

Job Club

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JOB CLUB is not like the movies. No pop songs. No dancing in the dole queue. No stripper fundraising. Clothes play a minor role. Tracksuit pants, hoodies, thongs and sports jackets are acceptable. We save our good clothes for interviews. That's what we tell ourselves. We don't want to waste any crumb of luck. Calling this place a job club is like referring to jail as a law club. The worst clubs don't ask for volunteers or applications. Membership is forced upon us by others. By those in authority. People that don't even belong to the club themselves.

Jimmy is a fixture of Job Club. A torn, coffee-stained couch that holds no sentimental value. One that you keep around to fill space and balance the room. Balance is the key. Jimmy's month was up many moons ago. The government sent him a letter telling him that he no longer has to attend Job Club. He still shows up every single day. Even on weekends, I'm told.

It's fun to watch Jimmy cast newcomers away from the job board. An exorcist casting away evil spirits. His eyes wide and his tone calm and defiant. Jimmy hasn't had a paying job in three years. His demeanor at interviews must turn them off. The way he stares like a bronzed crow. His eyeballs are like fishing lures; brand new, straight out of the packet. They dwell in a state of permanent shock; fresh. Raw with insomnia.

Jimmy screams at the job board. 'Look at that! Can't you see?' His salt and pepper hair vibrating with tension.

When we look he says, 'Chipboard. Paper. Don't work for them. They betray.'

He sighs and sits down alone to read the obituaries. Jimmy is Burmese. Too young to retire but not yet eligible for a pension. His face is tough and loose; a beaten leather handbag, minus the frills and charm.

'The sand runs red in my country,' he says.

We watch him. Claire and I. We are an 'item'. We met at Job Club and share a mutual lack of ambition. Jimmy doesn't lack ambition. He is missing something else. Claire pities him. If he were a puppy I think she'd take him home. Dogs are unpredictable. I don't do unpredictable.

My dog, Wrench, nipped me one day after school and drew blood. Dad said the vet would give him 'the green dream' and then Wrench would go to sleep. I told dad that Wrench slept with me on my bed and that he would be scared sleeping by himself. Dad didn't answer. He backed down the driveway with Wrench huddled cosily on the passenger seat. Dad came back an hour later with a nightlight. Nothing else.

'A gift,' he said, 'to help you sleep.'

'But how is Wrench going to sleep?' I asked.

Dad didn't hear me. The hallway light flicked off. He was already gone.

Jimmy refuses to read the classifieds. He passes his résumé around to anyone that says good morning.

We learn not to speak to him.

His CV is thin. It says he worked as a security guard. He has no referees. In his home country he used to be a soldier. He says he's a fighter. As he speaks his head bobbles around like a plastic dog on a car dashboard; thoughts seem to ricochet violently within him. Whiplash of the worst kind. He says, if you want peace he'll give you peace but if not then war will claim you. He mumbles about souls. Always about souls.

Sometimes Jimmy chokes on his saliva, forgetting to swallow between ramblings.

We steer clear of him.

Claire doesn't talk much. She likes to hold hands and nuzzle up against my shirt. She's a giggler. I bask in her lightness. She has the qualities of fresh air. She takes up no space. No space at all. I need space to think and it's easier to think when you have air. Fresh air does the body good.

It's the height of winter but we are at the beach. I tell Claire that I have written a poem on my phone. She pops excitedly like a broken seal on a jar of pasta sauce.

'Let me see!' she says. I fumble around in my pocket, taking longer than I should. Her lightness is replaced by an electric charge. I'm not a fan of this change in her. Anticipation breeds expectation. That's the last thing I need.

I unlock the device, open the note and pass the phone to her nonchalantly. My insides are scraped out as the dim glow of the screen illuminates her face. She bites her bottom lip and reads:

The Embrace

Trying to embrace the application,
Downing the medicine with each swallow,
An A4 shadow on an x-ray of well-being,
An unwanted murmur at the heart of it all,
Negative growth pulsating away with me,
Avoid the venture down yours truly road,
Dust will settle on open hands; idle hands,
Greeted by dead-end script in every hall,
To his detriment the hunter is down-trodden,
Too fatigued to suit up the soul,
Watch his catch float down the office aisle,
Beyond the bitter, halogen sunset; résumé in hand.

Claire extends the phone back to me and hugs me. After a pause, I hug her back tenderly, glad she isn't in the mood to speak. She doesn't look at the water or the pier. Nor does she watch the nearby, heavy pelican struggle to ride the thermals. She focuses on the sand, squeezing it between her toes.

'I can't imagine red sand,' she says, 'it doesn't seem right'.

'It's not right,' I say.

Claire giggles, wearing naivety like a pretty ribbon in her hair. The tide continues its dance and ignores us both.

This morning, in the cramped computer lab, Claire is resting her head daintily on my shoulder. She is sleeping. I can't resist. I make eye contact with Jimmy. His gaze lasers into mine. Jimmy never blinks. He is testing me. For once he doesn't thrust his résumé in my direction or raise his voice. We just stare and I feel him digging through me.

After a time, he says, 'Don't trust their souls. They waste us.'

A tear glints momentarily, red against his cheek. I nod and look down at Claire. She is dead to the world. I wonder what she's dreaming. I imagine that she's dreaming of undisturbed beaches, luscious trees. I'm slightly envious. She has a grin balancing on her lips. The vibe in the room softens. I watch her sleep. It's my job.