





Jeanine

B. P. Gallagher

At seventy-seven you stop thinking of errands as a hassle and start thinking of them as a fleeting luxury. You watch your peers drop like flies, first slowing except for occasional buzzes of energy and then subsiding to a more or less vegetative state. Then? Slow expiration. A stint at hospice where you climb the walls and slide back down, climb and slide until the climbs get shorter and the slides longer and a week later they find three or four of you lying on your backs on the windowsill, legs curled up and chitin crumbling to dust. So they sweep you into the dustbin and bring in the next batch of slow expirées.

Jeanine knows and dreads this. It's why she makes a point of doing her own grocery shopping and dry cleaning and banking each week, sticking to the backroads in her squat yellow Toyota Yaris. Because it's the boredom that gets you. She's seen it happen. People lose their passions and not long after that their will to live. The mind unravels, one foot in the grave and the other toeing this mortal coil. To keep her feet firmly planted on the latter, she makes her to-do list every Sunday and, starting bright and early Monday morning, follows it to a tee.

Use it or lose it, that's the motto.

So she does her Sudokus and crosswords and guesses almost every clue on Wheel of Fortune ahead of the contestants. Not too shabby at Jeopardy either, though she doesn't watch as religiously as she used to. Network television lost a fine-looking man when it lost Alex Trebek.

It's thoughts of this nature for which she is no longer 'in the cloth', as it were. As it weren't for the past thirty-four years. Too much of a free spirit. Always getting into trouble, acting willful. A native 'the hills are alive with the sound of bullshit' mentality that never gelled with the habit. Yet she fondly remembers her dalliance with the sisterhood. As a Sister of Saint Joseph, Sister Jeanine did many good works.

These days she's just Jeanine or to close friends Jeanie, old biddy. Former nun. Not lapsed, just no longer a nun. And today this former nun has business to be about. Secular business. Money changers outside of the temple business.

When the light switches to 'Walk' she shuffles across the street, minding the patches of dingy ice in the crosswalk. In the newspaper yesterday they devoted a whole column to the critical road salt shortage and the evidence is at her feet. But she's an old Rochester gal and knows how to cross an icebound street without cracking her tailbone. She wears a floral print shawl to protect against the cold and black earmuffs to keep her lobes from chapping and a purple and gold scarf knitted this past autumn in preparation for the winter. A pair of oversized sunglasses protect her eyes against glare off the snowpack and a mask protects her nose and mouth from germs. Ever since the pandemic she doesn't take any chances, especially in the cold months. Not that it appears she has much to worry about today.

East Rochester First Bank & Trust is empty this morning.

