girls."

In the sea Cathy has turned back early as usual, walked back up the beach and to her room. She thinks about looking in on Layla, but decides against it, hearing a male voice and knowing how much her Muslim friend would not wish to be visited until all traces of the night before are eradicated, and the folds of her headscarf perfectly arranged again. She steps out of her swimming costume and hangs it on the handle of the window, which is open to let in the

breeze, even though this room looks over the smelly back service entrance. Her parent would be back today. She wonders if Wendy is dead yet.

She's not, but nearly. She has aimed for a distant point, but today there are many more boats in the bay, and the choppy sea distracts her. Her snorkel has been steaming up more than usual. The waves ebb and the boats rock; their sails and masts are dark against the overcast sky. Wendy realises she is being pushed out to sea by a current and should turn back, and then she notices the long tentacles. The change in temperature has brought from the bottom of the sea many more dying jellyfish. She knew it was the time of their bloom, but she had wanted so badly one more swim before going back to the heat and dust. She is surrounded; swimming in any direction means swimming into criss-crossing, poison-filled threads. She gets her first serious sting of the summer. The 2nd is stronger, wrapping around her left arm and thigh in a Celtic band of welts. She feels nauseous and panicked, and in extreme physical pain, but she must try to get back to the coast. She can't really see because the sun has suddenly emerged and she's swimming into it against the shifting current. Then a familiar sensation starts to scrape out the inside of her brain, the incongruous odour of her dead mother's cooking, the familiar sign that it's about to happen and she should avoid hard surfaces and corners. The masts waving in front of the sun produce a flicker like a dream-machine and the epileptic fit overwhelms her.

The man exits the hotel, his book still open at the page where he has been making notes. As he passes discreetly through the service entrance a water droplet from Wendy's swim suit (barely wrung out) detaches itself from the gusset and lands perfectly on the name of the factory, blurring the ink and obliterating it. He does not notice. He boards his train to Brussels airport then his flight to Philadelphia where his company is based and he works as a freelance fashion forecaster.

Cathy towels herself off and gazes into the mirror, glaring down her nose. Now she can be Ms Badru's favourite. She unscrews the cap of Wendy's epilepsy medicine, shakes out the pills into her hand, plastic rattle echoing round the bathroom. She takes out the vitamin C bottle from her wash bag and empties the capsules into the other palm, looks at the two sets of identical pills. She deposited the vitamins back into their container and replaces the medicine into its original bottle.

Back in Cairo Ms Badru is preparing the syllabus for the new term. She thinks they should have more self-defence classes. She does it on her own initiative - it is important for young girls to feel confident in a city where so much effluence wants to overtake them.

"My girls," she stretches, leaning back in her chair. Her white workcoat strains over her hairy chest and she yawns. She eases off one white slipper, helping it with the toe of the other foot. She stretches each toe, their claws carefully manicured. Slowly and gracefully she lifts the foot and sniffs it, then her rough tongue licks languorously around the pads. She replaces the shoe and packs up to go home for the day. As she exits the classroom her bushy tail strokes the door and disappears with a flourish.