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I'M GLAD YOU WEREN'T VERY NICE, ALFRED

JANE (TRANSLATED, NOT HER REAL NAME) told him, the rapist (name unknown, initially), that she was not native to America, that it was not her *comfortable* country yet, so if, in this proposed mayhem, he was trying to adjudicate all sorts of pediatric trauma by this instance of, really, terrible, terrible judgment, it would be more as though he were declaring war on another country than simply rooting out the skeletons of – “What was it?” – an incorrect mother? A mother who might have made him wear her underpants or eat cold, cooked onions?

“Did she beat you on your business with an electrical cord, a belt, her shoe?”

Jane, a physical therapist, very tall with what she'd been told was American blond hair, a rugged young woman due to her profession, had one friend so far, a woman of maybe thirty years who kept trying to “get Jane on” (as she said, a strange expression) at the beauty shop where she worked, Jane self-confessed as being good with her hands – if not certifiable in her own work without an expensive course of study at university – yet unable to tell this friend that she was, excuse me, quite beyond spending her life twirling curls in the reluctant manes of chatty girls.

Still, Jane used her friend as something of a model since she had few ideas of how she, herself, was supposed to be now, her own hair open to all sorts of opinions and shapes, malleable, as was her friend's. Jane's

lip varnish and eye shading were identical to her friend's as well, and even Jane's body was not at all dissimilar from that of her friend, whose name was Martha Spikes – both of them proportionally decent of figure, slimly lithe yet able to withstand good winds, their bodies, of course, at an age where change meant either a surrender to the surgeon or to gravity (Martha's view).

Martha wore uncomfortable hose with a wide netting so Jane did too, thus flattering Martha, and they both regularly wore a raised-heel shoe that tended to make the foot look shoeless. She was sure that Martha was extreme in matters of costume and cosmetics, but all that meant was that there would be numerous styles Jane could fall back on once she'd determined what she should be. One complication in all of that had to do with Jane's mother, who was in a languishing state back home, a morass of several diseases whose consensus might someday call Jane back home, something of a reverse smuggle, as she thought about it, and probably impossible since she knew it would be a long time before she had the money for such a journey. She would see to it, though, that her mother knew she was trying – a good daughter.

HER UNEMPLOYMENT, HOWEVER, the time on her hands that sat there like heavy gloves, was no excuse for this young man to wave a knife in front of her and to be, right here on a quiet street, going through her bag with all of its American disposables, including Extra Sensitive condoms (unopened), Fleer's Bubble Gum, Kleenex Tissues (89¢), all of her Martha Spikes imitations (lip liner, eye smear, pantycake powder, even the extra shiny toothpaste that would turn your teeth two shades whiter), pepper spray, and one half of a peanut butter (truly, a delightful expression) sandwich from Martha Spikes herself who, Jane began to think, didn't live all that far from where she was right then. Easy to imagine some sort of stiff-legged strut down the block, freshly-robbed and leaking the semen of a stranger without even having the memory of good bar food from the night before or truly vigorous American dancing.

"What can I do for you?" Martha Spikes might say. Indeed, what would she be able to do? American women always went to hospital after these events, which made the whole thing seem terribly clinical, as though rape and all its sadistic penetrations was only some sort of medical problem like estral cramping or an underarm fungus.

Back home, it was all much more human. A group of women would get together and find the man – not hard; it was never difficult to identify such men – and share some justice with a garden-fresh vegetable, usually a cucumber or zucchini although several carrots would do the

job. Really basic stuff with the injury pronounced enough to require some work in hospital (minor surgeries not covered by State Medix so that was always a plus). Police, too, viewed those woundings as of obvious origin and, so long as the women in town tended to feel the job was done, were not very sympathetic to the man. The surgery, too, would nearly always get the man back on his feet again, usually with a far different outlook on life.

There was progress in that feminine justice, Jane knew, since her grandmother had told her one time that when she was a girl they used to behead rapists. Jane thought she might tell this young man that if his goals seemed to be pointing in that direction.

"If you want to look at me," Jane said, "that can be arranged, you know. That's far better than war between two countries. Do you have a name?"

"It's Alfred," the man said, his face looking *flushed* (Jane was unsure of the word, that one sounding unduly toilettic), florid, outposts of angry pink at odds with islands of white.

"So Alfred," Jane began, "I don't know how this all works; me, you know, fresh off the boat – actually, a shrimper from Port St. Boulangerie. You ever eat raw shrimp, Alfred?"

"We wore tags around our necks," she went on, "and possessed all kinds of ramshackle, beat-up valises, backpacks, trunks, even plastic bags. Upon disembarking somewhere, I had a doctor probe my top, my bottom, and my all-around and pronounce me fit and prepped to be a cog in the great American machine. Keep in mind, that much of this took place in the dark and among strangers. It took the doctor a good five minutes to find a language he thought I could understand. Anyway, I have studied adversity and I'm a very good student."