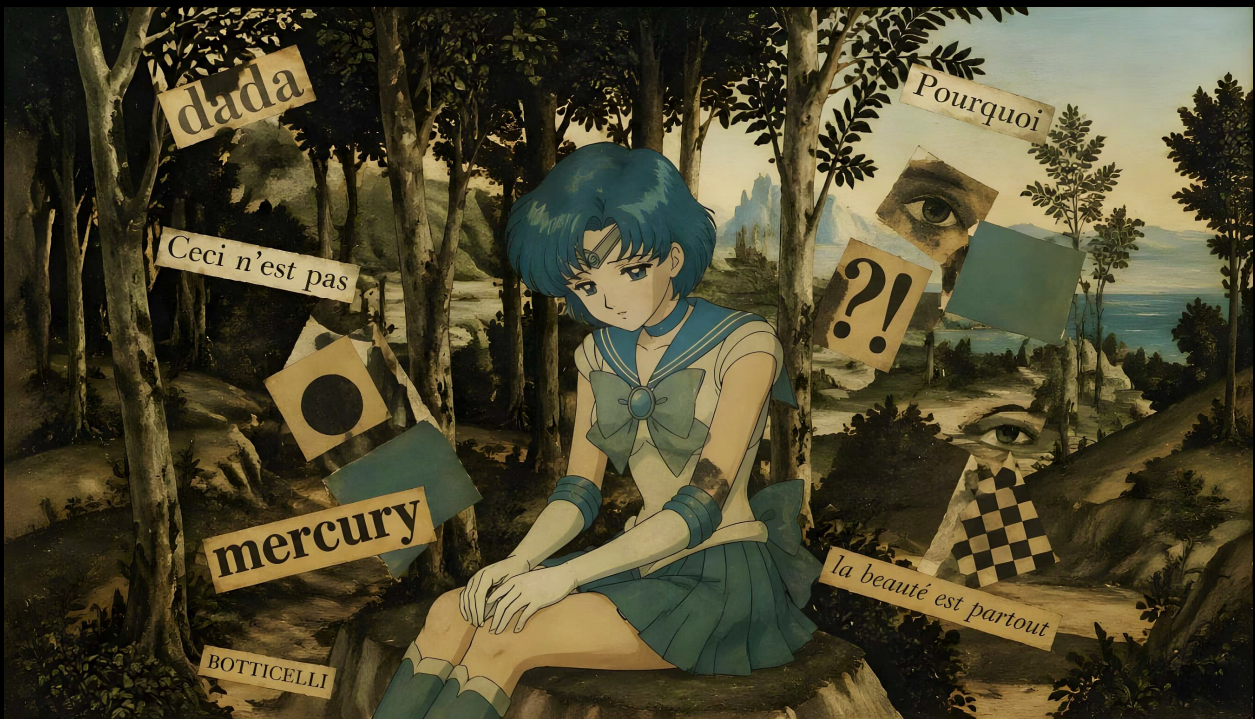
Jeanine has only visited once before and doesn't recognize the teller behind the counter. For decades she banked with Wells Fargo, but the past few years they've started charging fees out the ass, as her friend Marge puts it in her characteristically crass way. So, after thirty years and change it's time to move on to greener, less taxing pastures.

This isn't her sole reason for switching financial institutions. Others include, to wit: because her corporate landlord hikes up rent every year and big pharma and the corrupt government hike up prescription drug prices each year and because her accounts at Wells Fargo are in arrears. Never mind that she's lived in the same building for the past two and a half decades—the big rental companies snapping up what used to be quaint apartment complexes all across town and renaming them drivel like *Cottages at Garden Ponds*, whatever the heck that means, don't care. Never mind either that she's taken the same meds for the past decade. Tenure means nothing anymore, to real estate conglomerates or corporate chemists.

In Japan, she read once, they have a whole forgotten generation. Old people past their expiration date get shunted into massive apartment complexes and left to rot on their own time. *Kodokushi*, the culture writer called it.

Kodokushi. Must be nice.

Jeanine wouldn't mind being forgotten by bill collectors and solicitors and Jehovah's Witnesses too, for that matter. Misguided bastard children of the one true faith. But she abides by an old school of piety, itself a bastard child of tolerance, that obliges one to keep one's religious judgments to oneself. So she points to her 'no solicitors' sign for



the JWs same as for other unwanted visitors and doesn't tell them they're wasting their lives and afterlives too, even if the thought occurs to her.

The teller is a lumpy college-aged girl with wire-rimmed glasses and strawberry blonde bangs like a work of abstract art. A good thirty seconds after Jeanine enters the lobby she deigns to glance up from her smartphone and fixes Jeanine with a deer-in-the-headlights look.

She'd be some use in a bank robbery, Jeanine thinks.

Then again, maybe it doesn't matter these days. Now they're trained to comply, hit the panic button if possible, let the cops sort it out. She's pretty certain, anyways. At any rate, the appetite for dying in the line of professional duty, if it ever existed outside of the military and emergency services, ebbed around the time wages stagnated.

"Good morning, ma'am," says the teller. "Can I help you?"

Without removing her shawl or earmuffs or sunglasses or mask, Jeanine glances around. The place truly is empty except for her and the teller, which has to be a rarity. It's early and East Rochester is small relative to Rochester proper, but it's hardly a Podunk. She keeps expecting another banker to emerge from the back room. No one does.

