



The nondescript Jane

Chinwe Okonkwo

The nondescript Jane takes a seat below the incendiary contrasts of hatred and philanthropy; she carefully places her bag on top. I envied her and her clean projection of a life.

Her teeth so perfectly aligned as if to exaggerate the rest of her plainly unpretentious image, as if to shove the memory of their acute squares across my delicately insecure eyes - her smile taking up half her face.

She glides the subway on occasion to work cruising the war on Afghanistan, she nods to the Taliban in passing. On Sundays, she walks by reconciliation; she smiles, but not with her teeth this time.

She doesn't care for Bassett's Oscar snub or Bezos' trip to Mars. There is nothing more she seeks than her given life.

The nondescript Jane caresses exemption from reality, she is placid to small business or timely politicians. I heard she solved world hunger once, but felt no need to boast. The nondescript Jane clasps the world minus vision.

SHEPLESS

Paul Kimm

He was strangling his father. One armed strangling. His knuckles, white hills, clamped around his father's worn, crimson neck. His father struggled for breath, but kept that straight-mouthed grin he always had. His back grinded against the red brick behind him. Mal could feel his father's skin scrape against its roughness. He drove his grip harder. His father let out a splutter. Hopefully close to his last. Mal wanted the old bastard dead. Once and for all.

'Mal! Mal! Jesus!'

His brothers, Jeff and Pete, came pelting around the corner and dragged him off their father. All three of them tumbled to the concrete paving whilst their father choked his breath back to life. Jeff and Pete held Mal down and Mal raged, grunted, flailed, and cried.

'You can't even kill me, can you?'

'Dad. Please for once leave it. You have to get rid of the damn dog.'

'The dog stays.'

'It'll kill mum if you keep it. The doctor said as much.'

'Your mum'll be fine. She chose to smoke all those cigarettes. The dog stays.'

Mal still needed pinning down. He writhed on the floor under his two

older brothers' weight. Their mother was about to come home from hospital. She'd recovered from lung cancer, but was weak and frail. The doctor had said no disruptions. She needed calm and rest. Lots of it. All the same their dad wanted the replacement dog.

He had done this for decades with dogs. When one died he buried it. No ceremony. Just dug a hole, stuck the dead dog in it, and then went and bought another one. He never went more than a few days without a dog. It was always the same dog though. He'd buy the same breed, Alsatian, same colouring and markings, and call it the same name, Shep. He manufactured a reincarnation of the same dog. It had always been considered an oddity, an unnerving eccentricity, but until this one it'd never been a problem to anyone.



Just a week before his wife coming out to convalesce at home, despite being told by the doctor it'd be a huge difficulty for her, a genuine risk to her ongoing recovery, he'd gone and bought his latest Shep. He didn't seem to count. It could be Shep five or six or seven. That didn't matter. It was Shep again. The never ending Shep. When his sons found out he'd refused to get rid of it, they'd offered to take care of it. Even just until mum got stronger, but no, he still insisted on keeping Shep. Their mother didn't even know there was a puppy, not toilet trained, yapping all the time, waiting at home for her. She didn't know the previous Shep was now under soil at the end of the garden. She could barely walk from the front to the back of the house without losing her breath.

That's why Mal had lost it, cracked into a rage, a fury that sent him gunning for his own father. For the hollow absence of love they'd

grown up with from their father, their mother had a constant flood of love for them. What he took, and he really took, she gave, and in abundance. There was no way a replacement dog was going to stand in the way of protecting their mother.

After leaving their father's, and Mal promising to Jeff and Pete not to attack him again, the three brothers went to the pub. Over pints of cider, games of darts, and salted peanuts they talked about what to do.

The next morning, their father awoke, went downstairs and poured some milk on his cornflakes. Shep was gone. He searched the house, looked under beds, behind chairs and the sofa. He scoured the back garden, shaking the cabbages with a rake, behind and in the shed. No Shep. He asked his neighbours and spent the morning pacing around the neighbourhood calling out Shep's name. He phoned his eldest, Jeff, and asked him to come over.

'Has that brother of yours calmed down?'

'He's fine. He won't come round until mum's home though. Where's your new dog?'

