They is Us

A cautionary horror story

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Extract

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To Fay Weldon and Nick Fox

“We have met the enemy and he is us.”

Walt Kelly, poster caption for World Earth Day, 1973

The Small Loaf of an Artist in Society

Two chihuahuas have tiny pillowcases
pulled over their heads with holes
cut out for eyes and noses.
Are they members of the Ku Klux Klan?

We do not know. Only, they must be
itchy in this warm dampness,
this summer sprinkled with peppery
flies over the ash can of our lives.

What has blighted the stout cartpuller,
the homebody, the watch cur,
Beware of the Dog, a sign
leading to reticence in strangers.

All is changed, deranged and gone,
even slouches have a political
roll to fill. This is not a country
for old schnauzers or dull doubters

who muddle and fiddle and refuse
to remember the name of the street
they live on simply because they've
changed address once too often

and their furniture grows
molds and fungi in a warehouse
in Walla-Walla Washington. Changes!
Get used to them! Some young rabble

rouser keeps yelling in the parking
lot on Twenty-Third street, where
the organ grinder used to play
O sole Mio just beneath the windows

of our mansion and his monkey tipped
his hat in mock thanks for the penny
that we threw him, although he cavorted
on hollyhocks and crushed petunias in

our Moorish garden, but it's too late
for giving an artist advice, who
having taken on the guise (gorge
and hackles) of a purebred dalmatian,
is polymorphous perverse now, indeed
always has been.

Phyllis Janowitz

1

Years pass. There are still thimbles and Unitarians. The world is the same as it has always been, maybe a little worse. It's a beautiful summer day, kind of, although violent electrical storms are predicted for later – if not that day, then sometime. And the news, too, is much the same: 40 percent of people can't sleep; a type of bustard believed to be extinct has been found; war continues.

Slawa is still out there, painting the driveway with black glop. Why did he have to wear his white high-heels? The fool, he's going to ruin them. Now he's using his knife to open a second gallon of the stuff. Murielle could easily run him over, but he moves out of the way. She is taking Julie to look for a summer job.

Julie wants to help at the old age home her mother manages, but Murielle says no. Her mother prefers her older sister, Tahnee. Tahnee is fourteen. Tahnee is too lazy to work. Murielle doesn't seem to mind this, even though she is determined that Julie, who is only thirteen, should do something. First she tells Julie to look up the job listings, but there's nothing Julie is qualified for except maybe at the Blue Booby Club as a cocktail waitress or stripper if she lies about her age.

Murielle drives Julie and tells her to go in by herself. Julie is scared. It is dark after the bright outside, the gloom of midafternoon in a strip club that reeks of beer with a fainter odor of bleach. At first the manager seems interested. "Show me your tits," he says, but Julie doesn't move. "How old are you, hon, anyway?"

Her mother has said she should lie, but Julie is nervous. She forgets. She looks away.

"What about any interesting deformities?"

"No," says Julie. What if he wants to hire her? "I'm only thirteen."

If she had extra breasts – or was a hermaphrodite, or at least a young boy – but these days, times are tough, who wants to watch a normal girl? “Come back in a few years,” he says. “Or, if you want, we got a wet t-shirt contest once a month, top prizes in the juvenile category.”

She is so relieved she could cry. Her life is going to go on and on, frightening her. She does not want to be frightened by her own life, but there it is, lounging ominously before her, one paw tapping its sharp claws on the pavement just ahead. She goes back to the car and tells her mother there was no work for her.

“How old did you say you were?” her mother asks.

“Um… I said I was seventeen?”

“Julie, it’s not just that you’re plain; it’s your attitude. Nobody would want to hire someone who seems sulky. You could have made some good money this summer,” says Murielle. “At least you’re not flat-chested like your sister. That’s one thing you have going for you.” She feels cruel as she says this but with a kid like Julie it’s better to be blunt.

Julie thinks she will never find work. But at last Murielle gets her a job in a lab, thanks to her friend Dyllis. “Julie, make sure you do whatever Dyllis tells you,” her mother says as she drops off Julie in front of the Bermese Pythion building. “I’ll be back at four-fifteen to pick you up.”

Her mother leaves her at the far end of the parking lot. Julie is sweltering by the time she gets to the main door. In the lobby of the vast complex the security guard sweeps an electronic brush over her before she is allowed in. Once she is scanned, her microchip will be altered and she won’t have to do this again, the guard says. Her mom’s friend Dyllis is waiting for her beyond the gates, bucktoothed, attractive. Even though she has always known Dyllis, Julie is still frightened at the idea of starting work.

