

Another Version of My Life, in Which I am Played by Meryl Streep

by Sally Houtman

I am standing in the doorway of Oliver's office on the fourteenth floor, because it is the only place I can see outside. There is a window in the cubicle where I have a small desk, but, like the others along the corridor, it has been covered with a thin grey film to block out the glare. From Oliver's window you can still see out. On a clear day, if you rest your forehead against that thin glass pane and tilt your head at just the right angle, you can see as far as the outer harbour, to that place where the sky meets the sea. But Oliver, with his head inclined forward as I watch him work, has not once looked up, not once turned to see the world outside. I lean my shoulder against the frame of his door and ask, "Do you think I look like Meryl Streep?"

He lifts his head, forehead creased. "Who says you look like Meryl Streep?"

"Just someone," I say. "Some random bloke at the store."

He taps a pen on the desk, gives me a lingering look. "Is there a point to this little visit?" he says.

I glance sideways at the photo on his desk, he and Jen at some seaside locale. Jen is barefoot; pouty-lipped, an ankle-length cotton skirt hangs low on her hips. "It's not a lot to ask of a window, you know," I say, shifting my weight to the other side. "It just has to hang there and let you see outside."

He massages his temples, exhales through his teeth. Chez Greene, passing by, swivels her head, stops. "Look, Meg," Oliver says, taking on a clipped, impatient tone. "We've been through this before. Glare leads to eye strain which leads to loss of productivity. The tinting stays."

Chez turns to me, strikes a pose in her Thursday heels. "Meryl Streep, did I hear you say?" She holds her right hand up, elbow tucked at her waist. "Dude musta been blind."

I look out over Oliver's shoulder, at the trees and the hills beyond, and wish that I was there, wherever there might be.

In my office I do a Google search. I find Meryl Streep's bio on Wikipedia, a recent photo as well. It is an outdoor shot, snapped at some prestigious celebrity event. Wind bellies her floral skirt; strands of loose hair are flying, hooning a bit. Her thin lips are pursed, her jaw square and blunt like a shovel's blade. She looks like someone's grandmother, or someone's unmarried aunt.

"God! Is that Meryl Streep?" Oliver leans over my shoulder, a paper coffee cup in one hand. "Wow. She looks so old. I mean, like Jane Fonda old."

I rest my elbow on the desk, chin in hand, say, "Is there a point to this little visit?"

"I'm sorry," he says, palms his cup into the bin. "I didn't mean to snap at you before. It's just that nosey Chez is getting a bit suspicious." He glances right and left, candy-coats his tone. "Jen's with her women's group on Saturday. I can come over...keep you company...if you like."

I nod. I always do.

I turn back to my screen, to Meryl Streep's unblinking stare. I move in closer, search her face for similarities, some small interchange of features I can claim. I browse the net for earlier photos, from the *Deer Hunter* era, which place her closer to my current age. I click on a thumbnail image and a still from *Kramer vs. Kramer* fills the screen. Streep is captured in mid-gesture, one hand raised, a look of tightly-capped emotion on her face — a face I swear could have been mine. I view more photos, study her, increasingly aware that in me there is something lacking, a single lagging drumbeat that is holding the orchestra back. I cannot help but envy her, the way she dares to not be pretty, how she wears with

pride that little edge that makes her interesting, but only serves to make me plain

I am on my couch, Oliver's head in my lap. We are watching *Mama Mia*. Meryl Streep is singing on her daughter's wedding day. She is standing, feet together, shoulders back, against a turquoise band of sea. Her voice holds steady, rises, inches forward, settles in the warm Greek breeze. The melody is shaky, but her delivery is resolute. If only real life could have such stagey realism, I think, be choreographed to a bouncy ABBA beat.

I run my fingers through Oliver's thick black hair and sigh. "Guess I'd better pay attention, eh?" I say. "Because this is about as close to a real wedding as I'll ever be." With this, I have strayed into enemy territory, headed straight into his no-fly zone. Sitting up, he manoeuvres my face to his with his hands and places his lips over mine. On the subject, no further comment is exchanged.

At the end, Oliver yawns. "That was a bit cheesy, don't you think?" He wrinkles his nose. "If you wanted a gawp at Meryl Streep, weren't there better films you could've chosen?"

I don't tell him that in the past two days I've seen half a dozen of such films. On Thursday night, while he went bowling, I watched *Silkwood* and *Sophie's Choice*. On Friday, while he made roast chicken for Jen and her sister on their enormous gas-fired grill, I watched *A Cry in the Dark* and *The Devil Wears Prada*, twice. And, later that night, while he made love to Jen on the wide unbroken plain of their king-sized bed, I watched *Julie and Julia*, the special director's cut. I knew he'd loathe *Mama Mia*, but, given the circumstances, I figured he owed me that much.

Later, Oliver sits on the edge of the bed and tucks in his shirt. "I think maybe we should cool things down a bit," he says. "You know, give ourselves some breathing room. It's just that it's getting...well... it's complicated."

There is a voice inside me I'm trying to silence, a voice I'm telling to shut up. "It's complicated, yes," I say. "That was one of her better films. She has an affair with her ex-husband."

He looks at me like I'm a product he wants to rebrand.

As I lie there naked under the sheet, I can't help but wonder what a stronger woman might do, one with a more snap-to-it attitude, who had an ounce of stubborn kick. I imagine that there is another version of my life, one in which I am played by Meryl Streep. In this parallel world I am sitting, legs crossed, in Oliver's large backyard. I am waiting in an Adirondack chair, elegant and nonchalant, dangling from one hand a cigarette, or a drink or a book. When Jen arrives to find me, she welcomes me as just another one of Oliver's friends. I cannot help but admire the woman's stalwart optimism, her unimpeachable charm. I lean forward and rest my elbows on my knees, own my words, tell her everything in a voice as smooth as dusk.

But the real world has weight and density. I haven't imagined it. It exists.

I have, in recent weeks, seen nearly all of Meryl Streep's films, and I can say I am emboldened by her poise. I have long admired straight-backed women, the way they coax their bodies into sharp angles, the cocky way they hold their wrists. Me, I have always slouched. Sitting, my shoulders sink towards my hips, forcing my spine into an undignified curve. When I stand my posture stiffens, I shift my weight from side to side, hips jutting, fighting for some awkward plumb. My lilting posture, I have often felt, was a sign of inner weakness, of my inability to grasp the geometry of grace. But today seems somehow different. Today in my cubicle at my desk I feel I sit a little straighter, my heart more steady in my chest.

Of late, I have seen Oliver only from a distance, skulking about in a solemn, hang-dog sort of way. He looks this way now as he leans in my doorway, hands in his pockets, asking why I don't come to his office anymore. "What's the matter?" he says. "Don't like the view?"

I don't ignore the question, but neither do I respond. I refill my lungs, bring my back a little closer to the chair.

He rubs the back of his neck with his hand, shifts from foot to foot. "Jen's away at her mum's for the weekend. I can come over, stay the night if you like. C'mon, Meg, whaddaya say?"

I cross my arms, flip back my hair. Outside, wind beats hard against my window; I can almost feel the building sway.

