

Jessie & The Junkie

Umm, a 'ghost chilli' free-range sausage roll from a little shop in Brighton I love. I've no idea what 'ghost' refers too, but it's certainly scummy. Standing before the window display of twenty one of various flavours, including 'Christmas season spice' and 'black pudding', neatly stacked in groups of three, I have to wonder if anyone has ever been caught shoplifting a sausage roll.

Rolling my bike down the pedestrianised street, mentally licking my lips (literally too, perhaps), I hear a somewhat bashful, but clearly directed-my-way, "Oh, hello you." My pork-fat addled senses immediately recalibrate—in particular my lazy, diffuse gaze (the inner world of 'happy belly' having been so much more comforting than the gaudy Christmas lights, unabashedly opulent window displays, and bustle of people) now focuses on what moments before had just been just another a shifting splodge of body-shaped colour in my peripheral vision. It's Jessie, my old London flat mate. "Oh, no," I say in jest, approaching. We both knew our last meeting didn't end too well. Explosively, in fact.

Jessie was born in Medellin, Colombia but adopted as an orphan baby by a wealthy English couple. "There's probably abandonment issues there," she confided in me once with a croak of a laugh. Medellin was home of the famous drug lord Pablo Escobar. I did wonder if Jessie was one of his love children. Now in her early thirties, Jessie is about five foot tall, sweet natured, and rather pretty (I'm a sucker for the latino look). She's also a budding photographer and art director, though frustrated with her progress in each.

Realising we were both living in Brighton (thank you Facebook), we'd arranged to meet up one evening. This was several weeks earlier, and the first time we'd seen each other in years. She'd seemed on good form at first. Smiling, chatting away. We're good at that, aren't we; presenting an image. However, as she'd rolled cigarette after cigarette (one every ten minutes by my reckoning); or held her glass of wine, the slight shake in her hand disclosed her frayed state of nerves.

She's rolling one again now as we speak, and again I see it; a telling tremor. I also notice her nails: uneven, bitten short. I notice a few wrinkles too; and think of time's incessant march, waiting for no man (or woman); and my own mortality. I want to give her a hug.

Jessie had steadily drunk more and more that evening. Towards the end of the night somehow we arrived on the topic of Syria, and she was getting rather worked up about it.

She'd begun to express her deep pessimism about the world, in a relentless, no holds barred kind of manner. Not just over Syria, but climate change and capitalism. She spoke in a way however, that to my mind at least, said, "this isn't really about the horrid shit 'out there'; it's all about me - the dark shit I can't face." Her sense of abandonment, perhaps. It wasn't really the lives of Syrians, or climate refugees, or those shafted by the 1% she was most unhappy about.

As expressed through many stories in old mythology, there's often an inner dragon we must one day meet. A dragon we must love or slay. Or not, of course; we can always keep on finding excuses for our misfortune and unhappiness. I may have foolishly eluded to the fact. Tried to make some philosophical and psychological points. However sound they might have been, and however calmly I may have voiced them, I should have known better. Some people are very attached to their story; their drama; their suffering. I know - oh gosh, don't I know! And who am I to meddle? Even if my intention was but to try and open Jessie to another perspective. Her current one was clearly causing her grief, and limiting her: success in the current "system" meant fucking up the planet or screwing other people; or so she said.

It didn't work. In fact, it was like wedging a crow bar under a fifty-tonne boulder and expecting movement.

I may have argued at one point that since humans are 'natural', so too is all they do and produce. Pollution. Climate change. War. All of our ignorance and malice and its effects. I may also have said that it's hard to be so black and white about these things (rich coming from the former king of 'black and white' thinking) and given the example of Obama. We all thought it was a great thing, right? But if it meant Trump followed, was it?! Where in time and space do you begin and end your points of reference? "Perhaps Trump will be a good thing", I'd said. I think that was the moment she went berserk and almost hit me. I raised my hands instinctively to defend myself, and twigged it took great effort on her part to suppress the urge to hit me. Luckily she just stormed out of the pub before her self-restraint faltered. God knows what the couple sitting beside us thought.

