

FREE PLAY PUBLISHING

Mr. Trout's Slide

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COLOPHON

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by Austen Tucker



Patrick Trout felt as if he was shrinking. Shrinking from life, from his job, from the desperation that came along with growing old, complacent, confident that his contributions to the world would never grow beyond making a comfortable living for himself, possibly popping out a few kids with his wife, and then dying, leaving only a handful of ashes sprinkled against a tree. (Possibly crushed into a diamond - he held onto this thought as if it were a rebellion in and of itself. "Here. Wear my corpse. It's pretty." As if a piece of him would last forever instead of being promptly forgotten in the bottom of a drawer.)

Presently, Mr. Trout felt himself shrinking against the towering oaks that surrounded him. He had left a suicide note, a will, and his last remaining possessions in a townhouse in Chicago. All that remained was the oxford-cut white on his back; a pair of black, round glasses; the scooter between his legs; and a small, rolled-up map in his pocket, sent by mail, pointing to a lakeside cabin at the end of this road. As he pulled up to the tiny rental cabin set against the large, almost sea-like Lake Michigan, he knew things would only get smaller.

As he cut the ignition to his bike and put down the kickstand a short lady came out to greet him. She looked not a day over twelve, with gangly limbs that seemed to get in each other's way, but the most striking thing about her was the way her face shifted. There was no real detail

to nail down: every time Mr. Trout looked there was a different woman there. Sometimes she was black, others white; here, a tall little girl; there, a stooped old woman. Imagine blurred vision, only with people.

Mr. Trout adjusted his glasses, unrolled the map from his pocket, looked down, back to the girl, down again, and then read aloud. "Shifter, I presume."

She reached out a hand. He took it; there was no real texture. Only pressure, weight. The girl spoke with a dozen voices:

"You shaved."

"Odd thing to mention," said Mr. Trout.

She shrugged. "Most people don't bother keeping up appearances by the time they get here, is all."

"But it's true. You're the Shifter."

"I'm a Shifter, yes." She walked over to the scooter and put her hand on it. "We are all Shifter. Security measure, you see. Anonymity breeds safety in this line of work."

Her fist closed. The scooter buckled over on itself, screeched, and then imploded. The air filled with heat and the stench of burnt oil. The bike kept buckling, hard, until there was nothing left but a small cube of nickel alloy.

"A keepsake," she said, offering it to Mr. Trout.

"That was my ride."

"It won't be necessary anymore," she said with a giggle. "Safety precautions. Please. Step inside. Can I offer you

tea? Coffee? Bourbon? We keep a full bar in case you need to calm your nerves.”

“Bourbon, thanks.” The door opened. The accommodations inside the cabin were barebones, temporary, and spartan: a collection of bottles, tea kettle, laptop on the counter, and three chairs arranged in a circle. On the back deck someone had set up an inflatable pool on the edge of a long slope that dumped out into the lake.

On seeing it, Mr. Trout’s heart caught in his throat. “It’s true, then.”

“True?”

“You can change people.”

“Why else would you be here?” She handed Mr. Trout a highball glass with two fingers of bourbon, which he tilted back without hesitation. She went to pour another slug. “I mean, you *did* find our message board, and you *did* do your due diligence. We sent sample portfolios.”

“I just thought you’d be hucksters. And you’re...” he hesitated. “You’re so... young, I guess?”

“I’m just an apprentice,” she responded.

“Hell of a position to land.”

“Well, I turned myself into a newt back in elementary school. Caused a huge ruckus, but that’s how Shifters find each other. They took me in afterwards. Better to have well-trained Shifters than folks going off half-cocked, right? Last thing we need is folks realizing we exist.”

“Huh.”

The front door flew open. Another shifting figure came into the cabin as if running to put out a fire. It wasted no time in grabbing the laptop, clicking through some files, and then looking up to Mr. Trout, arm extended.

“Right then. Patrick... Trout, it is?” She looked at the file again. “Oh. Guess we’ll need a new name. Questions for later.”

He shook the shifting hand. “Yes. You must be my Shifter then?”

“Yes.” The voice heaved. “Sorry, just did two furries, one facelift, and a pair of wings that barely fit through the door. Busy day.”

“I’m glad you could fit me—“ he paused. “Furries?”

“Yeah. Some bunnies, actually. Came out really cute. Anyway! Let’s see. Oh! Right. You’re my Ariel treatment for the day.”

“Ariel?”

“Mermaid.”

“Ah.”

“I do a lot of them,” she added with a smile. “So, let’s see. Consent forms signed, good, good; looks like you’ve given me some reference photos - classical styling, definitely doable, though I suggest going with different hair —“

“I’ve wanted this all my life,” Mr. Trout said. “I’ve dreamed about it since I was a kid. I know it sounds

ridiculous, and I should be asking for something sensible
—“

“Did the wire come through?”

“Pardon?”

“The cash,” she responded, and buried herself in the computer to search. “And please, I’m a professional. You don’t have to give me your life story to justify what you want.”

“Ah.”

“I turned an accountant into a gryphon before breakfast,” she continued. “Wanting to live under the sea is small potatoes. So let’s see: oh! You’ve set up instructions to your next of kin, I assume.”

It was at about this time that the apprentice reached for the buttons on Mr. Trout’s shirt. He tensed, and she stopped. “Prep,” she explained. “We have a small window. Okay?”

He nodded, and she went to work.

“I left a note and a will, yes.”

“And nobody knows you’re here.”