"Ma'am?" The teller's hands rest on the countertop, her red lacquered nails chipped and ragged, in line with the general presentation. Now her fingers leave her cellphone and dance impatiently across the grey laminate and her computer keyboard. On the wall behind her a series of slotted shelves hold forms to be filled out by would-be account holders.

"I'd like to open a new account," Jeanine says.

“Wonderful. Welcome to East Rochester First Bank and Trust. Is this your first time banking with us?” The teller begins to *tap tap tap* on her keyboard, though Jeanine hasn’t yet volunteered any info.

Still no movement from the back room, where the vault door sits visibly open. Where is this child’s superior? Surely they wouldn’t leave the entire bank in her ragged-nailed hands. On second thought, maybe Jeanine doesn’t want to bank with this establishment after all.

The teller is saying something.

“Excuse me?”

“I said, your name please?” Her fingers hover over her keyboard, ready to type.

“I’d rather fill it out with pen and paper,” says Jeanine. She reaches for her purse. “I have the pen. I assume you have the paper.” She points to the forms on the back wall.

The teller follows her finger as if the existence of said paper is news to her. She starts and steps away from the counter to look for the appropriate form. With her back to Jeanine, revealing a no less distressing layering in the rear, she says, “Oh, right. Sure! Let me grab that for you.”

A few steps past her, the vault stands open. Inside, a wall lined with locked deposit boxes and a pushcart stacked high with banded banknotes. Enough to cover her rent and all other expenses for the rest of her days. More than enough.

When the already frazzled teller turns around again, Jeanine blurts out the first words that come to mind. “This is a stick-up.”

She means it as a joke. Of course she does, and the teller giggles like she’s in on it. But Jeanine’s hand lingers in her purse and the teller’s eyes, framed by that bizarre haircut—ironic, or simply a style incomprehensible to the old?—widen behind her wirerimmed glasses. Next thing Jeanine knows she’s making a finger-gun inside the purse with her right hand and angling the purse up at the teller’s breastbone with her left.

“Hand away from that button, missy!” she snarls. The ferocity of her own voice surprises her. Thrills her, even. She grins behind her mask. Even now she might turn back, let the wolfish grin devolve into an old lady’s titter and make a joke of this ridiculous situation. Her heart pumps arrhythmically in her chest, her frontal lobe trying and failing to exert impulse control. Instead she doubles down. “A heater like this will put a hole in the purse and you and that wall behind you too, no problem.”

The purse is an oversized navy blue tote bag, large enough to hide anything from a pistol to a sawed-off shotgun. This lends itself to the bit, which is rapidly devolving into an honest-to-goodness hostage

situation. The teller certainly believes it. Her glasses are fogging up, she's hyperventilating so hard.

Still brandishing the bag as if it contains a loaded firearm, Jeanine says, "Forehead and palms flat against the back wall. Do it."

The teller does as told. With her tote-clad finger-gun still leveled at the girl's quivering back, Jeanine gropes for the latch to the chest-high door that grants tellers access behind the counter. Shutting it behind her, she orders, "Keep those hands on the wall and shuffle down to the back room there. Don't look at me, or I'll shoot!"

"Please don't hurt me," the girl whimpers. She sidles along the wall, tripping over her own feet.

"I won't, hon. Not unless you make me." Knowing it's an empty threat doesn't make the poor kid's choked sob any less guilt-inducing.



"Easy does it," she says. "Ten minutes from now this will all be a memory."

She stays on the teller's heels—not literal heels, but sensible flats—into the doorway to the vault, lest she try to slip inside and shut the would-be bank robber out. A sudden spurt of bravery doesn't seem in the cards, but you never know. She walks the teller up to the cash-laden pushcart. The girl gives a little squeak of terror as she bumps into it.