I hadn't meant that what was happening in Syria and the rest of the world wasn't terrible, but just that it probably wasn't the true cause of Jessie's rage and pessimism, rather something she was projecting her internal angst on to. Perhaps what Jessie had actually needed wasn't some smart-arse analysing and intellectualising, making points about objective and subjective truth, but someone to listen. Someone that wasn't going to get stuck on the specifics of her dialogue, but to hear the deeper, hidden voice saying, "I feel

shit", "my life feels fucked up", "I feel unworthy", or whatever it may be. Someone to shut up perhaps, and simply offer a hug. But I find it hard to indulge someone's 'poor me / poor planet' story. Unless it's my own, of course. Sorry.

We begin with a kiss on both cheeks. 'Tis the season to be jolly', after all. Then the usual 'How are you?' check in. I give an honest answer: "I was good, but I had a bit of a crash this week," pause, then add, "I feel a bit shit to be honest." I seem to imagine the more "honest" I am, the more permission it gives others to be honest also. Be *vulnerable*, that is. And being vulnerable in our world takes courage. It doesn't always work, of course. It rattles the more cerebral types. Makes them squirm. And it gives ammo to the crueller kind to either mock (internally in adult polite society, but outwardly when one is at school) or plan ways to undermine you. Emotion is the language I know best. I indulge in it dreadfully, but am learning, slowly, painfully, to give it less credence. Along with 'meaning'. Meaning of life; meaning of all sorts of things. Meaning of emotions, especially. It's all a story we make up. But still, if someone withholds their emotional truth from me, I find it devilishly hard to trust them.

"Ah, I'm sorry to hear that," Jessie says, responding to the news of my difficult week.

"No, no - it's fine," I interject. "It's all 'the journey'. And we bounce back right?"

"I guess," she replies, her gaze falling to her feet.

I tell her a bit about the week in the countryside I'd just had. How, leaving on such a high, I'd half expected a 'come down'. It came. And it came hard. Mercifully brief, however.

"I've been feeling a bit shit too," she says, holding eye contact.

"Ah, Jessie," I say, and give her a hug she gratefully accepts. It's not one of those cold, rigid, brief ones you feel a bit rejected by when you went in there all loving, open and giving. Neither was it too long to feel awkward. *Gosh*, the politic involved in the friendly embrace.

"So what are you up to?" Jessie asks. I ignore her question, and instead bring up our aforementioned fracas from two weeks earlier. We have a little laugh about it. I think I affectionately call her "you crazy little monster" or some such when recounting how she almost "cuffed me one".

She doesn't apologise. I don't need her to. Instead she offers a reason for her behaviour: being stressed about the building work in her flat and just taking it out on someone. I suspect it's only a half truth, but it doesn't matter.

I remind her I texted her afterwards. Twice in fact. Once straight away, reiterating my smart-arse assessment of her anger not doubt, and again a week later just checking she was ok. She hadn't replied to either, and that was ok too.

The 'old me' wouldn't have been so cool or compassionate. Mainly because he wasn't compassionate with himself, of course (those pesky dragons!). I share with Jessie how I'd been tempted to forget the relationship and erase her from Facebook (a modern "I bite my thumb at thou!"). Come to think of it, it wasn't the first time I'd erased her - I did so soon after I moved out of our house-share when I discovered she'd lied to me about something. How touchy I was. How quick to judge. How hard I was on... myself). I tell Jessie how I recognised it as an old pattern triggered when I feel affronted, let down, or betrayed by someone. How I loved to walk away, slam doors, wash hands, as it were, of things or people - an old, guarded pattern. I recognised it was based on my own insecurity. And that people are both simple *and* complex. Delicate things with hard shells. That want to love and be loved. And are full of fear, doubt and anxiety. We are all well intentioned really. Aren't we? I want to believe that. Believing it is kindle for compassion. Obviously if Jessie had actually hit me, that would have been a different matter. Compassion doesn't mean no boundaries or not holding people accountable. Luckily things didn't get to that, and we now knew what to avoid (in conversation, but perhaps in variety of wine also).

"Anyway, what am I up to?," I say, getting back to her original question. "Buying a sausage roll, and off to find a cafe to work in."

"Which one?"

"Err, probably that one over there," I say, pointing to one I knew had lovely lighting, thick wooden tables, comfy seating, and a great selection of teas.

"I'm just about to go to the Royal Parade Hotel and use their pool and sauna. I need a shower. It's only a fiver."