“I told my wife.”

The Shifter groaned.

“She didn’t believe me!”

“Still,” she turned to the apprentice. “This is why we use blended faces when we’re doing contract work.”

The apprentice stopped undoing Mr. Trout’s shirt. “Are you sure we should continue? I mean, I already crunched

his bike—“

“It’ll be fine. Not like this’d be the first time the PD covers for us. Right then. Looks like the wire came through, though. Mr. Trout, let’s get you into that pool out back. Water’s a bit cold, fair warning.”

“Just like that, then.”

“If by ‘just like that’ you mean ‘give me enough money to buy a small house and you get your dream,’ then yes. The police look the other way because I do a bunch of pro-bono work for burn victims. Right. So slide on into the water, then. We want you waist-deep at the very least – less than that, and you might suffocate. No pressure.”

He stood at the edge of the water with his pants on. This *had* to be a joke, he thought. In a few minutes the camera crew would come out from behind a tree, stifling laughter, saying they were with some sort of prank show or something. It couldn’t have been this easy. Shouldn’t have been.

Then again, these two women shouldn’t have been able to make their faces do what they were doing.

“Do you want a towel or something?” the apprentice asked. “We’ve seen pretty much every configuration downstairs by this point, if it helps.”

At least the cameras would get a show, he thought, and then slid into the tub. The water was cold enough to send him shivering.

“What do I... erm, do?”

“Relax. I can take it from here.” Then the Shifter put her hands on his feet and a shock ran through his body. One second he had feet, complete with toes and calluses and bunions that never, ever stopped hurting, and the next it was all gone. He felt as if someone had unfurled both feet like a maid might uncrumple a bedsheet: up, flip, and then the crumpled mess flattened out into a single, graceful, green fin.

Fin. His feet were now one fin.

So much for the prank angle.

“Don’t pass out on me,” the Shifter said. “I’ve got twenty dollars that says you won’t be a fainter.”

“Are you always this *laissez-faire* about this work?”

“Yeah. I’ve been doing this since I was a kid. You have any *idea* how many people want to be a mermaid? It’s, like, top three dreams of little kids, at the very least. And don’t even get me started on how much Disney bumped my business model – there was a time where I’d have a dozen clients laid out in chutes on waterslides, and I’d just flip through them all—” she paused, hands on his ankles. “Deep breath, honey. This one fucks with your pulmonary system. Don’t want a collapsed lung to go with your new fins...”

He gulped air, and then the Shifter gripped the edge of the fin and pulled, hard. A long, slick patch of scales swept over his legs and hips, took hold, and then melted down his old lower half. The breath in his lungs seeped

out from his hips, and when he went to breathe again the muscles in what used to be his thighs reacted.

“Gills,” she said, smiling. “Yes, it takes some getting used to. I’ll send you with some materials on your new body. Atlantis insisted I start doing that after I kept sending clueless idiots downstream. So... torso. You sent reference pictures, but the form asks for final confirmation. Fuller chest, flatter chest, somewhere between?”

“Are you always this forward?”

“When I’m on a schedule, yes.”

Mr. Trout looked down at the green scales gleaming beneath the water. This was the first part of the question he had not rehearsed.

“Fuller,” he said. “I think.”

The Shifter touched his chest. Warmth spread beneath her palm, followed by weight, a new center of gravity, a shape he had known in dreams but never expected to feel. A grin melted across Trout’s face.

“Can I just have a moment?”

“Take two,” the Shifter said. “The schedule can survive.”

“Thank you,” Patrick said. The name felt as temporary as the legs he no longer had. He flipped his tail, shook the water from his hair, and watched the woman in the pool smile back from the surface.

The Shifter produced a bag from below the pool and handed it to Patrick. “Okay. Here’s your stuff. GPS. Clamshell bra. Every mermaid should have one. Call it a

gift. That, and public nudity laws are nothing to fuck with in Atlantis – fair warning. The GPS has Atlantis programmed. Make sure you don't miss the final turn. I hear it's hidden behind Niagara and impossible to get to without tourists seeing you."

"Who cares if they see me?" Patrick said, his voice full of singsong and melody. "I'm a mermaid! I'm special! I want the world to see—"

"About that," the Shifter said. "One more thing. You told your wife?"

The newly minted mermaid froze.

"She didn't believe me."

"Call her when you reach the lake. Atlantis has phones. You left her a note, not a corpse. Give her the chance to be surprised."

"That's not part of the package."

"Free advice." The Shifter tapped the laptop. "Second thing. Atlantis needs a name for the arrival ledger. Your inquiry says Patrick Trout. Is that the name you want waiting for you at customs?"

She looked at herself in the water. Green fin. Wet hair. The curve of a body that had been waiting inside the question all along.

"Patricia," she said.

"Patricia Trout?" the apprentice asked.

"Too freshwater."

The apprentice considered this. "Patricia Pufferfish?"

“Plain as a pufferfish,” Patricia said. She blew out her cheeks for effect. “Perfect.”

The Shifter held up the GPS.

“Take this to the customs desk. They’ll get you the rest of the way.”

Patricia took the navigator. “And the phone?”

“At customs.”

“Right.” Patricia pushed off from the edge and slid down the long, wet chute toward Lake Michigan. For the first time since arriving, she was headed somewhere instead of away.

The apprentice watched her disappear into the trees. “Do you ever get tired of mermaids?”

“Never,” the Shifter said, smiling. “There’s a puffer born every minute.”



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