"Shut your eyes," Jeanine says, "and fill this bag. One peek and I'll shoot. Do it!"

She holds the tote open while the teller, tears streaming between her clamped-shut eyelids, loads it with cash. When she clears the top of the pushcart with room to spare in the spacious purse, Jeanine says, “Better get that there on the bottom too.”

When the bag is full she orders the hiccupping girl against the wall again and backs slowly from the vault. At the door she stops and says, “Can you get yourself out of here?”

The teller, eyes still shut and seeping tears, nods forlornly.

“Good,” says Jeanine. “Then shut yourself in behind me and count to a thousand before you come out. If you don’t—”

“I know,” the girl all but wails. “You’ll shoot!”

So the illusion holds somehow. Not the brightest, this one. “Very good,” says Jeanine.

No sirens or flashing lights assault her senses as she emerges into the still-empty lobby. No sign of backup or good Samaritans. Nothing but the sound of the vault door swinging slowly shut behind her. One thing’s for sure: this certainly has *not* been a boring morning.

She hustles the block and a half from the bank to her little yellow Yaris and stows the tote in the trunk. She needs to think, figure out her next move. She’s heard the cops can track stolen cash now using serial numbers or something. She probably has forty-eight hours or less to unload it before they put two and two together by process of elimination and start tracking the lifted bills.

Working in her favor: the sleepiness of East Rochester. Its lack of traffic cameras and tiny police force. Her get-up, and the fact that she’s never held an account at East Rochester First Bank & Trust. Her advanced age, which makes her an unlikely suspect.

Working against her: the dedication of a small-town police force embarrassed by a brazen crime committed under their own noses. Her advanced age, which predisposes her to hasty and careless decisions.

Jeanine is a woman of simple needs. A home, for one. Medicine to extend her lifespan within that home, for another. Johnny Walker, a third. That one more of an indulgence than a need, and the simplest to address at present. So she sets off slow for the liquor store, where she pays by card. As she exits the liquor store, a train of squad cars with lights blazing and sirens chirping boil past in the direction of the bank several blocks away. She makes her next stop the Goodwill a few doors down from the liquor store, where she tenders the first of the stolen cash in exchange for a long tartan coat with a fur fringe that smells of mothballs. Non-profits aren’t known for their forensic accounting skills. She removes her mask and shawl and dons the coat in the parking lot and sets off again, slowly, for her favorite diner in Henrietta.

Time to start building an alibi.

The hostess sits her in a corner booth and pours her coffee without asking. Jeanine orders the ‘fireman’s platter’ (two pancakes, two eggs, two strips of bacon and a slice of toast) and settles in for a long meal. She’s halfway through breakfast when a pair of police officers enter and do a lap of the diner.

She busies herself adding cream and sugar to her second cup of coffee. One of the officers smiles at Jeanine in passing and she smiles back. They leave, apparently satisfied that their perp isn’t in the building.

“Do you know what that was about?” she asks the waitress when she drops by the table next.

“You didn’t hear? Someone robbed a bank in E. R.”

“Oh my goodness, I didn’t.” Jeanine widens her eyes like this development appalls her. “What is this world coming to?”

“Well if you haven’t yet, you will. It’s all over the news. Wait a sec, I’ll put the TV on for you.”

The TV crackles to life, playing a local channel. On screen, a reporter in a drab olive peacoat stands in front of the bank and says into his microphone, “The bank robber, disguised as an elderly woman, made off with over two hundred thousand dollars. At this time, police are still pursuing leads. Anyone with information about the case is asked to contact—”

“Another coffee, dear?” the waitress asks, pot poised over Jeanine’s mug.

“Why not?” says Jeanine, and smiles. “I earned it.”





Standards

Justin Chun

I can speak. I've got the dialect. I've been in the army, got a job. My sons play football on their school teams. I believe I've met your criteria. I've integrated. But now you tell me I'm not indigenous, a native I could never be. You're so full of bile and shit. And you wonder why I don't want to live in your hypocritical neighborhoods where you stare at me and my kind, make me yearn for the days of mere discomfort.



