

## Plain Jane

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Miffed. Out of west coast oysters. East coast oysters only. Jane sneered at the sandwich board and ran her hand straight through the fine chalk cursive. She turned to the nicely dressed couple waiting in line in front of her.

“We’re celebrating our one-year anniversary.” The woman said to the host with her back to Jane’s face. He smiled too large, and his eyes creased.

“Well allow me to get you a nice table by the bay.” He corralled them near the open waterfront seating, where a thin pink line of sun held up the ocean and the moored boats bumped and scraped against the docks in an ambient lull.

When he returned to the podium Jane shot out, “I’m celebrating too.” Clutching her laptop to her chest and still wearing her sunglasses.

“Okay,” he said. His torso giving a slight bow. “What are we celebrating this fine summer evening?”

“Me, it’s just me. I’m celebrating my birthday,” she said, “and I’m getting a divorce.” She wished to sound unapologetic, finessed, but it was an off-putting tone.

The host ushered Jane to a table near the bar, tucked away like a shameful hiding place. He fanned the menus on the table side that didn’t face the ocean, so Jane yanked the opposite chair and sat, lifted her glasses, and asked immediately for a glass of Viognier. “You’re out of west coast oysters, how? You just opened?” Her comment wasn’t about the oysters, rather the way they made her feel superior to those who could not stomach them. Their lavish, sexual quality. It was a boost of dopamine she could administer herself, but it was true, the further their freshness, the farther their fun. She regretted her announcement of the split. It was sharp. When it came down to it, the

leaving, the act of moving out was going to be silent. She would stow away with her things and wish to be soft. She opened Tinder on her phone, not sure if she was truly ready to take the leap of defeat. The men were all young and had beards and held fish. She couldn't find a photo where her forehead wrinkles were minimized.

Her intention was to be in a fine establishment for some alone time with her laptop and maybe some John Coltrane. The keys and her fingers meeting in a bebop fast tempo of relief, an unpredictable virtuoso making sense of the world one stroke at a time.

The host returned with a complimentary glass of Prosecco and apologized. Jane flipped her phone upside down and took a sip, thought it was Baby Duck, or even sparkling apple for expecting moms, and shuddered. When the waiter brought the Viognier, the first sip elevated her good tastes and placated the promise of her evening escape. She would after all, be home the rest of the weekend, parenting without his help, having her tits pulled on in the middle of the night, her sweatpants stained with mysterious crud. A pile of their laundry to fold, little socks stuck to all her silk.

Her body hummed with the weight of confusion, the inertia of uncoupling and how to go about discussing the finances. It coursed through her insides, tightening at her bite. It made swallowing difficult. Plain tired of her brain shadow boxing against her heart. Her stomach held the answer all along. She knew that she had failed, would end up renting, hyper independence telling her to walk away without what she was due. Pride is an annoying thing.

A group of ladies wearing sashes and tiaras were celebrating a fiftieth birthday, they cackled in unison, and threw their heads back and pecked at their food like chickens. They were well dressed, their hair dyed to the roots, rings and accessories, fine bags propped against the legs of the table and hanging off the backs of chairs. Jane wondered who took care of them, how they got their needs met, if the flourless chocolate cake was the pleasure centre of their evening.

Across the lounge a large group of men came in, fresh from the golf course, still dressed in hats and sweat wicking fabrics. One was loose and buzzed and lingered behind. They ordered lagers and cheered and one of them, the alpha, stretched his body and arms beyond the lengths of the bench, sitting with his thighs agape. Jane was terrified of them, their arrogance, their propensity, and disregard. They left their hats on and spoke to the alpha like a focal point of testosterone worship. He sometimes puffed up and bellowed and they all nodded in agreement.

Jane turned her gaze to the two men occupying the bar. They talked of boats and motorcycles and then Super Sexe.

“You never been to Super Sexe? It is most iconic strip club in Montreal.” One said.

“Was.” Jane interrupted.

“That’s right, they closed. You been there?”

“A lot. I used live in Montréal. Fun city.” Jane hoped her comment would make her seen, enjoyed, like she still had value or shelf life. She wanted to impress the men, who were drab and passed middle aged, with rolls sticking out the sides of their boring shirts. One of them turned his chair towards her, while the other didn’t. As she perused the menu, she fantasized for a moment that the man who moved to see her more clearly, would in turn offer to buy her dinner. It’s your birthday, you’re getting divorced, you? But you’re so fun and you’ve been to strip clubs, you dine alone, you must be brave and confident he’d say, you deserve it. He fiddled with his motorcycle gloves continuing to try and make conversation with her, but the momentum was stale, and Jane returned to her menu.