'I don't know where the bloody thing is.'

'How do you mean you don't know?'

'Seems to have done a runner. I'll pick up another one tomorrow.'

'Another Shep?'

'Aye, another Shep. The breeder had a good few to choose from.'

Their father was at the breeder's kennels at nine sharp the next morning when they opened. Through the garden he could only hear the breeze in the thinner branches as he walked up.

'Sold the lot, Bill.'

'Sold the lot? Who the bloody hell bought the lot?'

'Now come on Bill, I can't give customer's details. Sorry, but I've none for sale for now.'

'Sold the lot. Who flaming buys four Alsatians in one go!'

When he got home he put the kettle on and dropped a teabag into a mug. When the kettle whistled he clicked off the gas burner, poured the water into his mug and sat at the dining table tucked up to the window sill. It was silent. That kind of silence where pieces of furniture, walls, carpets seem to start to make a barely perceptible hum of their own. He picked up the phone and dialed his second son.

'Pete. You live five minutes from the pet shop. Pop down for me

and see if they've any Alsatians in, would you?'

Fifteen minutes later, his mug of tea just finished, the phone rang.

'Dad, they've got none.'

'That's odd that is. They usually have one at least.'

'Aye, well, she said they sold their last two earlier this week.'

By the next day he became the longest he'd been without a Shep in thirty-eight years. He got out the Yellow Pages, found just two other possible sellers in the area and called them up.

'Do you have any Alsatians for sale?'

'Not at the moment, no. We've got Jack Russells, some spaniels and a poodle.'

'Oh no. I only want an Alsatian you see.'

'Sorry mate, we sold our last two Alsatians two days back.'

By the time his wife, their mother, returned home, he had failed to find an Alsatian, a Shep. He was Shepless. The doctor who brought her home commended him on not keeping the puppy he'd got. Bill grunted in return. Pete and Jeff helped their mum out of the ambulance and walked her into the house. As always, never using the front door, but gently walking with her, each taking an arm, around the back of the house. The weather was good, so they brought her a dining chair outside and made her a milky, sugary tea. Their father stayed indoors, as always, his eyes fixed to the cricket on the television.

'It's so lovely to be home boys. I've missed sitting out here with you all.'

'Aye mum, it's great to have you back home. We've missed you too. We'll look after you.'

'I know you will lads. You always do boys. Is Mal going to be coming round too though?'

'Yes, mum. Hopefully later. He's been travelling a bit these last couple of weeks. New business venture on the side.'

'Oh, what's he been up to?'

'I don't know a great deal about it mum. Something to do with supplying pets.'

'He's a grafter your little brother is.'

'Aye mum, he's been selling dogs up and down the country I think. It's pretty decent earner it seems.'

'He's a good lad your little brother is. He'll do owt to make sure his family is looked after.'



Plush

Arlo

Are you still there?
Tucked in and gathered
Amidst my legs,
Taking tender breaths.

A peach-fleeced joy
Of sickness and relief,
Not seen or heard
In gloom, but pet.

A smell,
Like you or me, or both?
Caught on our shivers,
Together under downy wraps.
And across the pale horizon.

Public Service

Jack Norman

It is an ignoble occupation. A place to keep the dregs of the educated class busy so you are never trapped with them in an elevator, much like prison serves to keep the delinquent away from grocery stores of a night-time.



EVERYTHING WHITE SO YOU KNOW WHEN IT'S DIRTY

Tyrone Monk

Kevin told this story to his wife Margarete at night. He said it exhibited a problem in society. Young people and their fucking phones.

He had a bad day at work, said fuck it and left early for lunch. But because everything happened to him, that was spoiled too. The woman one table over had a phone call loud enough Kevin could hear both sides if he listened.

“I didn’t want to listen,” he said to Margarete while he brushed his teeth, “but I had no *choice*.”

“People,” Margarete said as she rubbed lotion into her hands, “have no respect for a public space anymore.”

The woman’s phone was ironically on silent because Kevin did not hear it ring. He only heard the woman’s voice when she answered.

Hey, are you still sober? Are you still not drinking at all?

