

The Sulker

By Mx Frog

She made an excellent sulker. Permanently furrowed brows covered black holes of dark brown eyes which themselves covered bruised purple bags poised to slide right down her cheeks. Her slender, nearly invisible pale lips were dry and cracked, holding only the moisture of a thin line of blood running from a split right in the middle of the bottom lip. She kept licking her lips anyway, lapping up the little dribble of blood with the underside of her tongue so it wouldn't heal. She looked down at her hands, the long nails lined and filled with greasy grime.

She blinked, and that was that. Sulk time was over. But still, what was she *doing*? She stood up from the curb, knees popping, and began a slouched walk along the sidewalk. As aesthetic as it may be to sulk, people usually sulk *about* something. So, what was her thing? She thought about it, then shook her head. No, it wasn't coming to her. Not right now, anyway. But she could damn sure use a cigarette. Few things better for sulking than that. She cut across the parking lot, staring down at the still-wet cracks in dry gray pavement while the still-wet crack on her dry lip dripped.

That soft little bell rang as she pulled open the door and crossed from the mute light of an overcast expanse to the harshly shining technicolor of the convenience store. She snorted at the smell of cheap taquitos and sugar, and stepped to the counter.

"Hey, how's it going?" asked the man behind the plexiglass partition. It wasn't much of a question, the way he said it, but she responded anyway.

"Ah—" Her throat was dry; the first word caught and stopped up the ones behind it. She cleared her throat and breathed in more of the stale-grease aroma.

"Ah, you know, I've been better. I've had to do a lot of brooding recently, and I don't really know what for. You have any idea?" Right, so maybe the sulk wasn't over. But that still doesn't answer the question: what *was* she doing? She thought about it, then raised an eyebrow at the cashier. He stared back at her, mouth slightly open. She shook her head and continued.

"Could I get a pack of... um, cigarettes?" This wasn't a question, really, but she said it like one. He stared another beat, then looked down at his red polo shirt. There was a spot of mustard on the collar.

"Shit." he said, maintaining his monotone. "Shop's closed, get out."

"What? What do you mean?" she said, clearly exasperated. Yet he had already turned his back on her and left to the back room, rubbing at his collar with spit-shined fingers on the way out.

"Hey!" she shouted, and slapped the plexiglass with one hand, then with both hands, but the time had passed, her request was rejected, and she still had to figure out what she was doing. Her heart pumped hard, and she swallowed, but none of that changed anything. She stormed to the back of the store, black lace-up docs punching the linoleum maliciously. Reaching the wall

of fridge, she threw open a glass door and pulled out a 40, cracked it, and walked back swigging, shoes a bit quieter this time. She shoved open the main door and was embraced by gray again.

She sipped and she walked, she walked and she sipped and she thought and the anger subsided – her drink drowned it in a puddle of sulk. Approaching a major intersection, she finished her 40 and threw it into the parking lot of the gas station on her right. It shattered, and a drizzle began. She pulled her burn-riddled hoodie tightly around herself and hurried toward the gas mart’s entrance. Like the gray and the rain, a vibrating buzz enveloped her, and as it tingled atop her skin the bags beneath her eyes grew darker.

“Hey, girl!” She turned left to the voice, where she saw a man in formal dress walking toward her hidden beneath the black of his umbrella. “Did you smash that bottle?” He asked, neutral in every way. Caught out, the buzz and surprise numbed her hands; she rubbed them on her black jeans to find a spot of foam sitting on the hip. The man saw this and chuckled.

“So you did. Here’s a ten, go buy yourself some cigarettes.” His black leather-gloved hand held out a rectangle of crisp, pale green. A gust of wind swept in and the bill fluttered, wetted slightly, in the gas-scented breeze. She looked at it and thought, but her hands moved only to rub her denim hips. The bill remained; she met his eyes as they tried to hide behind his wire-rimmed glasses, beneath the rim of his hat.