Perhaps her one wasn't working properly. Her father had had bought her a flat six month's earlier but it was pretty run down and a bit of a building site at the moment. She was having a terrible time with a builder she paid up front (big mistake. I bite my tongue) and who wasn't doing any of the promised work. She'd told me about it last time and brings it up now.

"I may go an camp outside his front door," she says with a nervous chuckle. I know she's strapped for cash and it's a bigger stress than she's making out. "Then I'm going to meet a friend."

I don't flee from the conversation as I normally might. I allow for silences. They don't last long; it seems we both have things we want to share.

Jessie looks well and I comment on the fact.

"I've met a new man," she says smiling. Adding, "I'm worried he's a bit kinky, though."

I laugh. "Sounds fun."

"He wants me to dress up as a cowgirl."

Naturally, I laugh some more.

"Where did you meet him?"

"On *Happn*" - a mobile dating app.

"Oh, lucky you. No one ever connects with me on there. In fact, I never get laid in Brighton." *One reason I'm moving back to London*, I think, and maybe even voice. *Main reason most likely*.

"Have you slept with him already?"

"Yeah," she says, flashing me smile both wicked and guilty at once, before quickly looking down at the cigarette she's still rolling.

"You told me last time you were going to wait next time and not sleep with someone so quickly - 'check they aren't a psycho first!' wasn't it?!" She'd told me she had a track record of meeting such types. And falling head over heels in love with them. I don't think I'd ever seen Jessie wear heels, mind you. I'm not sure they'd suit her.

She laughs nervously. "Well, it was the second date." I chuckle. "And the sex is great. It's just fun. He's forty-five."

"Oh, experienced then."

She's not afraid to look me right in the eye as we talk. Not all the time, of course; that would be weird. It's nice. She has nice eyes. A strength and sparkle. A fragility too. And a seeking—for acknowledgement; for understanding; for security; for... love?—that lust in our eyes we all have.

"It's nice to have someone to share that with," Jessie says after a thoughtful pause.

"Someone who isn't a psycho like Jim."

"That was the last boyfriend, right?" He was a right 'player' apparently. I remember feeling a tad jealous at her tales of his exploits with women.

"You're still quite into him aren't you?". She'd mentioned 'psycho' or 'Jim' a few times in the conversation now.

She doesn't answer; just rearranges the tobacco again with one finger, brings it to her mouth and seals it with a lick before giving it a squeeze and roll between forefinger and thumb.

"So, tell me about this 'friend' you're meeting," I say.

"Oh. That's a story. Well, he's a drug addict. Or was. I was sitting outside the Bees Mouth smoking a week or two ago and this guy turns up; clearly homeless or an addict - you know, not so smartly dressed; gaunt features...."

I nod.

"He was carrying an old wine box with loads of names and numbers scribbled on it. I asked him about it. It was the contact details of all his friends. Anyway, I felt a strange pull; a desire to help him. I think it's because he looked how I felt;" —she laughs—"dreadful!" "Ah, Jessie," I say gently. *Now, that is interesting*, I think, psychology hat on. *Projection... attraction...*

She rolled him a cigarette and she asked about his life. He was newly off heroin, taking methadone (or some other substitute she couldn't pronounce) at the local clinic each day, but he feared a relapse if he didn't find something to do.

'Perhaps you can help me out at my flat?' Jessie offered with surprisingly lack of hesitation, 'I'll feed you. And you can scrub my living room floors.' Her living room floors were calling out for some love and attention, apparently.

Maybe she imagines a mischievous question in my stare, but at this point she says, "There was nothing sexual there. He's in a disgusting state", adding, "he even pissed in one of my beds" for good measure.

Another pause in the conversation. Comfortable. Unhurried. A few new clouds of cigarette smoke blooming, dissipating. I imagine the nicotine flooding Jessie's bloodstream, calming her very being. I was brought up to be very anti-smoking, but actually, it's a blessing for some folk.

"We got to work and I had to tell him to shower because he absolutely stunk. He returned a new man, in clothes I think he'd stolen from Primark."

"This is all very... saintly of you, Jessie," I say. "It sounds like just what he needs. Can you put him to work on more DIY jobs?"

"Not really; he's a liability. Scrubbing the floors was hard work enough; just getting him to use the scrubbing brush properly."