And if that were not a good enough way to start the conversation, the next word was the icing on the cake:

Mom...

Kevin could not suppress a laugh. Not because it was funny, but because it was Kevin’s first instinct. And so he laughed one half stifled laugh that ejected the coffee out of his mouth and onto his good, non-iron white shirt. He picked up a napkin and before even wiping his mouth he dampened the napkin in his water and pressed the stain. No avail, though. The stain formed into the shape of Argentina.

Have you ever considered going to a meeting? Just one meeting? I know you said they were a bunch of losers over there but, guess what, you drank too much and now you're a loser too. Go. Join your people.

At this point the waitress came to refill the woman's coffee. When she did, the woman took the phone from her ear long enough to say thank you. Kevin hoped the woman left a big tip.

The waitress came to Kevin's table. He had to make like he was wiping his mouth to hide his smile.

"Get you something for that spill?" she asked.

"No," he said.

"More napkins?"

"No. Thank you."

The waitress left and Kevin cast his eyes down. He took a bite of his salad and listened.

Just go to one meeting, mom. Just one meeting. What's it gonna hurt? I know you hate people. I know that but you won't have to talk... No, you only have to talk if you want to. Nobody makes you talk, especially if you're new... I don't know, I just know. It's common knowledge.

Kevin wondered how many of these meetings the woman had been to. He wondered if she ever talked. Who was he kidding? Of course she did. If she can talk here, she can talk anywhere.

Christ, I'll go to a meeting with you. God knows I could use a meeting or two. After I had Charles I was drunk almost every day for a while.

This last line could not be repeated to Margarete. Not as the woman said it. It wasn't funny anymore, not with children involved.

"So then she tells her mother, in front of the whole restaurant, 'You know, Mom, I could use a meeting or two myself. I drink every day!'"

"Some people have no sense of public and private," Margarete said, still going at her hands with the lotion. "Some people have no sense at all."

As she spoke she found a rough spot on the middle knuckle of her left hand. It was a calloused spot that yesterday had cracked and bled. She put another bit of lotion on it, the expensive lotion. She knew women half her age that did not have hands like hers. She prided herself on her hands.

"Isn't that the truth," Kevin said, coming out of the bathroom pajamaed and teeth brushed.

What happened next was the nightly routine, so often repeated neither thought twice.

Kevin went to the bed. It was a queen sized bed with a big, wooden headboard. Piled halfway up the headboard were pink and red decorative pillows, five on the left side and five on the right. Kevin pulled the comforter from the bed and took the five pillows on the left side and lay the pillows down and replaced the comforter over them. Under the decorative pillows were two normal pillows in plain white cases. Kevin took the two plain white pillows and held them under his arm, then he went to the foot of the bed and opened a white bed chest. Inside the bed chest was a plain white comforter and he removed it and draped it over his shoulder and closed the bed chest. Then he went to the door. By this time Margarett was in bed. She lay with a book in her hands, though her eyes were closed.

“You want this off?” Kevin asked, meaning the overhead light.

“Yes,” Margarett said. “I’m going to read for an hour but I’ll turn on the lamp.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

Kevin shut the door and went downstairs and went downstairs again to the basement where he put the pillows and blanket on the leather sofa and lay himself down. It took him ten minutes longer to fall asleep than it should have, not because he was not tired but because he could not stop thinking. He was not thinking about the woman anymore. Now he was thinking about his good, white non-iron shirt and if he would ever get that stain out or if it was a job for a professional or if he would have to throw his hands up, give in, and only wear it with sweaters.

MADE TO UNDERSTAND

Vincenzo Balistreri

the colors of
the world cannot
be as I see
them
but only as
you claim to know
them

you draw mazes
straight as arrows
out loud telling
the solutions
solved
to everyone
even me

vulnerable
standing stuck
in mud up
to my shins
there is no
way to drown

I'd rather you
left me swimming
in endearing
ignorance
of my own



The Attic

S.P. Irit

The door horizon tilted.
Small glass reflecting
the nest. Quiet enough
and sunlight fogs
through the windows.



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“The Attic”
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go read “The Sayings of the Desert Fathers”

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