“I’m not homeless.” she said. Her hair was soaked now, and clung in stringy clumps to the side of her face. Her face was soaked now, and clung tightly to the front of her skull. The man dropped his hand; the bill dripped. The rain picked up and poured steady drops upon her.

“Oh.” he said, flat. “Then what are you doing?” He turned and walked away. Shivering against the wet chill, she watched him leave, rounding the edge of the gas mart and out of sight with the wet bill still pinched between his fingers. She spit without moving her eyes from the spot where she last saw him, and continued to send thoughts tumbling through the buzz that engulfed her mind. What was she doing? Shouldn’t she have something to sulk *about*? All she really knew was that right now, she wanted a cigarette. Due to the aesthetic of brooding or not, that’s where her mind went. Yet her eyes remained locked on the corner of the store behind which the umbrella had disappeared. And her feet followed her eyes while the rain intensified and she pulled her jacket tight as her buzz began to fade and you know what? The aesthetic of brooding welcomes standing in the rain as much as it does a cigarette. Yet she did not just stand but walked, rounding the corner crunching broken glass underfoot to find.

The rain let up a tad, though the smell of gas coming in on the wind remained strong. Before her, sitting on the curb beneath the sparse protection of the gas mart’s overhang, was an old homeless woman. A half-full 40 stood beside her, and a burning cigarette hung stuck to her dry inner lip. Her style of dress was not too dissimilar to our sulker; her hair was dryer and shoes less militant. She looked up at the young woman, now stopped before the curb, still exposed to the rain, and took a pull from her cigarette. The rain pulled back to a drizzle and the old woman coughed, disrupting her young counterpart’s scan of the surroundings.

“Cigarette?” she rasped, reaching her leather hand filled with garbage filled with cancer toward the leather feet before her. The sulker laid her dark brown eyes upon the box, thought, and shook her head. The woman flicked ash from her burning cigarette and set down the package.

“Sit down, girl.” She patted the ground beside her. “Come on.” The young woman hesitated after taking half a step, then did one more quick scan – unsatisfactory. She continued and sat beside the woman, the 40 between them. Sighing, the old woman hoisted the 40 and took a gulp, took a look at her new partner, and set the bottle down on the other side of her with the softest glass clink. The girl’s brown eyes swept the asphalt in erratic jumps, and the woman looked at her and she did not look hard at anything; she didn’t look at the woman. So much for sulking.

“Look at me, girl.” She didn’t look. She kept glancing around erratically, kept licking the scab on her lip. The woman drew on her cigarette, and she exhaled into the girl’s face as she spoke. “Girl.” The girl looked. Her eyes were black puddles lapping before the woman. The woman reflected those black holes in blue; she put her hand on the girl’s shoulder. The rain stopped completely, and the lack of that ambient noise somehow made everything louder.

“Why are you sulking, girl?” the woman asked. “Or are you?” The girl broke eye contact and began scanning again. As she thought, she chewed her lip again, and blood spilled out of the scab onto her chin.

“Where did he go?” she asked. The woman didn’t respond; she reached over and wiped the girl’s chin with a leathery hand, then pinched it, pulled, turning her deep eyes back to contact. She sighed shortly as the woman lowered her hand, but she kept their eyes locked.

“I’ll ask you again, girl.” the woman said, flicking her cigarette butt into a puddle. It bobbed and floated there, the centerpiece of concentric circles, but neither woman broke focus to watch the waves fade.

“I…” The girl frowned and rubbed at her jeans. She was thinking about it as hard as she could, so why would nothing come to her? She dropped her eyes to look at her dirt-laden fingernails, by doing which the brooding felt more authentic, but saw a leather hand grasping an old box of cigarettes instead. She thought more, but instead of grasping at another undefined goal, she took a cigarette, and put it between her lips. The old woman lit it, and she inhaled pure static energy; she exhaled extasy. The drizzle started again, and she smiled, leaning back to suck in another draw.

What was she doing? She was smoking a cigarette.