“Ai, eet’s so hot today, you know what I mean?” Dyllis has a high-pitched voice and slightly buggy, wild eyes. “Sometimes, I jes’ look around and I think, what I am doing here? In Vieques, yes, it’s hot, but we have trees, palm trees, you got your coconut trees, when it’s a nice day you go to the beach… Here, you got no trees, everything dead. Tell me, when was the last time you saw a bird or any living creature?”

Dyllis grew up just around the block from Murielle, but two years on Vieques – the small island that was part of Puerto Rico where she worked for a government laboratory – has left her with a strong Puerto Rican accent.

“How is your mother doing, you tell her let’s get together this weekend, okay?” she says as they walk down the long, windowless corridor. The black granite walls and floors are flecked with embedded chips resembling glittery stars; the only light is from the artificial ones above. Murielle has told Julie that Dyllis was able to get a good job back in the States as a lab technician with Bermese Pythion only because she smuggled genetic material out of the lab when she left Puerto Rico.

There appears to be no one else around. The hall is lined on both sides with many doors of different colors. “You see, each color is for a different security level. You going to be working level three, that’s pretty important level. Later I got to make you sign a confidentiality form. And these are my labs.”

Dyllis is in charge of six or eight of the laboratories, each housing a different experiment in progress. Canary mice: they can sing like little birds, which is a problem if they escape and breed; they sing all night. Black-and-yellow striped fish hang from the ceiling on invisible threads. “These are clownfish-crossspider, we call them spiderfish. You see, they don’t need no water, they spin a thread and they catch the flies, you want me to show you?”

She opens a box and releases four fist-sized flies, seemingly too large to get off the ground, but they hover in the air. “I call these SloMoFlies.”

“Yuck. They look like flying raisins.” The flies are creepy. And the fish, too, are somehow wrong. In formation, as a school, the fish on the threads lunge for the flies, then weave longer threads to lower themselves as the flies circle. When the flies go up, so do the fish, pulling in their threads.

“You see, I gotta do some more testing first, but if they interbred with regular flies, a lot of people going to buy them, they going to know after a while all the flies going to be real slow. Plus, they supposed to eat clothes that are out of style. But right now, nothing is going well. These flies, when you kill one, it makes a terrible mess.”

A web of words: **J a N u A r y y y Y y y** or **J u u u uuuu u u ly** linger in the room, blocking the windows and doors; there is no escape. Dyllis is a talker, the words never seem to stop. Trails of letters spin constantly through the air around her head, forming a virtual wall.

Dyllis stops to take a breath, it is almost as if she has to fight to clear a space for herself in the middle of all these words.

“What?” Julie is confused.

“Now, over here, this is something cute, right?” Dyllis points to a cage containing feathered rabbits. The feathers are downy, pink and blue. “Later on, I’ll give you one.”

What Julie doesn’t say is that she already has a feather-covered rabbit at home. Years before, she had come exploring with her sister. At that time the vast grounds where the labs are located weren’t yet fenced in. There were still trees back then. That was when they found their dog Breakfast and the rabbit; they had been tossed out with the garbage and managed to escape. Both were almost dead and had to be nursed back to health – surely that couldn’t have been stealing?

“Anyway,” she says, looking at the fluffy bunny, “won’t you get in trouble?”

“I’m jes’ gonna tell them, it die, a lot of these animals die, and they know that. But don’t tell no one, hokay? I put him in your backpack, just before you go home.”

Julie doesn’t know what to say. She can’t accept stolen property, even if it means the animal will be killed or tortured… or can she? She has never had to contend with this degree of ethics. Of course she will take the bunny home, even though her mother has said, No More Pets! She supposes she can sneak it in.

“Lemme show you something.” Dyllis takes Julie down the hall to the Women’s Room. A window – the only exterior one Julie has seen – looks out into a dumpster surrounded by a tall cinderblock wall. The refuse bin is filled with animals, either dead or dying. Even through the closed window the stench is terrible, and a few things down there are still wriggling.

“Oh, this is awful. What can we do, aren’t some of them still alive?”