Still I don't rush off as I usually do, worried conversation might be waning. I'm enjoying listening to Jessie. Being witness. Hearing something of some other person's life (self-absorption, I'm finally realising, is such a bore. Although by the tone of this text, you probably don't believe me). Here is someone who is going through some shit. Must have had some really dark times. Something she had alluded to during our last encounter. And her new 'friend'? - I can't begin to really imagine what life has been like for him. What abuse (for it usually is) led to such degeneracy.

Another puff on her cigarette. It's almost burned to the filter now. Her hand still shakes. How long before she rolls another?

"You can get help, you know. I did therapy for years. It doesn't make you a freak. Loads of people do it."

"I know," she says. "I'm reading all those types of books."

I hesitate, not wanting to talk over anything she may have yet to say.

"I don't have the money for anything more," Jessie adds.

When the coast seems clear, I venture out again, gently countering, "But often you can't do it alone, Jessie." Really, I'm thinking, *you can't do it alone*. "It's something psychological—you *need* an 'other'—a witness. That's why group therapy works so well." Does it? I don't know for sure. But I'd witnessed some incredible things the few times I'd done it; seeing grown men and women weep at some sorrow they'd kept locked away for so long, released; or seeing such weight lift from people's shoulders as they met, and embraced, some neglected inner child that still cowered lost and scared within; or acknowledged their sense of shame and inadequacy, whilst in touch with some strength and tender wholeness beyond it; or simply people who finally forgave their parents, or their past, filled with a sense of what that now made possible. Wound met, even blessed or celebrated. Time with dragons.

"You know you can get the first ten or so sessions for free on the NHS?" I add.

"Yeah?," she says inspecting the ground, kicking dirt, in what is clearly a 'thanks, but no thanks: I'm fine' (but clearly not) type way.

I don't push it. Instead I hold the space. And breathe. I feel gratitude. For the moment we're sharing; a temporary intersect of two lonely journeys. For being able to close on our last encounter, and this time I could listen. Grateful that deep down we know, past our stories and dramas and apparent troubles, that we're ok, aren't we? We're on the 'right path' - a unique, precious journey that nothing but death can truly ever deny us. It is ours. Ours to live. Ours, I'm gradually learning, to share.

I wonder if now is the time to say "Well, lovely to see you; I better be off now", but Jessie begins to speak again. She shares how she fears that she's just sabotaged two great job offers. One because she thought she didn't want to move back to London, even temporarily; the other because they cancelled some phone interview with her, asking her to email a CV instead, and she didn't.

"It was such a big film project," she says. "I felt... overwhelmed."

"Well, don't beat yourself up too much about it," I say

"I'm not."

"Oh, good. That's quite an achievement," I say, hoping I don't sound patronising. I shouldn't, because I mean it. I would probably have lambasted myself horribly. Self-flagellation was a forte. I tell her that.

"Well, I did to begin with," Jessie admits.

Is it still? I wonder at memories of self-attack. *No... I think not.* Not after my time in the woods. And dance with the scaled, fire-breathing folk. I feel a new... spaciousness. A new... sense of ease.

Jessie's friend is at the clinic. She tells she's going away for the weekend but has written him a list of things to keep him occupied.

"You haven't given him the keys to your apartment, have you?" I ask, alarm bells ringing.

"No, stupid. Just things like 'go to for a swim', or 'go feed yourself'."

"Are you paying?" I ask, wondering how far her desire to 'help' had gone.

"No. He's got some money. He's mum's just sent him £30."

£30 - sheesh. Life can be tough... and tragic.

It's obvious to both of us that such thoughts, and their offspring, hang in the chill December air between us, clawing. Are we both wondering if our own lives could one day become so desperate? Or feeling lucky for what we have; for not having fallen so low?

"Well, see you Jessie." There, I say it. And it's the right moment.

"See you, Sam"

"I'm around if you ever want to chat."

"Or not chat," Jessie jokes... "we could just hang."

"Ha, yeah! That might be wiser." *No stumbling on talk of humanitarian crises or the state of the world that way.* "Take care of yourself, Jessie."

And off I go, grateful for Jessie having been placed in my path today, and feeling the warm glow of 'ghost chilli' in my gut.

Senses softening once more, vision honey-glazed. Back to rolling my bike along the road. Rolling. Rolling.

Samuel Morgan, 2016