Alfred's eyes started to roll back in his head and Jane thought either she was losing him or he was becoming quite angry. They were standing face-to-face and he had the tip of his dagger right at her throat to where she could feel something in her neck throbbing against it. She did think, though, that she was meeting all of this in a good way, a straightforward way and very democratic at that. All things were possible in Paradise, and crime had to be the least surprising of any disappointments. Even Martha Spikes who, back home, would have been told she looked like a whore and that it was time to change her ways, had told her that she occasionally cheated on her taxes, but only in those years when her income was so low she simply could not afford to build one more Patriot missile or even an inch of transcontinental highway.

"Alfred?"

"Yes?"

"Am I supposed to be giving you a blowing job?"

Jane was holding her bag open as Alfred dug through it with one hand. She thought he seemed a bit nervous, not quite professional enough yet to be accosting strangers on the street, better to stick with stealing tram chits from your father's wallet, or loose coins from your mother's purse. She knew Martha, for example, carried a small American pistol and Jane had no doubt Martha would be exercising her constitutional right of self-defense, numerous windows in this dark neighborhood at risk, perhaps the assailant, too.

Alfred had not, yet, asked her to raise her skirt or to sink down in a posture she'd given up shortly after her First Communion. Wise beyond her years, she'd told her mother she liked the priest and the little cookies he gave out, but she was only a child and short enough. If she made herself any shorter God might miss her altogether. Still healthy during those years, her mother had talked to the priest and the priest had found Jane's argument so novel he allowed her to stand during communion.

Authorities had continued to suffer under Jane's logic. She told a teacher one time that kneeling was so grave a posture it should be regarded as a court-sanctioned punishment, and she'd shocked her whole town not all that long ago when she'd failed to exercise abjection in the presence of the Regent Docent, nearly choking on the expected "Your Venerable Learnedness" and substituting what she thought of as the infinitely more sophisticated, and honorable, "Hi, Miss." That alone prompted the first rumors that she was doomed to emigrate to the States.

"I thought you were supposed to say, 'On your knees, bitch,'" Jane said.

"I'm only robbing you," Alfred said. "Rape is a whole 'nother kettle of fish."

That expression was unfamiliar to Jane, though it sounded properly demeaning. Her mother had once told her that sticking a kippered herring into her pants was a good way to keep a gentleman's attention focused on her moral and mental assets and not her tubular promises.

"I have no money," Jane said. She was glad it was a warm evening, since, if he took her shirt and brassiere off she wouldn't pucker up too

badly around the incision where the small lump had been removed.

Lump – she’d told her friends that, the reality of it more like something that needed an address and some fond remembrances during holidays. Nevertheless, the end result had been good news in any language and the healing had been clean and decent. It just sucked in a bit under tension, as though she were being only tentatively nuzzled before a full commitment had been made.

JANE’S MOTHER HAD SAID one time, “Ninety percent of the evil in men occurs when they don’t get what they want.”

As a child, Jane had thought that profound, even if she had wondered about the other ten percent. You had what you wanted but still decided that a little teleological flexibility was all right? Those kinds of questions tended to anger parents, and Jane had pleaded for, demanded clarification, mostly about that ten percent, but also about the unfulfilled desires of women. Was there no evil there? Were they incapable of it? Might she, herself, someday turn out to be evil?

“Do we not loot, plunder, pillage?” she’d asked with all the innocence of a young teen.

All her mother said, however, was that “such data has not been compiled.”

Jane’s mother was a statistician for NewFlex Bourse, and Jane had grown up immersed in percentages: mueslix portions, bowel movements, school marks, moods, pet ownership, and menstrual onsets. Those numbers had made the world a safe place for Jane, since nothing could ever happen unless there was a good chance that it could happen, and that it could happen was something easily expressed on a computer sheet – or not.

“Alfred?” Jane asked.

“Yes?”

“I’m feeling a bit sick, dear. Do you suppose we could go to your place for a bit? You can finish your work there and I’m critically in need of a lavatory. You can blindfold me if you want, or simply swear me to secrecy.”

She was surprised that it was such a short walk to Alfred’s home, a

small apartment in the back of a Sudanese restaurant. Very close, she thought. It occurred to her that your neighbors might quickly get on to your gig if you persisted in molesting them.

Alfred had stereo equipment with speakers as high as Jane was tall. A television, too, occupied nearly one whole wall of the small place, and there was a full kitchen with an island stove and refrigerator, a dishwasher, cabinets, and microwave oven. Alfred, she could see, took good care of himself.

"Do you like to cook?" Jane asked.

"I do," he said.

"Would it be too much trouble -?" she began, realizing that she hadn't eaten in two days because her remaining money was practically vapor. She had some cash set aside, but only so that, if she couldn't return home to her ailing mother, she could at least ring her once in a while. Jane thought it was very important to hear from your daughter if you were dying.