I was reality last week

Leonard Baske

I'm waiting at the top of the stairs
Stood with my arms by my side

All the light we have
To watch all the light...

Someone has written their name on
that rock,
Carefully etched I stood back
And held the view

The road takes me back

I'm in the lights

I'm in the lights.

I'm. In the roadside

Into the retinas and in the mind
Where I listen for a new experience
Left vacant by pain
I'm just existing

Dead eyed biological system

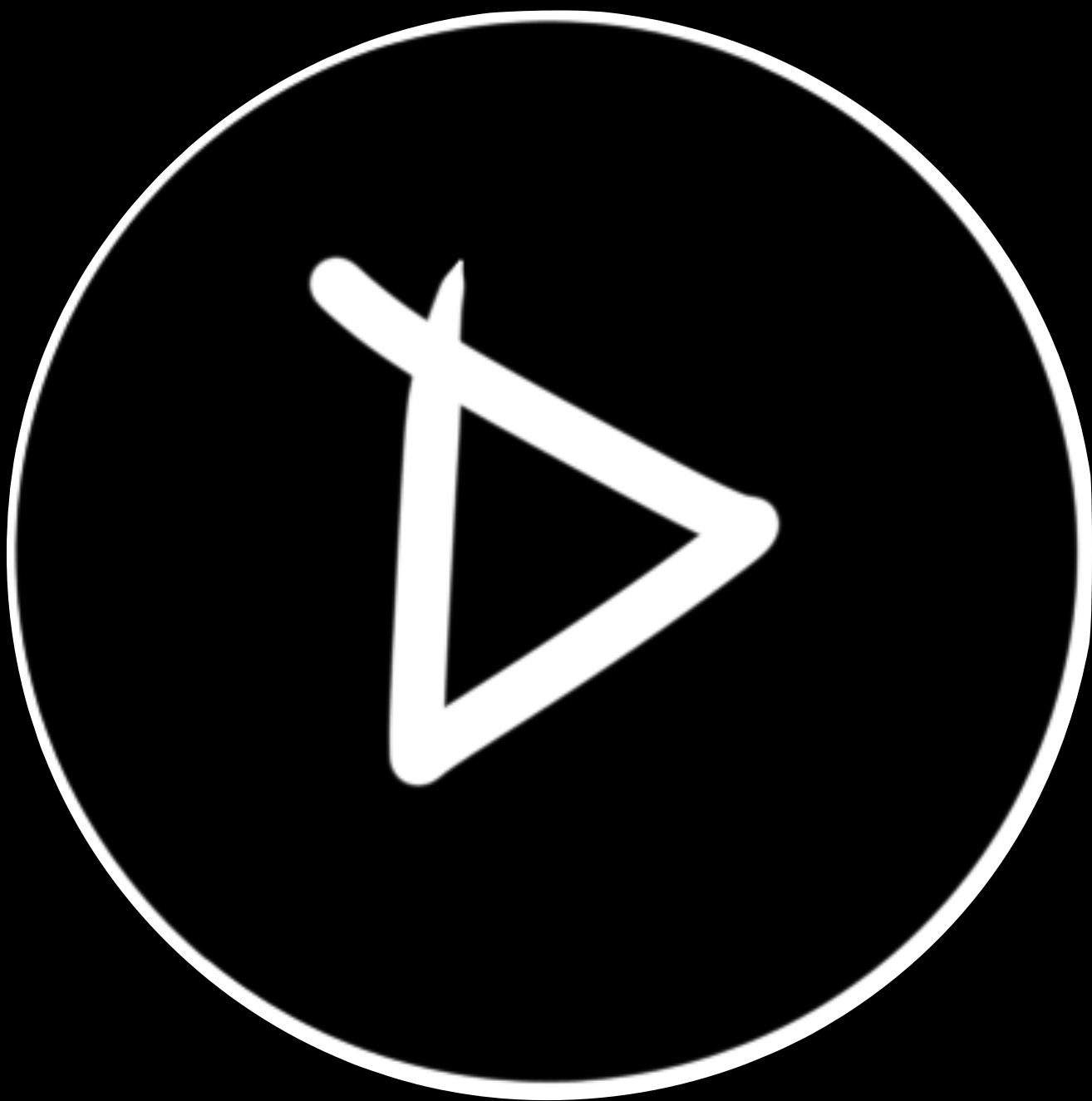
We turn left

Turn left

Walk some time

Red bag and rubbish

At the top of the stairs
I'm watching



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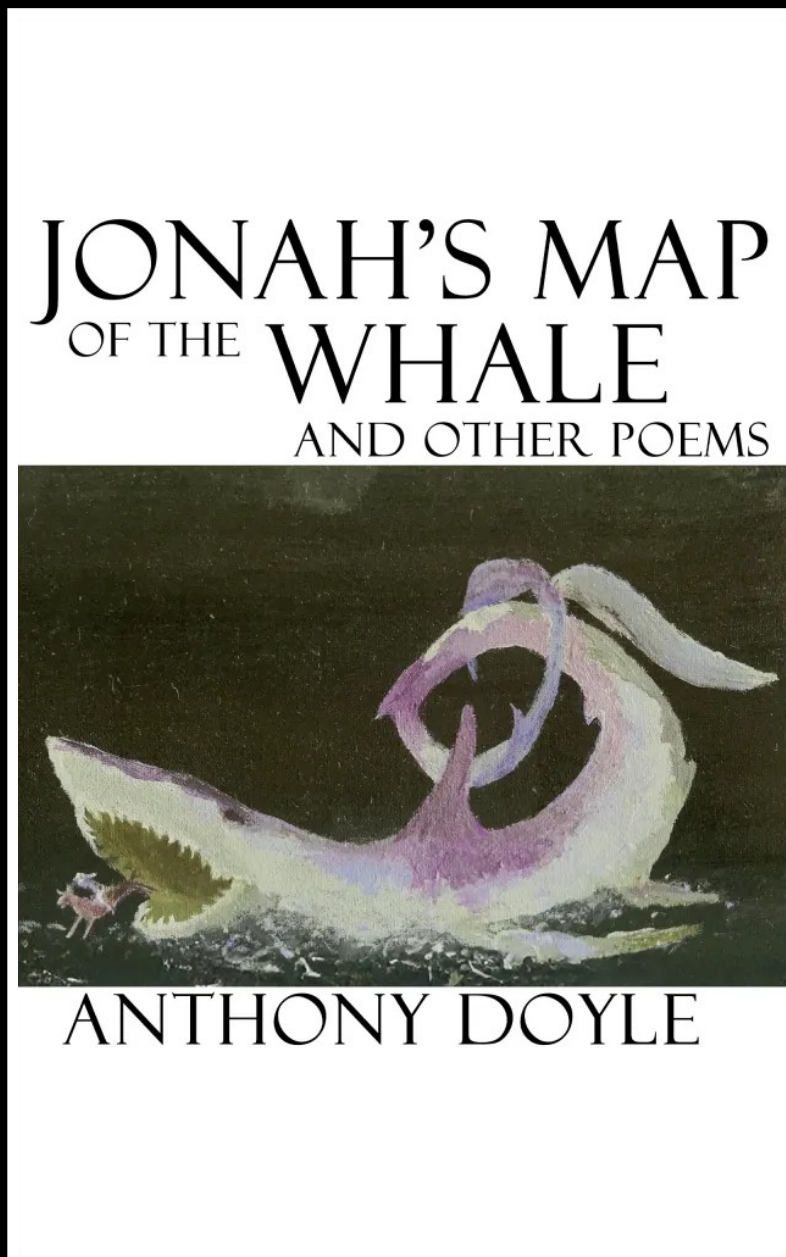
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