

A Scene from Café Retro

By Peter M. Ball

You sit opposite Pandora, safe in the shadows of the café, the room filled with the low babble of crowd murmur. Pandora sips her coffee, café au lait spiked with ephedrine. She stares at you, green eyes pinned and anxious. You stare back, waiting. She takes a sip, licks residue off her lips.

You hold your breath; her tongue is snaking over her lips, glistening and sinuous. You wait; refuse to fall into her trap, biding your time. You can see the sweat beading on Pandora's forehead, glistening droplets that shine in the dim light. They quiver, waiting, eager to begin the slow slide down her face. Pandora doesn't cope well with silence. Her cheek twitches, she opens her lips again. She's edgy, ready to go. She starts talking.

So, yeah, I had this friend once, she says. A girl named Mitsuko. She was an edger, always looking for the new new thing. A fad chaser, you know the type?

You do. Of course you do. You know the type well.

Mitsuko was beautiful. The kind of beautiful that gets away with anything, you know? Both her parents were rads, back during the first gene-push. They refused the option of gene-grafts, locking in with the ideology of the purity movement. One of them a staunch Anglo-American, the other Jap-American.

You ever seen that look pulled off, au natural? The Anglo-Asian thing? Mitsuko got it natural and it worked well. Real well. Scary how well, sometimes, if you think about it. It was the kind of look that made you understand how the gene-grafts caught on. Of

course you'd want your kid to look like her. She was stunning. Stunning and real. Realer than anyone you'll find around here these days.

Anyway, picture that look coming together for real and you get Mitsuko. She used to be Mitsuko Adams once, before she dropped the last name, but by the time I knew her it was just Mitsuko. I met her back in the early days of the queercore revival, and you should have seen the trouble that caused. Mitsuko would have all these straight boys hanging around, trying to look camp and hardcore every time she walked past them.

She caused all sorts of trouble with the girls too. It was like most of them had their first queer moment every time they looked at her. Even the fakers, the once who just took up the movement because it was vogue, they wanted it. I know she hit me hard when I saw her, real deep in the gut. Way low, you know, way below the stomach?

You raise an eyebrow. Pandora grins and keeps talking.

She wasn't faking it, Mitsuko. She was a real queercore purist. She'd never had trouble with the straight scenes before that, but it was like queercore comes along and she was suddenly home. She tried to leave it behind when the time came, but the fingerprints lingered. Most edgers are like that, hanging onto their first taste. Mitsuko had queercore, I have bits of deadgirl. You, I don't know. You hold onto nothing, I guess. There's no relic of the past in your style. You barely exist in the here and now.

Pandora pauses, looks at you, searching for a reaction. You hold it steady, watch her fidget. She pulls sugar packets from the pile on the table, cracking them open. White dust piles up on the table, hissing as it falls. Pandora looks down, sketching with her finger.

Mitsuko and I got together and interfaced, just the once. Not for long, but long enough.

It left a mark, you know? Spend enough time with someone and they'll do that. Mitsuko taught me stuff. Drugs mostly, and how to handle my first couple of steps into the edge. I tried to return the favour, but it didn't work. I knew nothing Mitsuko needed to know, and that's why we shut down. She needed to chase the new edge, and like it or not, I was always going to be the queercore moment in her life. Once the world made queercore mainstream, I was dead in the water. That's how it is with edgers. They leave you behind once the shine wears off.

Pandora carves words through the powder with her finger. Brand names, mostly. Coke. Pepsi. Armani-Gautier.

Mitsuko's dead now. Dead and gone. She tried going mutant when that started, and she failed like you wouldn't believe. Beautiful girl like her has to work hard to go mutant. It's hard to transform natural beauty into anti-glamour, and some rat-faced mutie purist put a bullet in her face for trying. Started a trend in retro-deaths not long after. You probably saw it in the style sheets. Trend killings, retro-culls, the whole death of history. Mitsuko would have been proud of that, you know? She always wanted to be at the start of something.

Pandora pauses and drains the coffee. Peaks with a shudder and lets the ephedrine carry her. You stare at your tea, already cold, the mug still full.

I wanna go, Pandora says. You coming?

Then she's up and moving, spreading the white dust with her hand. The words evaporate, lost across the table and the floor. Pandora leans against the table, her black jacket hanging limp on her frame.

By the way, Pandora says. I need a favour.

She smiles at you. You get up and follow her, away from the table and out into the streets.

Peter M. Ball is a Brisbane-based writer, but he grew up on the Gold Coast and still has a lingering fear of beaches, palm trees, and theme parks as a result. He attended the 2007 Clarion South workshop and works on a never-ending PhD thesis in his spare time.