Jane ordered and when the caprese salad arrived, an anxious weight gripped her heart. She could not expand her lungs. She was on the verge of tears. She was all the things he’d said to her: too intense, too reactive, too dramatic. She felt around her mouth for the bits of Wolden salt, internalizing the monologue that she was a woman who was just too much. Jane was the source of

his anger. The reason he drank. The reason his birthday was ruined two years in a row. The presence of the waiter brought her back from this blame belief, convinced it was all her doing.

“How is your salad ma’am?” Jane resisted the urge to say, don’t call me ma’am. Would you also like to say I look tired? She swallowed a block of tomato. The salad was in truth, too plain for twenty-six dollars. It did not have enough dressing. It was like eating an arrangement of fresh cut veggies and she didn’t have the gumption to mention it. They were a new establishment, feedback would be helpful, but she did not have the confidence left to say so. She was held together with her own defenses. The home fires, the gas lights burning in her soul, reminding her that to be an assertive woman, was to emasculate you husband. To speak your mind, was too much. To admit the load was too heavy, was weakness. After all, he drank because of her and maybe now, in this moment, she drank because of him.

She ordered the spaghetti vongole and when it arrived, the grit in the clams ravaged her teeth. She powered through because the herbed buttery juices were soothing, but buttered noodles could be made at home. Did she need an uptick in her antidepressants? Was it all just mom rage? Was everyone staring? The ladies continued laughing and the men postured. The men at the bar returned to discussing engines, the ones that roared and purred at a snap of their fingers, cooperative vibrations between their legs with torque and thrust that didn’t talk back or nag.

After the main course. She ordered an Americano and a lavender crème Brule. A seal to the deal of a tasteful experience, despite her inability to relax. The server came by and placed the cream, the sugar, the saucer, then the spoon. All brought and placed delicately with intent to charm her.

“I like my coffee, like I like my women, you know.” Jane gripped the coming sarcasm in her teeth, not positive she needed to hear more.

“Strong and valued in the workplace.” He said, nodding and Jane smiled large, puffed out a laugh and released the tension into the air.

“How true.” She said and he nodded again and winked. She knew he was gay.

When there was nothing left to order or consume Jane paid the 230.00-dollar bill and got into her SUV. She questioned whether the meal or her were of any value. The money could have been spent on new sheets, or soccer registration, groceries. An experience that previously brought her satisfaction, now felt disappointing. Was it because the ultimate one, a marriage, had ended? Oysters, after all, were just juicy sea water, flecked with E. coli and brought to life with vinegars and hot sauces that mask, or enhance the taste, depending on who you ask. She rested her forehead on the cool of the steering wheel and turned the ignition over. Before driving away Jane stared over the water in a trance, disillusioned with the start of her forties.

She backed out of the lot carefully, but drove fast along the paved road, recognizing for the first time since the Prosecco sip that she was tingling with the warmth of alcohol. This brought waves of bad memories from the time she drove home from a wedding with her son when she was drunk. The time only two beers made her consider suicide, the bottles upon bottles of vodka she found in their house, the shed, his truck. It was alcohol that ruined her marriage, not her, yet the escape from reality now, to drink, was the gearshift to alter real life. The sweet caress of the buzz undulating within.

She called a friend on speaker, and they didn't answer. She didn't leave a message. She willed herself to feel the power of a song, but it wouldn't come. She tapped off the radio and pushed down on the gas. She opened the windows, pretending to smoke a cigarette and driving erratically, because no one cares about mothers. No one cared about her. She let her top-knot fall, shaking her hair across her cheeks, gritting her teeth, and growling like a threatened dog. The engine revved and she considered driving into a telephone pole, only the area had undergrounding. Her vehicle bounced in a pothole and crossed the centre line. She swerved back into her lane, careening onto the gravel side

shoulder, nearly losing control. She pulled over. Turned off the engine, gripping the steering wheel until her knuckles throbbed and they lost their colour. She screamed and then she cried.

She opened the Tinder app on her phone and decided she would go ahead with a bio. If anything, who was she now, what was she looking for? Someone who wasn't a little bitch when they were sick, someone who didn't spit in the sink or drive too fast or hate the police. Old, discontent, and insecure, she wrote, if you don't see these red flags coming, you're a fucking idiot.