"—I mean, I'm quite hungry." Alfred looked the sort of man, she thought, who could run out some viands and be happy doing it. Normally, since she could not cook in her room, she bought small quantities of fresh vegetables and ate them raw (washed, of course), now and then a tin of fish or cured meat. She'd lost weight, probably enough so that her mother would be shocked if she saw her, but it was weight she'd gained for just this sort of eventuality so at least that part of things was going according to plan.

Jane emerged from Alfred's bathroom feeling much better. The threat of crime was wonderfully cleansing, and she could sense a great many of her fears already streaming toward some river somewhere.

If Alfred still had rape in mind she thought she'd talk to him about it. She didn't think it was possible to feed someone and then rape her, not that there weren't actual instances of relationship mores that weren't quite similar. She had, of course, been taken out for dinner many times, and "I enjoyed it, all of it, thank you. How about you?" was the usual invitation for something physical besides digestion.

That wasn't the point, however. She had no insurance, naturally, so she couldn't afford injuries. He'd have to be gentle, which rather missed the point. Nor did she have money for lawyers, a thought that had occurred to her only that morning when her let-lady told her she looked

like either a whore or a terrorist and she would have to vacate the premises. Jane hadn't been able to respond. "I'm not," had sounded weak.

LAWYERS, THOUGH, FLOCKED to criminal prosecutions like worms to a corpse and they all wanted money. She'd heard her reputation would be like bugs on an auto's windshield if she didn't have a good lawyer—no matter which side of the law she was on, rape or not, looking like a whore or not, all of this getting to be very confusing and she couldn't figure out where things had taken such an awkward turn.

Martha Spikes had been no help either, coming in to the shop while Jane was there, Martha confessing an early pregnancy, which would now require medication in order to end it. Jane had thought right away there was something about families in this country that cut deep and true but only when it was convenient – not a bad principle (Jane hated to be a critical person), convenience alluding to the overall rightness of things. *What I need, I have right here. This is a good world.* She remembered writing a school paper one time defending the Aztec practice of human sacrifice. Her tone had been high and moral, though she could no longer remember what her defense had been.

Jane's mother, too, had often said, "Everything in its time," but when Jane, grown tired of a maternal wisdom that seemed to circle round and round and go nowhere, had said, "In its time, everything," her mother had cried whole rusty gutters of dispirited tears.

Sometimes, she thought, right and wrong didn't mean anything at all.

"Alfred? You prepared no food?" Jane said after returning from the bathroom.

"You've been good at running me around, honey," Alfred said. "That business about not having eaten in days was pretty good."

"But it's true," Jane said.

"Now that I've gotten you in my house you can blow the scam. What am I supposed to do, kill you? I'm not prepared for that."

"Few of us are," Jane said. "You know, I'd begun to think that maybe we could be friends."

"That's not how it works, doll," Alfred said.

"So we're even then," Jane said.

"Say what?"

"Or is it equal? My English sometimes still misses the things that are in my head."

"Oh boy," Alfred said.

Equal or even, both odd notions, the capitalist and the journeywoman. Here she was, after all, fulfilling some kind of destiny; far from home with home viewing her as well-sent—"smart-ass" would be the American expression—as though she were some world-class athlete about to bring glory home and a good deal of money. Invincible was how she felt on most days, even when she was hungry or had had to sleep in (and be chased out of!) suburban garages. By memory, she could recite seven U.S. historical documents; she knew the time zones and where the Weather Channel was on the television; she could recite the full list of interstate motorways, and she could (not legally) deliver a full range of therapy for a hairline fracture of a tibia.

Alfred was equal to this? Alfred was fat and smelly and talked as though each word that came out caused him pain. He was home, true enough, and his blood ran through his shoes into the streets and onto the earth. He'd built a mountain of his own shit in his homeland already and the only thing he could think to do with himself was to accost foreign girls on the street and humiliate them in robberies where the only thing to steal was an unopened packet of condoms and some American bubblegum.

This was not an equal man. This was a low man, one her mother would have thought of as evil and told him so, not a thing back home a man wanted to hear—ever—though Jane wasn't sure about American men. Already, she'd found them bawdy, very loud, proud of a certain wickedness in their words, otherwise humble to a point of sudden disappearance.

"Alfred, my love?"

"Yes?"

"Talk to me, dear. Tell me about this place, this country, what it is for all the low people and how they do and how they get by. I might be a part of all of that, you know, but it's all very strange to me. Have I offended you? Might I know how? The lectures, you see, the booklets

and television shows with all the pictures of mountains and markets and beautiful children – they make it seem like a dream so it's all a bit less for that. All I really want to know is that I'm awake, that the snow is sometimes brown and crackly and that there are many people who are not very nice at all. I'm glad you weren't nice, Alfred. That's important for me to know and it helps me, it really does. Tell me, Alfred, do you like my hair?"

"It's very beautiful."

"I thought you'd say that. I really did."