“If you don’t take Mister Bunny… that’s where he gonna end up. Oh, sheet!” Dyllis lets out a shriek. “Look at this, somebody tossed out my experiment, can you believe that?” Over by the sink is a pot of dry dirt containing a plant with only two leaves covered with what appears to be human skin; beneath the skin Julie can see veins and arteries. “This plant disappeared, like, two weeks ago, I thought maybe my boss, he took it to decorate his office. I no want to say nothing. But now I am thinking someone took it to kill it. Jes’ look.”

“Is it dead?” Julie says.

“I dunno. Needs water, anyway.” Dyllis shakes her head in disgust. “I mean, who would have done this, I had the plant in my window!”

Tenderly Julie strokes the leaves of the dying **common house plant** and places it under the trickling tap; the veins – if that’s what

they are – flush and weakly pulse. The plant is slurping up water, she can sense its gratitude. To hurt anything – some nights she can't sleep, thinking of how wretched it must be to be an ant, with people around who actually like to crush them.

"Let's go back in – I'll show you the rest of the animals and their food."

"Um… okay. Sure! Great. So, um, Dyllis, you invented all this stuff?"

"Oh, jes, and if I had my own lab I could have made a fortune. But I work for the company, which is not so bad – they give me good health insurance. So come on, let me show you the kitchen area. Here's where you have to prepare the different kinds of food."

Dyllis opens a refrigerator. "To keep everybody happy, put the different things on each little plate. But some days you can chop everything and mix it, whatever, just so it looks attractive. Now, we gonna go feed some toads." She puts the plates on a wheeled cart and off they go.

The room is very hot and dry, so dry that for a moment Julie's lungs feel seared. "This room, we gotta keep it like a desert." Dyllis points to a row of glass tanks. "Don't ever touch the animals in them, they are puffball toad, a cross of puffball mushroom and toad. When they get scared, poof, they let out a cloud of spores, get you right in the face. I heard we going to try to get in the anthrax gene next, so when they puff out, they blow out anthrax spores. It's interesting, no?" Dyllis opens the tops to each tank and carefully lowers the plates to the sandy floor. Julie thinks she will never be able to arrange the food so beautifully, topped with parsley and the wriggling mealworms in a circle around the edge. "They eat the compost, too, that's because they have the mushroom gene."

When Julie was little she helped her father in his shop on Saturdays. There was always the rich smell of leather, or leather cleaner, of glue and something fecund. Maybe he had a mushroom

gene, unbeknownst to her. She has been ignoring her father for so long, years, really, maybe since she turned ten or eleven, wrinkling her nose at his beery stench and cleaning-fluid breath. Poor Daddy with his winky bald spot and big proud belly; where is he now? Anything she dislikes about him is forgotten; how she misses him. Why doesn't she spend more time with him? She will be nicer to him from now on.

In Room 1829.wTd are animals that are sort of… pigs. But they are like no pictures of pigs Julie has ever seen, with human arms and legs, some too fat to be supported by such slender appendages who lie on their sides delicately putting biscuits in their mouths with their… Yuck, they look like big thumbs? Hands with nothing but thumbs? No, it is just that their fingers are half-trotters. The pigs have rilled snouts, small eyes fringed with pale white lashes, pink gigantic torsos; what is wrong with them? Julie doesn't want to ask but Dyllis tells her anyway. "You see, these pigs, they got human parts, so we can transplant what we need."

"But how many human parts do they have?"

"It's not so much as a number, these are only first generation, so it's fifty-fifty. In other words, we mix the pig sperm with the woman egg and implant in the sow."

Some pigs look as if they have worked out, done sit-ups, pullups and developed muscular biceps, legs with toned calves, ripped thighs. Even so, human arms are not strong enough to support the weight of a full-grown boar. Supine and languorous, unable to stand, occasionally feeding themselves with those odd hands, the pigs lie in the heat, yawning, bored. "These little piggies love to get a manicure!" says Dyllis when Julie stares, slightly alarmed at a pig's red fingernails. "If you want, when you have extra time, I got some extra polish in my desk, they so cute when they see the polish and make their little squeals!"

A boar – overweight, grayish with bristles – is gently fondling himself. He has a corkscrew-shaped penis. He looks up at Julie and

starts to rub faster. Julie doesn't like the way he looks at her with a smirking leer while he plays with himself. She averts her gaze. Julie wishes now she had lied about her age to get the job in the strip club; by comparison this is much worse.

"Hey, cut that out!" Dyllis says to the pig. "We working now on how to transplant the male organ. Some guy going to be mighty lucky, if we can figure out how to avoid rejection."