

Cold

A Short Story by John Gifford

Walking into the pet store, he spots her, standing by the rack of leashes, and wearing those tight jeans with the wild stitching along the seams.

She looks over and he wishes he hadn't stopped.

He tilts his head, mouths a greeting he knows she can't hear, and heads off in the opposite direction. Angling now toward the far side of the store, he passes through birds, cats, and finally into reptiles where his reflection drifts like smoke over the terrariums of lizards, frogs, turtles, and, near the end of the corridor, a black snake. He studies the snake, coiled and motionless in the corner of the terrarium. Save for its cold, black eye, watching him, the reptile might be dead. Wishbone shivers and steps back from the glass.

A voice at the opposite end of the aisle rattles him:  
"Wishbone, you don't even *like* snakes!"

I *might* like snakes, he thinks to himself. I *might* like lots of things I haven't told you about.

Finally, he says, "I'm just looking."

"You're just looking at me, too! You just walk by like you don't even know me!"

"I said 'What up?'"

"Don't stand there like you don't know what I'm talking about!"

"You don't have to yell," he says, looking over his shoulder.  
"This ain't yelling. I can yell if you *want* me to!" she says.

“Man, just chill. What do you want me to say?”

After a pause, she says, “My *name*. Next time you see me.”

“All right,” he says.

“People like it when you remember their name. It’s a form of respect. It shows you care.”

The snake flicks its tongue and again Wishbone inches back from the terrarium, into the middle of the aisle. “All right then,” he says to the girl. He jams a hand into his pocket, feels his phone’s rubber bumper. For a second, he takes his mind off the girl standing in front of him—Jackie is her name. Or is it Jacquelyn?—and thinks of another.

She sighs heavily, shifting her weight to the opposite leg. Then she reaches into her purse and removes a tube of lipstick, which she twists open and applies. It’s purple. “You still got my number in your phone?”

“Yeah.”

She smacks her lips together, drops the tube back into her purse. “What name you got it under?”

“It’s in there,” he says, trying to remember if it’s Jackie or Jacquelyn. He glances to his left and notices their reflection in a mirror. Across the bottom are these words: *Objects in mirror are closer than they appear.*

“Under what name?” she says.

Suddenly, he hears Marvin Gaye singing, feels his phone buzzing in his pocket. “Hello,” he says.

"All I ask for is a little respect!" says the girl standing at the end of the aisle. She shakes her head, her eyes narrowed and locked onto his. "A little respect that you can't seem to give. You won't even *say my name!*"

With the phone to his ear, he watches the girl in front of him, but he can't hear what she's saying.

"Wishbone!" says the girl at the end of the aisle, slinging her purse over her shoulder. "I'm done trying to be nice to you!"

The voice from the phone reverberates through his body like a dull vibration even as the girl in front of him continues shouting. He can't understand what she's saying, this girl. Is she Jackie? Jacquelyn? He still can't remember. She's yelling so loudly that now he can't understand what the girl on the phone is telling him. It's sensory overload. It's overwhelming. He'd like to slip into one of these terrariums, curl up in the sawdust and hide.

The girl in front of him shakes her head. "You don't appreciate anything! Cold as hell!"

After she's gone, he tells the girl on the phone he has to go. She's still talking when he ends the call and slides the phone back into his pocket.

He looks again at the snake in the terrarium, coiled and motionless, its gleaming black eye watching his every move. Again it flicks its tongue. Goose bumps pimple his arms.

Instead of walking straight ahead, through reptiles, as before, he turns and goes the other way. When he comes to the dog-food section, he stops and lingers, perusing the many different offerings. Finally, he grabs a blue bag and heads off to the register to pay.

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*Coastlines*

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In the parking lot, the afternoon heat radiates up from the asphalt, warming him. He feels better already. Until he reaches his car.

There, on the windshield, *Joyce* is written in purple cursive script, over and over and over. The name also appears, in white, on his blue hood. He drags his finger through one of the letters, but it doesn't smear. Now he traces the name with his finger, knowing he'll never get it out.